

Breakfast at tiffany's: a revolutionary romantic comedy

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



“ I'll tell you one thing, Fred, darling. I'd marry you for your money in a minute. Would you marry me for my money?” Holly Golightly (played by the delightful Audrey Hepburn) drawls to Paul Varjack (George Peppard) as they banter in the tiny kitchen of her minuscule brownstone in downtown New York City. Given Varjack's affirmative answer, she jokes back, saying, “ I guess it's pretty lucky neither of us is rich, huh?” From this and a multitude of other exchanges throughout the film, it is easy to see that one activity consumes and controls the lives of both of these lower class main characters: the pursuit of wealth. Golightly and Varjack each earn their money through similar means: Golightly is a call girl who caters specifically to wealthy, upper-class men and Varjack is “ kept” by an affluent, upper-class woman. By creating charming and likable characters who are forced to literally turn their bodies into commodities in order to gain capital, the film highlights the negative effects of capitalism on the lower classes. Additionally, the women featured in the film are arguably far more empowered than the majority of their contemporaries. Thus, while disguised as a harmless, playful romantic comedy, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is actually a quite revolutionary film from both Marxist and feminist perspectives.

The film, originally released in 1961, may come across as dated today— especially given the extremely misguided and racist portrayal of Golightly and Varjack's landlord, Mr. I. Y. Yunioshi, by none other than Mickey Rooney. However, it is essential to understand how subversive the content was at the time of the film's initial release. In Sam Wasson's novel *Fifth Avenue, 5 A. M.: Audrey Hepburn, Breakfast at Tiffany's, and the Dawn of the Modern Woman*, he notes that, during pre-production, “ censors...rail[ed] against the script”

(Wasson xvii). The screenwriter, George Axelrod, managed to evade censorship by only subtly suggesting that Golightly is a sex worker. For example, after confronting Varjack about his “patron” leaving \$300 on his writing desk, Golightly empathetically says that she “understands completely” his situation. Still, many viewers perceived the film in a negative light. In a letter to the Hollywood Citizen-News, concerned citizen Irving A. Mandell declared that *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was “the worst [film] of the year from a moral standpoint” for showing “a prostitute throwing herself at a kept man,” among other objections (Wasson 185).

Aside from chronicling the lives of sex workers in New York City, the film features several other potentially contentious scenarios. The mixing of social classes depicted in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is in some ways unprecedented. Not only do Golightly and Varjack interact with individuals who rank far above them on the social scale on a purely transactional basis, but on an interpersonal level, as well. The party scene that occurs relatively early in the film is an excellent example of this. Golightly invites Varjack over for a drink, but when he knocks on her door, he is greeted by the charismatic O. J. Berman, a Hollywood agent who credits himself with Golightly's transformation from a “hillbilly” into an exceedingly stylish young woman. Berman is markedly upper-class; he is pictured later in the film at his home in LA with his newfangled “executive phone” and remote-controlled bed. “Can you believe this place?” he flippantly remarks to Varjack about Golightly's apartment. “What a dump.” Nevertheless, he is still one of Golightly's numerous well-to-do friends and acquaintances. Other notable

upper-class characters at the party include Jose de Silva Pereira, a Brazilian millionaire, and Rutherford “Rusty” Trawler, who is the “ninth richest man in America under 50,” according to Golightly.

As the party progresses and its guests become more and more inebriated, it is harder to differentiate who belongs to which class. The guests become raucous and uncouth, instantly disproving the stereotype that only members of the lower class behave in such an uncivilized manner. A well-dressed couple argues with each other loudly, an older woman laughs and then cries hysterically at her reflection in the mirror, an intoxicated woman jumps on men's backs shouting “Yippee!,” and men in expensive suits clamor in the kitchen to guzzle hard liquor straight from the bottle. Even the alcohol delivery man, who is clearly a member of the working class, is invited to join in the festivities and freely dances with several women whose elaborate, jewel-toned silk dresses presumably cost far more than his monthly earnings. Later, as the police arrive due to Mr. Yunioshi's inevitable noise complaint, Varjack and the worried de Silva Pereira manage to escape through the bathroom window together—one man a millionaire and presidential hopeful, the other a broke writer, now united by their mutual friendship with Golightly and the sudden need to flee the party.

One could simply write off this scene as a fantasy; the film is a work of fiction, after all. Or, one might mention the well-known quote from Queen Victoria: “Beware of artists, they mix with all classes of society and are therefore the most dangerous.” But while Varjack is indeed an artist and does seem to fraternize with those both above and below him in social class,

he is not the only one in this scene who does so. Thus, the more analytical eye views this segment of the film as a subversion of the commonly held societal values that effectively separate people of different classes and enforce the idea that wealthy people are somehow better than those with lower incomes. The message contained within this lively and humorous party scene is this: people possessing vastly different levels of wealth can, in fact, relate to each other and quite often do.

Another key element in a Marxist interpretation of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is the alienation experienced by both of the main characters, Golightly and Varjack. Marx's complex theory of alienation can be simply understood as people's estrangement from their "species-essence" (in other words, human nature and the world around them) as a result of their wage-labor and the separations caused by class distinctions. While class differences are somewhat blurred in the film, as described in the example above, there is no doubt that they still exist. And while Golightly and Varjack's form of employment may not explicitly classify as wage labor, it is quite similar—if not worse, because it involves the commodification of their own bodies, rather than just their labor power. Perhaps, too, there is some sort of set wage involved; according to Golightly, "any gentleman with the slightest chic gives a girl \$50 for the powder room." Either way, the sense of alienation that surrounds each character can be viewed as direct result of their labor practice.

Golightly's alienation is overwhelmingly apparent: near the end of the film, she audibly admits to this feeling, exclaiming, "I'm not Holly. I'm not Lula

Mae, either. I don't know who I am! I'm like cat here, a couple of no-name slob. We belong to nobody and nobody belongs to us. We don't even belong to each other." Here, her sense of isolation from humanity is so great that she must relate to an animal rather to Varjack, or to any other human being. The alienation that Varjack experiences is somewhat less blatant. While Golightly seems to lack the capacity to experience love for another individual, Varjack boldly admits to his love for her on more than one occasion throughout the film. One could assume that he simply does not experience the same levels of alienation as Golightly does due to the fact that she has been in the "business" for longer than him, but the film itself provides no evidence to support that claim. Instead, Varjack's alienation is manifested in other, perhaps less discernable ways—for example, through his disconnect from writing, which was once his passion. The first time Golightly visits his apartment, she notices his typewriter and inquires if he writes every day. He answers that yes, he does, but Golightly slickly points out that though "it's a beautiful typewriter...there's no ribbon in it."

The film strikes a chord of hope, and of anti-capitalism, by allowing both Golightly and Varjack to dispose of some or all of their alienation. The only way of doing so, of course, is to remove oneself from wage labor, which Varjack essentially does when he tells his Mrs. Failenson—his wealthy lover, played by Patricia Neal—to "find a new writer to help." He then begins to earn his income by selling the short stories that he writes. This means of acquiring wealth is obviously far less dehumanizing than his previous method. It is also critical to note that it is only after quitting his (for all

intents and purposes) wage job that Varjack tells Golightly he loves her. This chronology suggests that he is only able to connect with his true emotions after the once-enveloping sense of alienation has finally lifted. From this perspective, it makes sense why Golightly is initially so unresponsive to his declaration of love for her—she is unable to return these feelings because she is still embroiled in the hellish capitalist nightmare from which he has already escaped.

Unfortunately for Golightly, stepping out of the labor force is not quite as simple for her as it is for Varjack. Her brother, Fred, whom she describes as “sweet and vague and terribly slow” is in the US Army, and she is forever trying to save up enough money so that he can come live with her. Even after Fred’s death renders this struggle obsolete, Golightly still lacks the skills and education to successfully establish herself in any field other than the one she is already involved in. Only at the film’s grand finale does it seem that she is finally leaving wage labor, or at least sex work, behind, as she chooses Varjack’s love over the wealth of all her previous suitors.

Some feminist analyses argue that this ultimate pairing somehow renders the film antithetical to feminist ideals. In an essay entitled “We Belong to Nobody: Representations of the Feminine in Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” Margaret Fox argues that, although throughout the film Golightly “appears to be a proto-feminist character in her [progressive] lifestyle,” the ending makes her less so because she has “submit[ted] to Paul’s ownership” (Fox 13).

However, this argument reads more as fallacy than fact. By choosing to enter into a romantic partnership with Varjack, who is not moneyed and

therefore cannot provide for her financially, Golightly renounces the nature of her past relationships with callous, wealthy men like de Silva Pereira and Trawler. Because she relied on them for pecuniary support, they owned her more than Varjack ever could. If anything, her elopement with Varjack further contributes to Golightly's status as a feminist icon by depicting her as a woman who stays true to her feelings and does as she pleases, rather than allowing herself to continue to be controlled by men and their money.

Feminist critics have cited Golightly's independence, sexual freedom, and her running away from her husband in the Midwest as reasons that she is, indeed, a feminist role model. While these assertions all ring true, it seems that most of these critics chose to either ignore Golightly's union with Varjack or condemn it, as Fox does. No one appears to be able to fathom that their coupling could, in fact, be beneficial, let alone aid in undermining the patriarchal system Golightly once found herself trapped in.

Renowned French feminist Luce Irigaray's "Women on the Market" states that the three social roles imposed upon women in patriarchal societies are that of the "mother, virgin, [and] prostitute" (Irigaray 808). Golightly is obviously not a mother, nor is she a virgin, but for most of the film she is a sex worker. Once she pairs up with Varjack, though, the viewer can assume that she will no longer be engaging in this line of work. Hence, Golightly is neither a mother, virgin, nor a sex worker; she is a woman who constantly succeeds in subverting traditional and patriarchal ideas of femininity.

Another note of feminism in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* that tends to go unnoticed is the sexual empowerment of Mrs. Failenson, Varjack's older lover. Though Neal's artful performance creates a cringe-worthy, snobbish character, it is important for the viewer to recognize her as more than just a villain. She is a sexually unsatisfied, married woman who consciously makes her own pleasure a priority. Though the way in which she does this may be objectionable to some, there is no denying that she is at once brave and intelligent for managing to hide this affair from her husband. And perhaps the viewer can even sympathize with her, especially during the artful scene in which she is secretly speaking to Varjack on the phone while her husband's weathered, menacing-looking hands shakily pour a drink in the foreground.

Breakfast at Tiffany's, widely known as a light-hearted romantic comedy and a classic film, has much more to offer than a few laughs and a happy ending. Upon closer analysis, the film possesses an inherently anti-capitalistic quality, along with two strong, independent female characters. When comparing the first and last scene of the film, the criticism of capitalism is plain to see. In the opening scene, Golightly stands alone outside of the massive Tiffany's jewelry store on 5th Avenue in the early hours of the morning. Here, as she sips her coffee and eats her croissant, she is clearly fascinated with the capitalistic pursuit of wealth; there is no better symbol for this than the gold, diamonds, and excessive grandeur of Tiffany's. In stark contrast to this initial scene, the final scene finds Golightly and Varjack alone in an alleyway, full of "garbage cans" and "rats galore." However, this is

the one moment in the film that they are both truly happy. Thus, in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, it is only through the denial of material wealth that the two main characters finally achieve happiness—a very anti-capitalistic message, indeed.

Works Cited

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