Imperfect Matches:

The Effect of Social Class on Young Love in the Short Stories of Fitzgerald and Hemingway

F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway are undoubtedly two of the greatest writers of the 20th century. Despite the fact that they are from the same period, their styles vary greatly. However, when comparing the authors’ young love stories, there is a theme seen in both: social class. The characters of both Fitzgerald and Hemingway are influenced by the class standards of the time, and their portrayals show what can arise when two young people come together. In love stories such as Fitzgerald’s “The Sensible Thing” and “Winter Dreams,” and Hemingway’s “The End of Something,” “The Three-Day Blow,” and “A Very Short Story,” the reader is given a glimpse into how class distinction relates to the inner workings of young love and relationships.

Social class plays a significant role in both Fitzgerald and Hemingway’s stories of young love, but though they share this similarity, the authors differ in the classes they depict. Fitzgerald generally focuses solely on the upper/upper-middle class. In Fitzgerald’s stories, there is typically a woman of higher social standing, while the man is usually middle class. The relationships are more romantic—even asexual—in nature, and deal quite a bit with wealth and the consequences it can have. Hemingway, on the other hand, does not necessarily specify what class he is writing about, but one can easily see his characters are most likely working or middle class. Unlike Fitzgerald, Hemingway tends to focus on aspects of relationships outside of monetary influences and romance. It is often easy to identify with Hemingway’s characters. The issues they deal with appear more modern, perhaps because he addresses realities that seem much more relevant today, such as sexuality. Hemingway writes about sexuality in a frank manner, and while his blunt approach may be attributed to his writing style, the social classes he chooses to portray allow him to write more freely about sexuality. In Hemingway’s stories, it is
easily assumed, or very apparent, that the reader is viewing a relationship where two people are sexually involved or, at the very least, wish to be.

The presence or lack of sexuality can be an indicator of the classes involved, and the asexuality in Fitzgerald’s treatment of romance is most certainly a sign of the values held by those of the upper class. In regards to social class and sexual activity, Weinberg and Williams state that, for the working class, “sex is still seen as something natural, to be engaged in as early as possible” (46). Those from a lower class are more likely to become sexually active at a young age, and before marriage. This association of the lower class with sexual activity has a major effect on the upper class, as there is a high desire among its members to distinguish themselves as much as possible from the lower classes. The upper class focuses on marriage, children, and money, allowing views of sexuality to be yet another barrier between the classes. The upper class views are represented well by Fitzgerald’s characters, as they are typically very separated from sex, and more concerned with flirting, romance, and eventually marriage. In Fitzgerald’s high society, kissing abounds, but these kisses are “not a promise, but a fulfillment” (Fitzgerald, “Winter” 226).

Following the importance of marriage in the upper class, Fitzgerald’s stories portray marriage as the overall desired outcome. In “Winter Dreams” and “The Sensible Thing,” each man’s main goal is to become prosperous and gain possession of a beautiful girl. Though these characters may love their respective women, their pursuit of marriage seems to stem from extreme fascination and a desire to gain access to the upper class. In “Winter Dreams,” Dexter comes from a middle class background, but young Judy Jones, who comes from a well-to-do family, spurs his ambitions to make more of himself. He becomes very successful in an effort to move up in social class because it is likely the only way to be a part of Judy’s world. Judy and
Dexter become close, but not as close as he had hoped, as there is always a revolving door of men pursuing Judy. During a conversation Dexter has with Judy, she says she has been mad about “loads of poor men,” but although she has been “mad” about them, she has never been serious enough to actually marry them (Fitzgerald, “Winter” 226). For Judy, these “poor men” are nothing more than a novelty. She, a woman of the upper class, would never marry a man who was monetarily unsuitable. Eventually, Judy tires of having Dexter as her plaything and leaves him for another. During the time Judy is gone, Dexter tries to move on and becomes engaged to Irene Scheerer. Unfortunately, Judy returns and admits she wants to marry Dexter, who willingly breaks off his engagement with Irene because he cannot let go of his dream to marry Judy. However, Judy leaves Dexter once again, and he is left unmarried and alone with the wealth he has now attained. “Winter Dreams” shows that although one may escape financial barriers, it is hard to escape the stigma of once belonging to a lower class. Dexter gained the wealth Judy desired in a husband, but his past left him as the novelty he was to Judy in the beginning.

A particular matter affecting Fitzgerald’s characters is an entrenchment in the ideals of their class. This is especially true for the women. They may love the men with whom they are involved, but if the men are not in a good position for marriage, a union between the two is almost out of the question. The preoccupation with “suitability” seen in “Winter Dreams” becomes a problem in “The Sensible Thing,” as well. When Jonquil hesitates to marry George because he is in a bad state financially, he tries to convince her that “everything is going to be fine… [he’s] been promoted—better salary” (Fitzgerald, “Sensible” 292). However, she rebuffs him saying it “doesn’t seem the sensible thing” (“Sensible” 295). She feels she cannot marry George until he raises his status. George leaves, pursuing a more profitable, high-status career, and returns as a successful engineer. Jonquil accepts George’s marriage proposal, but the damage
to the relationship is too strong. Her pressure on George to attain wealth and status causes their relationship to suffer from a disillusion of which they will never be rid. Jonquil’s preoccupation with status and wealth has ruined the relationship she once treasured.

While the men in Fitzgerald’s love stories want to gain financial stability and power to get the girl, the conquests in Hemingway’s stories seem to be more sexually motivated. The relationships written by Hemingway do not end in marriage, and most of the stories seem to have something to do with sexual experience. In “A Very Short Story,” the reader is introduced to the possibility of a man of a higher class seeing a woman of a lower class as disposable. When the story begins, Luz is in a relationship; by the middle of the story, her relationship is in peril; and towards the end, she meets a major with whom she falls in love. As a member of a lower class, Luz probably has ideas of grandeur. She enters into a sexual relationship with the major, imagines they will marry and believes he reciprocates her feelings. She writes to her boyfriend in the States and tells him that she will love him forever, but what they had was only a “boy and girl affair” (Hemingway, “Short Story” 108). She explains that she expects to marry the major in the spring; however, the major never marries her. The story does not specify whether he leaves or stays, but it seems the major was never truly serious about Luz and was most likely using her to fulfill his needs. The treatment of Luz furthers the idea that women of a lower social class are expendable and more likely to be used for sexual gain, making them unsuitable for marriage in the eyes of someone with higher status.

One of the better examples in Hemingway’s small collection of stories regarding the effect of social class on young love is “The Three-Day Blow.” In the companion story, “The End of Something,” Nick Adams ends his relationship with his girlfriend, Marge. He uses a pathetic excuse, telling her “[the relationship] isn’t fun anymore” (Hemingway, “The End” 81). Marge
questions him about whether love is fun anymore, and Nick says no. It is later revealed in “The Three-Day Blow” that Nick was following the advice of his friend Bill, who apparently lacks respect for Marge and her family. The conversation between Bill and Nick gives insight into the fact that Marge is of a lower class, and therefore, Bill sees her, and her family, as unsuitable. Bill implies that Marge was good for providing sexual experience, but she is not the woman for Nick to marry. He mentions how Nick has come out of the break up well, and it is for the best, as Marge can now marry someone of “her own sort” (Hemingway, “Three-Day” 91). His flippant treatment of Marge highlights the idea that the lower class female serves the purpose of providing sexual experience for males of a higher class. Bill’s strong opinions about Marge are yet another instance of a lower class woman being seen as a “lesser” and unsuitable for marriage. The entire scenario in “The Three-Day Blow” shows the unfortunate ability of differences in social class to trump love. Nick loved Marge, but he allowed the stigma placed on Marge by her lower-class status to be the deciding factor in ending their relationship.

When comparing Fitzgerald and Hemingway, there are not many similarities in regards to style and subject matter. Both men are talented authors, but they are very distinct in their respective work. However, an in-depth look shows that their short stories involving young love both display the effects social status has on relationships. The ideals entrenched in each class make it impossible to ignore them as factors. When it comes to stories of young love, Fitzgerald and Hemingway show that class has an inescapable impact on how relationships begin, evolve, and, in many cases, end

Works Cited


