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*Titanic*: The Disintegration of an Illusion

James Cameron's epic film *Titanic* narrates the story of an ill-fated couple and their dreadful encounter with fate during the ship's maiden voyage in 1912. But this film is much more than a love story because *Titanic* also portrays the essence of *la belle époque*, a period in history when the wealthy chose to live a fairy tale kind of existence. This was a time in history of great social and economic inequality, when women and the poor were not valued as human beings. Instead, this society chose to worship technology. For the elite making the crossing, the voyage meant partaking in a world of beauty and luxury; for the poor, however, the Titanic was an "unsinkable ship of dreams," of hope for a better future in America. Such optimism ultimately betrayed this society.

The ship Titanic is, in of itself, a microcosm of the real world. Aboard the Titanic there are people from all different socioeconomic backgrounds, ranging from first class passengers to the third class or steerage. These different classes are kept separate during the voyage, with the very rich housed in the upper floors of the ship and the very poor at the bottom, mirroring the social stratification of the times. Life for the elite on board consisted of endless parties, fancy dinners and entertainment. The rest of the passengers are kept away from intruding into this kind of fairy tale existence. When Jack tries to search for Rose, he is stopped by a guard who informs him that "you hold a third class ticket and your presence here is no longer appropriate." Additionally, when Jack escorts Rose and Molly Brown to dinner, Molly advises him on how to behave in front of the wealthy, "they love money, so just pretend you own a gold mine and you are in the club." Being poor on this ship as well as in society excluded you from everything, even the right to life. For instance, when the Titanic is about to sink, women and children in the first class were the first to have access to the lifeboats. In an effort to manage the crowds, the

guards shout and even shoot at the third class passengers who were locked up in the depths of the ship, "Stay back or I'll shoot you like a dog." By the time that the poor passengers make their way out, the lifeboats are full or departed.

During *la belle époque* women were also kept in their place by men and society, expected to abide by the customs and manners of the times. In the movie, Cal exemplifies the tyrannical male who tries to exert control over Rose. When Cal questions Rose on her whereabouts the night before, she explains to him that she was tired and therefore was unable to meet him. Cal manifests his control over her when he explodes in a rage "...you will honor me the way a wife is required to honor a husband." Although they are not yet married, Rose is intimidated by him and does not challenge him any further. A woman of her times, Rose is frustrated by her lot and protests to her mother who answers "Of course it is unfair, we are women. . . . Our choices are never easy." Feeling financially insecure, Rose's mother is trying to marry her daughter off to a rich man who will take care of them in exchange of total submission.

Although the values of *la belle époque* society were rather superficial, people were trying to find meaning and security in technology. The love for technology during the early 20th century is evident at the beginning of the film when the passengers are all eager to go aboard the Titanic because this ocean liner was considered to be the largest, fastest and most luxurious ship ever built. The rich, in particular, are portrayed as being exuberant about being able to afford this kind of modern, elegant travel. Above all, they are optimistic of the infallibility of science and technology, of man's ability to conquer the world. "It is unsinkable. God himself could not sink this ship," Cal utters when he and Rose first arrive before going aboard the Titanic. When Rose approaches Mr. Andrews and questions him on the number of lifeboats, he answers that there is not enough for all the passengers because "it was thought by some that the deck would look too cluttered." Cal further adds, "waste of deck space as it is on an unsinkable ship." Ironically, little did they know what fate had in store for them.

Traveling without ever imagining that the ship would never reach its destination, the Titanic's passengers would forever be linked together through tragedy and, ultimately, death.

Without discriminating against class or gender, the new technology betrayed those who had worshiped it. In the end, this great tragedy is portrayed in the movie *Titanic* as a warning to all of those who are willing to believe in scientific advances rather than humanity.