

**A CHANGE THROUGH TIME AND GENRE:
AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE PLAY
THE PHILADELPHIA STORY AND THE MUSICAL *HIGH SOCIETY***

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Philip Barry satirised the lives of the higher classes in his play *The Philadelphia Story* (1938). The female protagonist, Tracy Lord, was originally a young socialite unfit for the patriarchal values her family upholds. But when the play was transformed into a musical in 1956, the character and the story underwent the changes associated to its transposition into a new medium, not to mention the changes derived from the so called Hollywood Star System. As a consequence, part of the play's social criticism was softened, and Tracy's characterization changed. By analysing the changes produced in one single character, it is possible to gain access to the values and the ideology that governed the two different periods of time in which the play and the film were created.

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In 1938, Katharine Hepburn was considered to be 'poison' for the Hollywood's box office. A concerned friend, the famous American playwright Philip Barry, offered her the protagonist role of a new comedy which was *specifically* created for her. *The Philadelphia Story* is a comedy of manners which satirises the lives of the higher classes and deals with issues such as infidelities, alcoholism, or even domestic violence. Despite the depth of the themes proposed, the play was nonetheless written with the purpose of making Hepburn the centre of attention; this is why the analysis of the female protagonist, Tracy Lord, provides a complete understanding of the 'heart' of the play.

Despite its huge success on Broadway, scholars have neglected to study Barry's play and have favoured the analysis of its first film version, *The Philadelphia Story*, directed by George Cukor and released in 1940. Years later, Charles Walters directed a musical version of the play, entitled *High Society* (1956), which did not share the appraisal the previous works had received and did not get any attention from a scholarly perspective. Though many critics have been concerned with the characterization of Tracy Lord, there are few works focused on the comparison of Tracy's presentation in the play and in the musical version, although this study could provide access to the cultural representation of high-class women in 1930s and in 1950s America.

By making a comparative analysis, we can focus on the changes produced between the characterization of Tracy Lord in the original play and in the musical version *High Society*. This study will give us access to the cultural context in which the two works were produced, since these alterations were merely responding to different sociological and historical causes. Cultural Studies provides the perfect framework for this type of analysis, since its major concern is, precisely, related to the study of culture and its reflection on different types of texts. As Dunn states, "literature, history and the media should probably still be the coordinates of the cultural studies field. The

achievement of these disciplines so far in interpreting the country's culture to itself is of quite sufficient distinction" (1986: 88). Both the play and the film will be used as the *means* through which I intend to study how the Hollywood Industry works and how the conventions of the time in which the texts were produced could have affected their creation. Following Johnson (1986: 297), I will use the individual text as a *means* to a cultural study, as a kind of raw material for part of the practice.

First, we will begin with the analysis of Tracy in Philip Barry's play *The Philadelphia Story*. Because of the importance of the Star System both on Broadway and in Hollywood, there were certain features linked to the main character of the play since the moment Hepburn accepted to perform the role. The audience already identified the main stars of a Broadway play or a Hollywood film with a set of values and attributes, as if they were the 'trademark' of a particular studio or a particular type of work. Within the field of film criticism, there are many analysis of the ways in which the audience seeks in a *star* a positive identification and even associates a particular actress, for example, with a particular vision of womanhood. Richard Dyer explains how the star image and the persona can "fit" the fictional character to produce a work charged with ideological importance (1979: 148). Donald also contributes to this topic and adds that "the star image carries powerful cultural connotations that both exceed the fictional codes of character and identification and work and bind us into the fictional world of the film" (2007: 112). The fact that Katharine Hepburn accepted the role of Tracy Lord or, more importantly, that Philip Barry had written the role *for her*, already announced the type of heroine that was chosen for the play. Tracy was empowered with most of the actress's personal attributes and was developed as a unique, charming character with a strong personality.

But before moving into any analysis, it would be helpful to be acquainted with the main plot of the play in order to understand the relationships between the different characters. The following excerpt provides a brief summary included in the 1969 edition of Barry's play, *The Philadelphia Story*:

Tracy Lord, of the Philadelphia Lords, has married C.K. Dexter Haven and divorced him when he, resenting her chilling attitude toward the comforting virtues of domesticity, takes to liquor. A little while later she has taken up with a handsome snob of the mines named Kittredge and is about to marry him. One of the calender social gossip weeklies sends a reporter and a camera woman to cover the wedding. They are injected into the house by Tracy's brother, who hopes to divert their attention from Father Lord's affair with a Broadway actress. Tracy, already a little shaken in her urge for Kittredge, finds herself suddenly bowled over by Connor, the fascinating reporter. At the end of a pre-wedding party, at which the champagne flows like ginger ale, she and Connor go for a dip in the pool. Tracy always had been an uncertain champagne drinker. The last time she drank a lot of it she went out on the roof to salute the moon. Now the wedding is threatened. Kittredge takes his frock coat and goes home. (Barry, 1969:4)

Although we have a very accurate depiction of Tracy by simply reading the summary, the first real description we have about her character is given by her mother Margaret and her sister Dinah at the beginning of the play:

MARGARET: Your sister has very definite opinions about certain things.

DINAH: She's sort of –you know– hard, isn't she?

MARGARET: Not hard –none of my children is that, I hope. Tracy sets exceptionally high standards for herself, that's all, and although she lives up to them, other people aren't always quite able to. (Barry, 1969:16)

Tracy is a moral being, and upholds the values according to which men and women should learn to behave. But her “high standards” can be, as Margaret suggests, misunderstood. According to Pender, “Tracy, like many other characters in Barry comedies, must acquire self-awareness and tolerance in order to mature” (2007: 1050). This is the most widely sustained view on Tracy, that of her being intolerant with the “flaws” of the other characters, if we could describe the extramarital affair of her father, and the domestic violence perpetrated by her ex-husband as just “flaws”. In this satirical representation of the lives of the upper classes, Tracy is just a high-class woman of the 1930s who must change and ask for forgiveness in order to be worthy of a “happy ending”.

While the women keep their opinions about Tracy to themselves, the male characters speak out loud to her, to the point of hurting her feelings. Her own father says to her that “you have everything it takes to make a lovely woman, except the one essential –an understanding heart. Without it, you might just as well be made of bronze” (Barry 1969: 64). He even goes as far as to blame her lack of tenderness as the reason for his own affair with a younger woman. Before this scene has taken place, Dexter, her ex-husband, also blamed his “deep and gorgeous thirst” on her (Barry 1969: 54). According to him, “[she]’ll never be a first class woman or a first class human being, till [she has] learned to have some regard for human frailty” (Barry, 1969: 57). Just to complete the picture, her fiancé’s words follow the same line of Seth’s and Dexter’s, even though in his case they intend to be a compliment:

You’re like some marvelous, distant –Oh, queen, I guess. You’re so cool and fine and –and always so much your own. That’s the wonderful you in *you* –that no one can ever really possess– that no one can touch, hardly. It’s a kind of beautiful purity, Tracy, that’s the only word for it. (Barry, 1969: 60)

What she learns at this moment is that she does not want to be worshipped, but loved (see Barry, 1969: 60). In order to achieve love, certain things about her personality must change and, in a night of drunkenness, she experiences a connection with Mike Connor, the fascinating reporter. He has also been blind by prejudices, in his case related to class distinction; but just like Tracy, he has learned to overcome them.

Tracy herself becomes a victim of her own prejudices and perpetrates the sins she has previously condemned on others. Firstly, she gets intoxicated with champagne and wine, and then she almost commits infidelity with Mike. We must not forget that if this second act is not fully accomplished, it is not due to Tracy’s “high standards” but, instead, to Mike’s honourable values: “You were extremely attractive –and as for distant and forbidding, on the contrary. But you were also somewhat the worse –or the better– for wine, and there are rules about that, damn it” (Barry, 1969: 113). With Mike’s explanation of the events occurred on the night before, it becomes clear for the audience that Tracy’s virtue has been kept intact and that she has not completely fallen into the decaying morals that rule her society. Even though this is due to Mike’s values instead of Tracy’s, she is nonetheless given a second chance with Dexter, who has also managed to change and has stopped drinking:

TRACY: Oh –I’ll be yare now –I’ll promise to be yare!

DEXTER: Be whatever you like, you’re my Redhead.- All set? (Barry 1969: 113)

This ending could only be accomplished by Tracy’s realization of her own flaws; otherwise, she would never have been given a second chance with Dexter. So despite

his apparently eagerness of letting her preserve her own personality, it is evident that her happy ending only responds to her promise of "being yare". This highlights the irony intended by the author in the play's wry treatment of gender issues.

In 1940 the play was adapted to the screen for the first time. Katharine Hepburn, who owned the rights, sold them to the MGM studio with the condition of keeping the female leading role. The play kept its original title and did not suffer too many alterations when transformed into a film, although it presented some clear changes, like the importance given to the character of C.K. Dexter Haven (performed on screen by Cary Grant) through the amalgamation of Haven with the character of Sandy Lord, who disappears in the film.

Sixteen years later, the MGM presented a new version of its previous success, this time in the form of a musical. The film's title changed to *High Society*, the action moved from Philadelphia to Newport, and it was set in the 1950s instead of the 1930s, as the allusions to rock'n'roll suggest. The changes carried out in the story were mainly associated to the necessities of the musical genre, which demanded a new form of presentation, but it also had to reflect the new conservatism that governed American society and politics during the 1950s. The controversial themes of domestic violence and alcoholism were completely erased from the plot, something that affected, mainly, the character of Dexter and, therefore, the depiction of his relationship with Tracy.

Grace Kelly was the actress selected to perform the role of Tracy Lord. The reason for her choice lies on the fact that she had recently become the "most famous Philadelphian" (Irvine, 1995: 1) in the whole world when she married Prince Rainier of Monaco. The lack of strength in her portrayal of Tracy Lord is palpable, but it would not be fair to just blame her performance for the failure of the whole film. John Patrick was in charge of writing the screenplay and he deliberately left C.K. Dexter Haven's drinking problems and violent abuse out, making Tracy's personality more difficult to understand. The reasons for her divorce were mostly erased and this made the character change perceptibly.

The musical has always been considered as "the window to American culture" (Kantor 2004)., and therefore, *High Society* had to adapt itself to the new period of conservatism. Moreover, the musicals of the time were mainly comedies and were said to pay more attention to their form than to their content; a presumable decisive factor for the producers, who may have not dare to invest on a musical which carried out a social message and portrayed serious themes like that of domestic violence. But, as a consequence, the new product was the representative of a new ideology, and could be seen as a mirror of the values of a new generation.

In the very first song of the film, Louis Armstrong appears as the narrator of the story and presents the different characters. This narrator is leading the audience towards a biased understanding of the past and the nature of each character, presenting the film as a story of "how-Dexter-got-his-wife-back". The plot is not built around the female character any more, but around the male character. We are supposed to sympathize with Dexter and to judge his ex-wife negatively. She is called a snob, the only reason why her husband divorced *her*. She made him a "sad" man and considered that his work was underneath his class; she is a "silly chick" marrying a "square"; and yet, it is also said that Dexter wants her back. Since the audience knows that Tracy and Dexter are the leading couple, in this version of the story, Tracy's realization of her flaws is just one more obstacle to overcome in order to get a happy ending; but it cannot be considered the main theme of the film as it happens in Barry's play.

Her presentation, made by her mother and sister at the beginning of the film, changes, and now she "is just exceptionally strong-minded, that's all. And very

wonderful always". They do not mention her "high-standards", which seem to have been changed for the snobbery of a rich girl who needs to mature and learn to love above material things. For a modern audience, this version evidences the importance of her change. Her flaws are no longer connected with her moral values or her personality, but with materialistic wishes and class snobbery. Dexter is no longer presented as a drunkard and he never beats her. He is a man who loves her above all her imperfections, a man who can even compose songs for her. It is highlighted that she does not deserve a man like Dexter until she learns to love him and to overcome her prejudices.

We may conclude by saying that through the study of the main female character we have gone over the main themes and the most controversial aspects of the play *The Philadelphia Story*. The characterization of Tracy Lord gives a general overlook of the social conventions of the 1930s and allows us to study the position of women in that society. The same can be said about *High Society* in which we focused on the character performed by Grace Kelly. It is interesting to see how the ideals of womanhood changed in sixteen years and how the genre and the conservatism of the period in which this new version was released imposed a change in the plot and the avoidance of dealing with some controversial aspects like domestic violence.

Yet, the main theme remains. Tracy has to change both in the play and in the film because her personality does not fit with the expectations of the male characters surrounding her. The conclusion seems to be that, after all,

GEORGE: A man expects his wife to –

TRACY: Behave herself. Naturally (Barry, 1969:114)

Or maybe, as Dexter points out, we should expect her "To behave herself naturally" (Barry, 1969: 114).

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