Titanic: A Sociological Perspective

Titanic, directed by James Cameron, is a film based on the sinking of the R.M.S. Titanic, in 1912. The story told is about two fictional characters, Rose DeWitt Bukater and Jack Dawson, and their brief love affair aboard the ill-fated ship. Rose is an upper-class woman born into high society; Jack is an aimless drifter of much lesser means. While their love story, and the ship's sinking, are the main plot, this film depicts the glaring differences between the social classes - both in how they live and how they are treated. After all, the Titanic transported not only first class passengers, but also poor immigrants of various ethnic groups - from Europeans to Far-East Asians - wanting to make a new life in America.

The discrepancies between the classes begins from the start, when passengers board the ship. First class and those below them are segregated before they even board the ship with separate boarding ramps. Those lower-class passengers in steerage are jostled through various health inspections for lice, disease, and other contagious things usually carried by the impoverished. On the other hand, the wealthier passengers are courteously greeted by servants and attendants, who take their luggage aboard and see to their every whim. This segregation on the ship and vast difference in treatment will persist even up until the passengers are fleeing the sinking Titanic. Not all is pristine and wonderful for the wealthy, however. It is apparent from the start that the headstrong, feminist Rose has a hard time fitting into the expected role of polite, quiet submissiveness that is expected of her gender in this time period. She is opinionated, sarcastic, and oftentimes bordering on rude towards her mother's snobby social group. It is soon revealed that Rose not only dreads her position in stuffy upper-class society, but she is practically being forced into a marriage with a man purely for monetary reasons. This gives Rose a feeling of hopelessness, of being trapped. Finally, not knowing where else to turn one evening, Rose flees from dinner in tears towards the stern of the ship. She intends to commit suicide.

This is where she meets Jack. Jack won his ticket aboard the Titanic in a poker game. He
had been resting on a bench on the lower deck when Rose runs past him, upset and beside herself. When Jack sees her standing on the edge, contemplating her jump, he strikes up a conversation with her and manages to get her to step back. As Rose is climbing the railing to get back onto the deck, she trips over the hem of her dress. Luckily, Jack catches her and helps her back up, but they fall onto the ground in a rather precarious position. Two sailors, hearing her screams from when she tripped, run over to find Jack on top of Rose in this manner, and assume he attacked her. They summon the master-at-arms and Rose’s fiancé, and they are ready to arrest Jack of the assumed crime, when Rose admits he saved her, but lies about her attempt at suicide. It is obvious that Rose’s fiancé has a prejudice against those of lower economic status, but he invites Jack to join them for dinner the next night to tell the story of Rose’s heroic rescue. Mostly, he just wishes to make a mockery of Jack.

The next day, Rose and Jack spend hours strolling around the ship, chatting and getting to know one another. At first, their personalities and different upbringings clash: Jack is quite blunt, and Rose is used to social etiquette and discretion. However, they eventually find common ground in artwork and other subjects, and hit it off well. When dinner is announced, they part ways to get ready. A rich woman named Margaret Brown (an actual person who was on the Titanic, dubbed The Unsinkable Molly Brown) who seems to lack the pretension of the “old money” aristocrats, helps Jack by dressing him in an elegant tuxedo so that he will be in proper fashion to dine in first class. During the dinner, Rose’s mother and fiancé try several attempts to demean Jack for his lower station, but he handles them with grace and civility. However, in one amusing scene, Jack did have a bit of a culture shock when he was presented with the extensive and very circumstantial place setting of spoons, forks, and knives. Mrs. Brown simply murmured to him that he should use them working from the outside in. When dinner ends, the men at the table retreat to the smoking room for cigars and brandy. Rose’s fiancé, certainly not seeing Jack as his peer, invites him to join the men with open condescension, saying that their discussions of business and politics would interest Jack very little. Jack, of course, declines his offer and passes a note to Rose to meet him elsewhere, and departs.

Rose accepts the invitation, and Jack takes her down to steerage where there is a party
going on. She is exposed to a culture she has never experienced before, with loud Irish music, beer, raucous and lively people, and dancing very unlike that of the balls she has been to. Rose finds that she has much more fun in this sort of environment than the stuffy, artificial social interactions she was raised around. Afterwards, Jack and Rose grow even closer, and form a budding romantic relationship under the radar of her hovering mother and controlling, snobby fiancé. Unfortunately, as history shows, their time on the Titanic is limited. On the very night Rose decides she will run off with Jack, the Titanic hits an iceberg.

Passengers are not concerned at first because the crew assures them that it was nothing - after all, it was claimed that the Titanic was unsinkable. But as water begins to seep into the steerage accommodations and the ship's bow begins to lower into the water, panic sets in. Discrimination between the social classes is even manifest here. Crew members bar those in steerage from even coming up on deck. There are not enough lifeboats to hold even half the passengers on the ship, so the crew only allowed the women and children of first class on the lifeboats first. They do not even fill the boats to capacity, fearing they will capsize, further reducing possibility for rescuing other passengers. Social inequality is further exposed when Rose's fiancé uses coercion via money to bribe a crew member into saving him a spot on a lifeboat. However, that crew member realizes the desperate and dire situation and decides to not abuse his authority, and reneges on their deal. Meanwhile, Jack and Rose are fighting to survive the treacherous flooding corridors of the ship. Once on deck, they cannot get on any lifeboats together because of the common folkway that deems it important to rescue women and children first. After Rose decides she cannot board a lifeboat without Jack, they continue to try to join the rest of the panicked crowd scrambling towards the stern of the ship as it continues to capsize.

As the Titanic disappears under the Atlantic, the conflict between survivors is not over. The unbearably cold water is literally freezing people to death, and so they claw and fight for any pieces of debris or flotsam they can get their hands on to keep afloat. Jack and Rose find a chunk of wooden debris large enough to hold only one of them, so Jack allows Rose to get on top of it to keep out of the frigid water while they wait and hope for a lifeboat to return for them. Like hundreds of other passengers in the water, Jack cannot hold out and perishes before a single
lifeboat returns. Rose does live, however.

A much older Rose narrates the story, and tells of how she found out her fiancé lived as well, but she did not reunite with him, instead taking Jack's last name - Dawson - and starting her life anew. Furthermore, for all the money and power her ex-fiancé had, it ended up being his undoing when the stock market crashed in 1929 and he committed suicide. Rose was able to escape the life she detested, and live a much more liberating life, thanks to Jack's influence on her.
Sociology Terms

Chapter 3:
Culture
Culture Shock
Folkway

Chapter 4:
Peer
Personality
Status

Chapter 5:
Coercion
Conflict
Role
Social Interaction

Chapter 6:
Social Group

Chapter 7:
Crime

Chapter 8:
Lower Class
Social Class
Social Inequality
Upper Class

Chapter 10:
Discrimination
Ethnic Group
Immigrant
Prejudice
Segregation

Chapter 11:
Gender

Chapter 12:
Marriage

Chapter 15:
Ascent
Authority
Power

Chapter 18:
Crowd
Fashion
Panic