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Sex Discrimination in "The Catbird Seat" and Today's Workplace

by Amanda Woolum

(Honors English 1150)

If the American Dream is an opportunity for all, then why do people feel that women should not be on top in the workplace? In "The Catbird Seat," James Thurber leads his readers to ponder this question as he addresses the issue of women on top in the workplace, and how the American Dream is not an equal opportunity for all.

In "The Catbird Seat," the main character Mr. Martin does not approve of Mrs. Barrows who happens to be "the newly appointed special adviser to the president of the firm, Mr. Fitweiler" (Thurber 864). Mr. Martin claims that "Ulgine Barrows stood charged with willful, blatant, and persistent attempts to destroy the efficiency and system of F & S" (865). Because of this, Mr. Martin devises a scheme to get Mrs. Barrows fired. Even though it seems as if Mr. Martin's problem with Mrs. Barrows lies with her personality and the fact that "she had begun chipping at the cornices of the firm's edifice and now she was swinging at the foundation stones with a pickaxe" (865), the real problem lies with the fact that she is a woman in a position of power in the workplace. This intimidates Mr. Martin, and also makes him feel as if his American Dream could be taken away from him by Mrs. Barrows. The discrimination of women on top in the workplace is not just a problem in this story, but also a problem in real life.

In today's world, even with laws such as the Equal Pay Act, women are still receiving less pay than men, have difficulties reaching higher positions in the workplace, and are discriminated against in hiring. According to the article "The Glass Ceiling," "Today, nearly 60 percent of the nation's labor force are women or minorities, yet white males still hold most of the top jobs in corporations, labor unions, universities and other institutions"(Adams). Women particularly face the problem of the glass ceiling, meaning that they are unable to advance in their business. According to the same article, "[This] term was given currency by The Wall Street Journal in 1986" (Adams) and has since become a term that has stirred up many issues. Woman can do more work than men in their workplace and still not be able to advance . . . women have only 5 or 6 percent of the higher management jobs" (Adams). According to the article "Women, Sexual Politics & the American Dream," "Women sometimes vastly outnumber men in higher education and as recipients of degrees, yet do not rise to the top of corporations or law firms" (Mazur). Not only are women unable to advance in their workplace, but they also receive less pay than men. U.S. Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro stated that, "A significant wage gap is still with us, and that gap constitutes nothing less than an ongoing assault on women's economic freedom" (qtd. in Adams). How big is this wage gap exactly? According to the article "Gender Pay Gap":

In 2006 full-time female workers earned 81 percent of men's weekly earnings, according to the latest U.S. Labor Department data...Separate U.S. Census Bureau data put the gap at about 77 percent of men's median full-time, year-round earning. (Billitteri)

Some people argue that the wage gap is a result of women's choices in careers or to have babies. However, the article states that "The pay gap exists even when women choose not to have children and when they choose male-dominated fields of study and occupation" (Billitteri). Evelyn F. Murphy, president of The Wage Project, stated that, "Women do not realize the enormous price that

they pay for gender wage discrimination because they do not see big bites taken out of their paychecks at any one time” (qtd. in Billitteri). This means that even though women are being discriminated against, they usually do not realize it. By not coming to this realization, they are unknowingly accepting this discrimination and letting it continue. Not only do women face this glass ceiling, but sometimes they can not even make inside the door of the workplace due to hiring discrimination. Some places do not hire women if they are pregnant or intend on becoming pregnant while working there because they do not want their employees to take time off work. Others feel that women are not capable of doing a man's job, like construction. According to the article “Legal Discrimination Against Women in Hiring,” “Employers [in Effort, Pennsylvania] not only can and do refuse to hire a woman if she admits to being a mother, they can even pay her lower wages based on this familial status if hired” (Peppard). This is only one example of sex discrimination that goes on in today's world. All of these types of sex discrimination wage gap, difficulties advancing, and hiring discrimination are just some reasons why the American Dream is not equally available to women.

As portrayed in “The Catbird Seat,” people do not feel comfortable with women in a position of power in the workplace, especially men. Because of this, women have a harder time achieving success in their careers and so they are unable to reach the American Dream. According to the article “Women, Sexual Politics & the American Dream,” Lawrence R. Velvel, the provocative dean of Massachusetts Law School states, “Today... there is one very large group of people who are beginning to understand that the American Dream is usually not true for them. They are just over half the population. They are women” (qtd. in Mazur). Women work just as hard as men, sometimes harder only to crash into the glass ceiling. Even if a woman is in a position of power, like Mrs. Barrows, they still face discrimination and can be fired for illegitimate reasons. This is just one example of how the American Dream is not an opportunity for all no matter how hard you work.

In “The Catbird Seat,” Thurber focuses on the belief that women should not hold positions of power in the workplace, bringing up the issue that the American Dream is not available to all. Women of today have made much progress since Thurber wrote this story; however, they are still being held back by sex discrimination. This is just one of many points that proves that the American Dream does not exist for everyone.

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