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Athenian Alien

Having been an American living in Athens for 4 months last year I know how it feels to be an outsider in the city. Not speaking Greek, always getting an unsympathetic look from taxi drivers when I ask them to take me in the direction they didn't want to go... it's easy to feel like you don't belong when you have never been a part of the culture. However, in the film *Stella*, Stella goes through a much different outsider experience. Her feeling of exclusion comes from an internal conflict between freedom and love until her more powerful desire wins out and she chooses personal freedom. This drive to be free and untethered by marriage and society as a whole has led Stella to live a life outside of the conventional Athenian social scene. But what has lead Stella to reject the society in which she lives? The purpose of this essay is to analyze the movie *Stella* and specifically the character of Stella to determine what repulsive factors are at work in Athens to understand Stella's self induced alienation.

In order to fully understand the nature of Stella's alienation, the ways in which Stella is shown to be an outsider in the movie *Stella* must be identified. As George Simmel points out "The metropolis has always been the seat of the money economy" (Simmel, *The Metropolis...*) and in the movie *Stella* the pointing out of the lower economic by both Miltos and Alekos of Stella exemplify this. Since Stella has very little personal wealth in metropolis focused on the money she is considered an outsider. Also, when Alekos tells Stella he would "line the floor [she] walked on with money" she responds with "Money doesn't impress me". The fact that Stella is not focused on personal wealth in an urban space that Simmel describes as "reducing all quality and individuality to the question: How much?" (Simmel, *The Metropolis...*) creates a space between her and others in Athens.

In addition to the economic evidence in the movie *Stella* of Stella's alienation, there are some issues of gender that also create a social space between Stella and those around her. Stella is quite obviously a strong, independent, and unconforming

woman, and it is the last two of that list that largely contribute to distance between her and society. Greek women are traditionally accepted as being strong and powerful entities in society and in the family; perhaps this is best represented by a quote from the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* when the mother says “The man may be the head of the family, but the wife is the neck and she can turn the head in any direction she likes”. The degree of independence and conformity, however, is the area in which Stella departs from the traditional view of the Greek woman.

Stella is an autonomous person, her goals and ambitions serve no one else but herself, and she wants to keep it that way. She doesn't want to engage in tradition and get married because it would hinder her independence. She doesn't want to conform to the traditional roles of women in Greek society either for the same reason. While many Greeks may feel a pronounced sense of personal independence that is largely interpreted as pride it is Stella's unique desire for not only personal freedom but independence from society that contributes to her outsidership. She rejects the parts of society that don't serve her personal ambition of personal freedom while others in Greek society accept these undesirable societal obligations, such as the relinquishing of personal freedom when married, as part of life. Stella doesn't want to float through life following all the rules and obeying all the customs that don't serve her personal ambitions; she wants to make her life her own, unburdened by conformity to things with which she doesn't agree. It is for all these reasons among others that Stella can be seen as an outsider, but what were the factors that lead her to become this way?

Stella grew up as an Orphan during and post WWII. As an orphan she likely was forced by the will to survive to engage in non-conformist and untraditional means of self-preservation. As an orphan she was rejected from society, tossed out with the garbage but somehow managed to survive. Stella likely developed animosity towards the conformist society that rejected her and there wanted little to do with its' values and traditions; after all, why would she want to follow a societal model that actively excluded her when she need it the most? Stella embraced her unique position as an exile from society and integrated her own

values and ambitious into lifestyle that allowed her to coexisted with the alienating society in Athens.

Stella makes it widely known that her personal freedom is very important to her and that she will resist any and all influences that threaten take that away from her. This is shown in the movie by Stella's internal conflict between love and her personal freedom. Ultimately, she rejects both Alekos' and Miltos' proposition for marriage in favor of retaining her personal freedom. As seen with Annetta character, personal freedom and independence is not something that traditional Greek women possess; they are expected to adhere to societal norms and sacrifice both of those values when marriage is proposed. To Stella marriage would be the ultimate adversary to her personal freedom and independence. Her sense of individuality and personal autonomy are the things that during her years as an orphan, so it would likely seem frightening to her to give those up to be married and have to figure out a different way to live, especially since she is now a full adult. Stella's rejection of anything that challenges her personal freedom and autonomy is therefore likely a result of the fear that she'll lose an integral part of who she is if she sacrifices her core values.

It also seems likely that her rejection of both Miltos and Alekos is tied to the fact that they both came from families with money. Since she grew up as an orphan she had no money and people who did have money didn't give it to her. It seems likely that even though Stella had a great time with both Alekos and Miltos that is must have been very difficult for her to be with men who represented a class that rejected her when she was a child. In Giorgos Mazonakis' music video *Gucci Forema* we can see that the poor or working class disliking the rich is not only a phenomenon that existed in Stella's time but also exists today. In the video the artist says that the girl is "all that [he] hate[s]" and goes on to list factors that contribute to this feeling including "a make-up man at your house and personal hairstylist" and living in the nice part of Athens as opposed to the west side of Athens where he is from. It is clear that the artist despises all that the subject of his rants represents which is likely driven by the fact that he does not possess her wealth. Although Stella does not directly say that she doesn't want to marry Miltos or Alekos because

they have money she does make it evident that money is not important to her and that having money isn't what "does it for her".

Despite being an outsider in the aforementioned ways Stella still manages to achieve near celebrity status. She is sought after by many men, women admire her beauty, people know her name in the market, and many people are upset by her murder. While this all shows that Stella may very well have been a part of the community, the nature of being a celebrity means that you are in a social position different than the rest of the community. Not only is Stella in a different social position than the rest of the community but also her social position is perceived as desirable to others who admire her. This admiration by others in combination with her status at the local tavernas makes Stella a local celebrity.

It is interesting that Stella would want to want to admiration of men, the adoration of women, and want to have celebrity status overall given her rejection of traditional society in general. It is logical to conclude that someone, like Stella, who was rejected by society as an orphan when she was younger and who continually rejects certain key aspects of the society in which she subsists would just not care about what anyone in that society thought and would seek admiration and attention from a group of which she would want to be a part. However, given that Stella was an orphan and largely ignored and rejected by society as a child she might be trying to gain the respect that she was missing before. Children naturally want to be loved and since Stella didn't have that growing up as an orphan in the city she may be seeking that love and admiration as an adult. The conflict arises when her need to be loved and her rejection of aspects of society intersect; it is difficult to imagine how Stella can feel loved while rejecting the society from which she seeks this love.

Intrapersonal dynamics are not the only repulsive factors at work in the movie *Stella*. The nature of being in an urban center, such as Athens, in itself can work to create divisions and promote alienation. Athens, the capitol of Greece and a worldwide symbol of triumph over adversity, elicits a strong sense of independence as a Greek people however, in Stella's case she seems to take that independence to a whole new level; her independence extends beyond Greek

nationalism and she ascribes to intra-Greek independence as well. Unfortunately for Stella this extreme level of independence doesn't mesh well with Athenian society's strong ties to traditional institutions such as marriage. For a people so proud of their independence it leaves little room for individualism.

Athens, as a bustling city and urban center, is a space in which everyone has something to do, is doing something, and has a purpose. People in the market are buying food to feed themselves and their family, people in the shopping district are buying clothes, people in tavernas are eating and being entertained; everything and everyone has a purpose. Stella's lifestyle, however, does not necessitate this goal-oriented motivation. Sure, she has to accommodate her basic needs such as food and shelter, but being single and having no family ties she has very little responsibility. She doesn't have to feed a family, or show up for social engagements, she can do what she wants when she wants to do it. This sort of free-spirit lifestyle exists in traditional Athenian society, yes, but only for young men and women until they find someone to marry. Since Stella has no aspirations for marriage she has an unlimited time in which to pursue personal desires. Such pursuits in Athens cause her to be looked upon as an outsider.

During the Hellenistic period, and even before, there was a large movement of people from the isolation of their countryside farms and small villages into the larger cities, such as Athens. They came to trade and to be protected but also just for the opportunity to be around other people that share common interests, beliefs and goals. A city is a great place for this to happen since there are a lot of people in a small, dense, place and even today people live in cities such as Athens for these benefits. Additionally, the chances of finding a compatible spouse are increased when the number from which to choose increases. Stella, however, does not need to be in a city to trade, and she doesn't seem to have very many common interests, beliefs or goals with the others in the movie, nor is she looking for a spouse. Right away Stella would seem like an outsider since she didn't share these commonalities with others who were in the city; so why would she choose to live in Athens? Well, she probably didn't want to leave Athens given that she grew up as an orphan in the city; leaving the city would mean leaving everything she knew which is scary for

anyone no matter their age. Stella adapted both the physical and social structures of the city to suite her needs since she hadn't come to the city for any of the traditional reasons. She found that the social structures and scene in the tavernas fit her personality quite well; she could be the center of attention, have almost no responsibility, have fun all the time, and make enough money to account for her basic needs.

From the evidence set forth in this paper, both from an analysis of the movie *Stella* and from the works of George Simmel, the factors leading to Stella's alienation become clear. An understanding of her adolescence as an orphan reveals her motivations for being so independent and gripping so tightly her personal freedom. Her rejection of anything that challenges her core values has lead her to continue her exile, to some degree, from society but has also given her the opportunity to live the life she chooses. The city of Athens itself works to alienate those, like Stella, who lead a non-goal oriented life as well as provide a space in which her individualism can thrive. Stella's adherence to her values, even in the face of death, exemplifies the Greek struggle through history to establish their independence from oppressive conformist movements. Her break from tradition symbolizes the need for women in 1955 Greece to think about their role in an "independent" and democratic nation and bring about an awareness of the fruitful possibilities for women outside of traditional institutions.

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