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Women in the Twentieth Century

The history of twentieth-century American women is inextricably tied to the history of men and children. As family members, women have lived their lives as part of a larger unit—first as daughters and then as wives and mothers. Only in the last third of this century have large numbers of American women lived alone or in relationships without marriage and worked outside of the home in various occupations and professions. Hollywood movies have always included women in both starring and supporting roles, but always within clearly defined images: as the virginal Mary, such as Mary Pickford in the silent *Pollyanna* (1920); as sexual temptresses or Eves, such as Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was* (1915), in which she defined the vamp; or as an independent woman or Lilith. (All of Katharine Hepburn's movies fit into this last category.)

The most interesting portrayals of women combine two of these images, with the Eve-Lilith synthesis being the most powerful. Greta Garbo in *Flesh and the Devil* (1920), for example, is a temptress who exudes individuality and audacity. Bette Davis in *A Marked Woman* (1937) is a prostitute with integrity and courage willing to stand up to ruthless gangsters. Mary Pickford in *Way Down East* (1920) is a woman seduced by an unscrupulous man who survives, thanks to her tenacity and good spirit.

Women's filmic roles reflect the larger culture's view of women and are shown within familiar film genres. In adventure movies of all sorts, for example, women are the damsels in distress (the Marys) or attractive sexual decorations (the Eves). Less frequently, women are the heroes, the active centers of a thriller, a Lilith among the many Eves and Marys. Occasionally, at certain times in Hollywood history, women have been portrayed as careerists, independent people with identities of their own. Sweet young things and sultry Eves, however, dominated silent film; Bara, Jean Harlow (*China Seas,* 1935), and Garbo starred in film after film where their astonishing beauty baited weak but willing men. Sound movies, beginning in the 1930s, built on the formulaic images of the past but added more renditions of all three types.

Paradoxically, though the material conditions of women's lives have changed enormously during the century, neither dominant cultural values nor cinematic treatments have kept pace. Molly Haskell's classic study of women's roles in the movies, *From Reverence to Rape* (1974), effectively captures this view. Society and Hollywood hold on to traditional values about women simultaneous with observing their new behaviors. Even the fiercely independent Katharine Hepburn falls into Spencer Tracy's arms at the end of *Woman of the Year* (1942), the quintessential Lilith role. More women work outside of the home for more years of their lives than ever before, but recent films rarely show working women in their workplace. *Working Girl* (1988), with Harrison Ford and Melanie Griffith, is a notable exception to this rule. Effective birth control has given women choices as to when, or if, they are to become mothers, yet this very basic subject rarely surfaces in Hollywood films.

Although the relationship between filmic reality and historic reality is not simple, linear, or predictable, there are some correlatives. Strong, independent women were needed during the dark days of the Depression in the 1930s as well as in World War II, for example, so Hollywood delivered with an unprecedented number of films featuring stars such as Katharine Hepburn (*Spitfire,* 1934), Barbara Stanwyck (*Golden Boy,* 1939), Joan Crawford (*Sadie McKee,* 1934), Bette Davis (*Ex-Lady,* 1933), and Rosalind Russell (*His Girl Friday,* 1940) playing professional women as well as working-class women. But there is no simple equation.

During the post-1945 years, America's older stars found few roles open to them. Joan Crawford in *Queen Bee* (1955) plays a manipulative woman, while she is duped by a younger man in *Autumn Leaves* (1956). The problems of mature women were not treated sympathetically on the screen or in the culture. The new generation of stars played classic Eves, no one more effectively than Elizabeth Taylor. Her portrayal of the frustrated wife, Maggie, in Richard Brooks's version of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) displayed her beauty and her unfulfilled yearnings.

In the segregated days of the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood would not star the beautiful and talented African American actor Lena Horne in a romantic lead role for fear of offending many American moviegoers; indeed, her scenes in *Stormy Weather* (1943) were cut out when the movie played in the South. *Carmen Jones* (1954) starred Dorothy Dandridge opposite Harry Belafonte in a rare offering of a classic story performed with an African American cast. Ignoring race and denying African American actresses job opportunities in film, except for the most predictable and stereotypical roles, became the practice. Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen could appear on the screen as maids and nursemaids in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), but neither could portray the heroine in a melodrama or drama.

It was not until the early 1970s, and then for a rare and brief moment, that a black actress, Pam Grier, was allowed to play the star in an atypical female role, the adventure heroine, in movies such as *Foxy Brown* (1973) and *Coffy* (1974). The so-called blaxploitation films usually starred Richard Roundtree, but Grier offered a variation on the theme and attracted large audiences; unfortunately, she had few imitators or followers. Latin American actresses fared even worse. A recent documentary on the life and career of Carmen Miranda during the 1940s and 1950s effectively captures both her dilemma and the dilemma of all Latina stars.

Early Film

Silent movies established the pattern for all time with the Mary image dominating. Director D. W. Griffith became a father figure to actresses Dorothy and Lillian Gish, sisters who played sweet young things. Lillian starred in Griffith's The *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), and *Broken Blossoms* (1919). Mary Pickford, the most popular ingénue, also showed pluck and risk taking in her movies. *Way Down East* (1920) was a good example of a Mary-Lilith role. Mabel Normand departed from the Mary by being a daredevil comic in many silent movies with Charlie Chaplin; she jumped out of airplanes, drove a car, and threw coconut pies in men's faces. She ran with the Keystone Kops and was viewed by her contemporaries as every bit as talented as Keaton and Chaplin. Unfortunately, her fame did not survive the period nor did prints of her movies. Normand was a classic slapstick, a form unbecoming to a lady; it was not until Lucille Ball brought the format to television, a more intimate environment, that slapstick again became acceptable as a woman's genre.

In the adventure serials that were very popular from the early years of the century through the 1930s, *The Perils of Pauline* captured thousands of devoted child viewers. Pearl White, as Pauline, had daring experi-

ences overcoming kidnappings, dangerous physical encounters, and many villains. There was also a series of Nancy Drew serials, based upon the popular novels for adolescent girls and boys; kids thrilled to the multiple escapades engaged in by Nancy and her friends. Both Pauline and Nancy, as young women, could have adventures, but grown-up women had romance. The cultural message clearly stated that young girls grow up to become wives and mothers who then appear in melodramas and domestic comedies.

The Golden Era, 1933–1950

When sound movies took over in the 1930s, movies were still being made for all ages and both sexes; actresses, though caught in predictable images, had many movie roles. Hollywood studios churned out "A" and "B" quality movies. MGM, one of the largest studios, bragged that it had more stars under contract than in the sky. The "weepies," the melodramas of the period (one of the most popular genres, now seen on daytime soap operas), always featured long-suffering women. Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas* (1937) had to endure many obstacles, but she, like many others, persisted and often prevailed. Joan Crawford became a well-known star playing working-class women whose good looks snared her a wealthy husband, as in *Mannequin* (1937). Clearly the search for romance on a rocky road has lived on as the dominant subject of women in film.

Katharine Hepburn was often a career woman—a pilot in *Christopher Strong* (1933) or a journalist in *A Woman Rebels* (1936) and *Woman of the Year* (1942). Rosalind Russell and Bette Davis also played professional women, both journalists, Russell in *His Girl Friday* (1940) and Davis in *Front Page Woman* (1935). When Hepburn was not pursuing a career, she was an aristocratic woman whose wealth insured her independence. *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1936) are good examples of this formula. Greta Garbo played a real-life queen in *Queen Christina* (1933) and a doomed woman in *Anna Karenina* (1935). Her fabulous beauty, however, always determined her outcome. Men flocked to her like bees to clover, but they usually punished her for her seductive power over them. Eves had to be contained.

The stars also played ordinary women who suffered during hard, economic times. They were Liliths out of necessity. Crawford in *Sadie McKee* (1934), Hepburn in *Alice Adams* (1935), and Davis in *A Marked Woman* (1937) represented different social classes and different circumstances, but they were all needy women surviving during the Depression. When Barbara Stanwyck played a world-weary mistress in *Golden Boy* (1939), she did it with both strength and vulnerability, thereby making her enormously popular to her woman fans. Joan Crawford had the largest network of fan clubs around the country.

Mildred Pierce (1945), Crawford's award-winning role, described, rather prophetically, the dilemma many women faced as World War II ended. A weak husband and the need to earn a living and support her two young daughters became the new reality for Mildred Pierce. Her baking skills ultimately led her to open a restaurant, and then a series of successful restaurants. The plot, however, preserved the traditional value system and expected Mildred to remain an at-home mom even after she became an entrepreneur. Her romantic interlude with a playboy, (while her ex-husband was caring for her daughters) led to a family tragedy and what was viewed at the time as apt punishment for an (allegedly) negligent mother.

Mildred Pierce captured many of the new conflicts facing women while preserving the old-time values regarding women's roles. The imaginative universe of a good film enabled audiences to consider competing values, though, in 1945, the consensus upheld the old and rejected the new. Mildred was expected to sacrifice her personal happiness for the sake of her daughters. Working mothers may have

FIGURE 35. *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford, left) confronts her spoiled daughter Veda (Ann Blythe, right), who is ashamed to learn that her mother was once a waitress. The acting captured the differences between the generation of Mildred Pierce and the materialistic generation of her daughter. Courtesy Warner Bros.

been a new reality, but old views die hard and 1945 audiences shared those attitudes. Marjorie Rosen in *Popcorn Venus* (1975) offered analyses of women's films in the 1940s and the new challenges facing women.

The New Generation

As the 1930s generation of actresses matured, a new crop of young stars emerged. Older stars found themselves with few good roles—*All About Eve* (1950) effectively explores the subject—as the general social attitude was that romance and physical beauty was the monopoly of the young. In this sense, films ignored an important stage in women's lives—their mature years. Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe dominated the 1950s as superstars, with movie magazines splashing their faces on frequent covers. Romance became the major genre, with women adventurers and careerists finding few role opportunities. Both Taylor (*Butterfield 8*, 1960) and Monroe (*Some Like It Hot*, 1959) learned very quickly that their screen roles were shaped by their physical appearance; they would always be the femmes fatales, the gorgeous women whose attractiveness trumped all other features.

But even beauties projected other characteristics, a sure sign of the multiple meanings produced by movie stars' portrayals. Taylor, as the wife of a cattle baron in *Giant* (1956), director George Stevens's film adaptation of the Edna Ferber novel, defied the stereotype in that she displayed tenacity, tolerance, and independence as well as obvious beauty. The film also discussed anti-Mexican prejudice, a subject rarely shown in American movies. Monroe, on the other hand, played a shrewd blonde playing a dumb blonde in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953).

The unfair view that beautiful women have empty heads had existed throughout Hollywood's history, from the silent era onward, and Hollywood's unwillingness to give Monroe roles other than those that emphasized her physical assets perpetuated the image. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957) typecast her. Further, this image operated most successfully in comedy and thus remained the genre within which Monroe got most of her parts. While Monroe yearned for serious dramatic roles, projects such as Billy Wilder's *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) were offered to her.

Darker Days Ahead

The 1940s and 1950s also introduced a genre called film noir, a style in which directors emphasized the sinister, the tawdry, and the mean qualities of people. Cinematically, the noir movie often took place at night on dark streets and with dark deeds lurking around every corner. The women in these movies were either the victims of crimes or the perpetrators of them. Barbara Stanwyck wanted to murder her husband for his insurance money in Billy Wilder's adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *Double Indemnity* (1944), but the roles were reversed for her in Anatole Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) when her husband tried to have her murdered. Even Grace Kelly, the aristocratic beauty of the 1950s, became a victim in Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*

(1954) when she discovered that her husband wanted to kill her.

The easy targets, whatever the reason, were women. As a result, a strange phenomenon occurred: after film noir lost its appeal, sometime in the 1960s, and continuing on to today, the number and type of roles available for women declined precipitously. Film critic Pauline Kael discussed how the male buddy film took over and jokingly called Paul Newman and Robert Redford the romantic duo of the decade. Of the new generation of actresses in the 1960s, only a few got many parts. The best roles went to Jane Fonda, who began as a sweet, young thing in *Barefoot in the Park* (1967), moved into sexual temptress roles (*Barbarella*, 1968), and then to independent women parts (*The China Syndrome*, 1979); Liza Minnelli (*Cabaret*, 1972); and Barbra Streisand, who played in musicals (*Funny Girl*, 1968), comedies (*What's Up Doc?* 1972), and dramas (*The Way We Were*, 1973).

Musicals seemed safe for wary Hollywood producers, and *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1965) were very popular. In *Cabaret*, Minnelli offered a sexy, decadent young singer in 1920s Berlin. Diana Ross, as legendary blues singer Billie Holiday in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), gave audiences a melodrama with music while displaying her acting and singing talent; she was the second African American actress to be nominated for a best actress award (the first was Dorothy Dandridge for *Carmen Jones*). Ross lost to Minnelli. Minority women, Latinas and Asians particularly, continued to be ignored by Hollywood.

Toward the Future

By the end of the 1970s, Hollywood ventured to treat some of the dramatic changes in women's lives. Jill Clayburgh in *An Unmarried Woman* (1977), Jane Fonda in *Coming Home* (1977) and *China Syndrome* (1978), and Sally Field in *Norma Rae* (1979) are among the select few roles that looked at a wife facing life after divorce, a wife of a Vietnam soldier, a reporter, and a working woman fighting for a union.

Sally Field, in the role of Norma Rae, offered a rare portrait of an indomitable working woman in small-town America, a woman raising two children while living uncomfortably with her family. Her awakening as a voice for workers, thanks to the aid of a New York City Jewish union organizer (played by Ron Liebman), was unique because no romance intrudes upon their relationship; they work together, trying to convince apolitical reluctant workers to stand up to the textile company managers. Field's marriage to a fellow worker (played by Beau Bridges) is treated neither extensively nor sentimentally. In fact, because of her increased work for the union, she neglects both her husband and children. (Field won the Academy Award for her performance.) This Martin Ritt film is important for its intrinsic interest, but more so because it was a rare foray into the world of working mothers.

By the 1970s, Hollywood no longer made two hundred movies a year, and the studio system had given way to independent productions. The cost of movies grew each year, and filmmakers seemed content to make Mafia movies (*The Godfather*, 1972), war stories where women were absent (*Patton*, 1970), and thrillers where women were largely extraneous (*Jaws*, 1975). This disturbing trend was fueled by the growth in the youth market, particularly young boys, who had become the major patrons of movies; male adolescents' love for action, destruction, and violence in film as well as their willingness to see the same movie many times encouraged filmmakers to produce the same mindless action movies again and again. In the meantime, adult Americans watched broadcast or cable television or rented classic videos.

By appealing to the market's wishes, film producers can easily justify their continued reliance on tried-and-true formula films starring action heroes. No one can accuse them of willfully ignoring women; rather, they can easily argue that they just make the movies audiences want to see. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are still few women producers, directors, or writers, and even fewer male feminists in charge. By the 1980s, the roles for women were so few and far between that the same fine actresses received the slim pickings. Meryl Streep, undeniably one of the great actors of any period, had eight Academy Award nominations between 1981 and 1995, including *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *Out of Africa* (1985). Jessica Lange had five nominations with stellar performances in films such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) and *Blue Sky* (1994).

FIGURE 36. *Norma Rae* (1979). Reuben Warshawky (Ron Liebman), a New York union organizer, convinces a factory worker, Norma Rae (Sally Field), to help him unionize her fellow laborers in order to secure better wages and working conditions. Courtesy Twentieth Century-Fox.

With fewer movies being made, and fewer starring roles for women, no actress today can compete with the large output of films made by Golden Age stars such as Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, and Barbara Stanwyck. Today's actresses rely on cable movies and theater to occupy themselves between the film offers. Although women are very much alive in real time, they are largely absent in reel time today.

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