

# HOLLYWOOD'S PRODUCTION CODE OF 1934 AND THE PARADIGM OF FEMALE VIRTUE

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## RESUMO

Entre junho de 1934 e o período após a Segunda Guerra Mundial, Hollywood impôs a ideia de que a domesticidade era o ideal feminino, imbuído de uma responsabilidade moral para estabelecer um bom exemplo. Os bons modelos de feminilidade apresentavam esposas reservadas e mães dedicadas. As mulheres que escolhiam a carreira seriam representadas como uma ameaçada para a vida familiar. As que não se submetiam ao caminho espectável, ao seguirem um tipo de vida que não incluísse casar e ter filhos, seriam castigadas com um final infeliz. Qualquer tentativa de corrigir um comportamento com um gesto de autossacrifício não seria necessariamente suficiente para atingir um final feliz. O Código era implacável e as más condutas seriam punidas exemplarmente.

**Palavras chave:** Hollywood, mulheres, Código de Produção, representação

## ABSTRACT

Between July 1934 and the post-World War II period, Hollywood enforced the idea of domesticity as the female ideal, imbued with a moral duty to set a good example. Good role models of womanhood would depict demure wives and dedicated mothers. Career women, were to be represented as a threat to family life. Women who did not submit to what was supposed to be their life path, by pursuing a type of life that did not include marrying and having children, would be punished with an unhappy ending. Any attempt to correct a behaviour with a self-sacrificing gesture would not necessarily suffice to achieve a happy ending. The Code was unforgiving and bad conducts had to be exemplary punished.

**Key words:** Hollywood, women, Production Code, representation

Hollywood's Production Code altered not only the way situations and scenes were presented on screen but also changed the representation of people, and in particular women. However, films also mirrored the socio-economic context of the war years and post-war period. Women were a vital part of the war effort and workforce, later pushed into a domestic role when peace came. Still, Hollywood presented an

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even more conservative view of femininity than there was in reality in order to set the finest example of morality.

The United States economy started to present a consistent recovery after 1939. During World War II, the United States became the major supplier of weapons and goods, even though trying to maintain neutrality in the beginning. Eventually America was dragged into the conflict. With the declaration of war, the United States prepared the economy to finance war and redirected the industry to manufacture war supplies. The war effort included the rationing of many goods, since industry was to be focused on war products (Reeves, 2000:126-127).

When a percentage of men went to war, women occupied the jobs left by those men. In need of workers, wages naturally rose and women became employed in a wide range of jobs. As during the Great War, there were women, including large numbers of married women, in factories oriented to produce military supplies. Despite the necessity for female workers, women earned less than men at the same jobs, and harassment, teasing and sexual advances were frequent in factories. Many other women contributed to the war effort by performing volunteer work, canning foods, sewing, cooking and trying to find a way for goods to last longer. Young married women, with small children at home, were most likely not to work in the factories despite the fact the Federal Works Agency invested in care centres. The biggest percentage of women factory workers was of older women with school-age children. Apart from the factories, many women worked as secretaries, clerks, waitresses, hairdressers and in sales. Yet, women's work, especially in the industry, was expected to remain temporary. It was believed once war ended women would return to their domesticity, particularly married women. For many the newly found independence would last longer than everyone expected (Reeves, 2000: 127; Cott, 2000: 474, 476-479, 487).

After World War II, the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union became tense due to disagreements regarding the future of Europe. After years fighting fascism, communist ideals were spreading from Soviet Union. The solution the United States found was to create the Marshall Plan devised to aid the recovering nations of Europe—including Soviet nations, which declined the help. The plan was also an important tool to stop the spreading of communism, by insuring the countries' loyalty to capitalism, while at the same time providing new markets for American goods.

Western Europe benefited economically from the plan and, at the same time, expunged Soviet and communist influences (O'Callaghan, 1990: 116-117; Reeves, 2000: 142-143).

At home, the fight against communism had militancy. A government act created a new Department of Defense, the National Security Council (NSC) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to provide for national security. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other departments investigated people who could have, or were suspected to have, totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive ideological sympathies. The hunt on anyone suspected to have communist ideas or ideals, even if they were innocent, would become a blind obsession in the 1950s and would affect Hollywood as well (Reeves, 2000: 144, 149-150).

After the war, American families were eager to return to normal life. Industry resumed normal production and the economy was stable. After years of crisis, instability and war, people's main concern was to resume their lives, marry and have children. Because of that, birth rates rose exponentially creating the so-called 'baby boom' of the post-war period. Numerous campaigns urged women to return to a domestic role, especially married women. There was no place for independent single women or married working women. Advertisements encouraged women to become wives, mothers and homemakers. Television, magazines and newspapers encouraged women to dedicate themselves to their families and husbands and to provide a secure, clean, comfortable and pleasant environment. Eager to return to a protected and peaceful milieu, as soon as the war ended, there was a huge increase of marriages, low divorce rates—after a peak in 1946 due to the dissolution of rash marriages—and a high birth rate that lasted until the 1960s. With the factories resuming normal production, job availability was reduced. The return of the veterans, in addition to lesser job opportunities, forced working women, especially married, to give up their wartime jobs to make space for the veterans. Yet, women were not happy to forfeit their jobs and return to a position of dependence. Three million women left their wartime jobs. Despite the setback, by 1947 there were more women working than during the war and more working wives, even with lower salaries. (Reeves, 2000: 139-140; Cott, 2000: 484-493)

As in the case of other industries, World War II was good for film business. The coming of the war helped some studios to overcome bankruptcy with record

revenues. The reason behind this may have been the country's conversion of its industries to war production. With large-scale war production, unemployment rates diminished drastically and that meant more workers in the major industrial cities. Consequently, theatre attendances rose and reached the numbers of the pre-Depression era. Overseas film trade also flourished during these years, especially in the export to the United Kingdom and Latin America. The export of American films forced Hollywood to alter its terms of production: the need for better films resulted in the production of lesser but bigger budget movies per year, with longer runtimes. The filmic genres were also altered to suit the military context, namely by the introduction of two government-mandated genres: the combat film and the home-front melodrama (Monaco, 2010: 83, 85-86, 95; Thompson and Bordwell, 2003: 213-214, 239-246, 323-324, 328; Nowell-Smith, 1990: 234).

The fall of Hollywood's Star System was sealed in 1944, when the United States Supreme Court ruled the standard seven-year contract could not be extended indefinitely because of suspensions. This type of punishment, caused by an actor's refusal to work in a certain project, was a way to coerce him/her to work; otherwise, he/she would be contractually bound to a studio and unable to work, either to that or another studio. The 'Havilland decision' as it became known—since it resulted from Olivia de Havilland's suit against Warner Bros—dictated the end of the Star System. No longer contractual property of a studio, the actors were able to look for their projects, to demand better scripts, to decide which pictures they wanted to do, and with which directors they wanted to work. The new contracts were on a year basis, or two or three picture deals. Specific stars could no longer be associated to certain studios. Studios lost their trademark actors, affecting their self-promotion and part of their status (Dixon and Foster, 2008: 171-172).

After the war, Hollywood quickly attempted to recapture the lost foreign markets affected by war, but found problems and resistance provided by the Italian neo-realist movement and the protectionist policies in the major foreign markets. In America, the post-war era was also cruel to Hollywood as anti-trust legislation and the union strikes of film personnel crippled the Studio System. The rise of commercial television and the migration of people to the suburban areas, away from major theatres, were also damaging to the studios. The Cold War and the anti-communist bigotry,

culminating with the HUAC (House of Un-American Activities Committee)<sup>2</sup> hearings in 1947, created a climate of terror and persecution in Hollywood. Many actors, directors, scriptwriters and other personnel were named in the blacklist. Their careers were severely affected or ended. Some went into exile or worked under pseudonyms. Only one tenth of the HUAC victims were able to resume their careers and the resentment against those who gave names to the Committee lasted for decades (Thompson and Bordwell, 2003: 326-327; Parkinson, 1995: 158; Monaco, 2010: 115-117; Dixon and Foster, 2008: 178-181).

In 1948, the Paramount case caused the downfall of the Studio System. The anti-trust case of 1938 had led, in 1940, to a restriction in which the vertically integrated studios could only force blocks of five films to the non-integrated theatres, instead of the entire season pack. In 1948, however, the big studios' oligopoly was forced to end. A series of decisions, appeals and legal actions eventually ended with the Supreme Court declaring block booking violated antitrust laws. The Big Five and the Little Three were found guilty of monopolistic practices. The Little Three did not own theatres but they were accused of cooperating with the Big to exclude the independents from the market. The major studios were ordered to dissociate from exhibition, thus being forced to sell their theatre chains, and ordered to end book blocking and other practices that could limit independent exhibitors. The Big Five continued in the production and distribution business but had to sell their theatres. From then on, films were sold based on their merits, which forced the studios to produce less films but of better quality. The loss of the theatres was a setback for the studios profitability since two-thirds of their profits came from exhibition. The studios found, however, other ways to profit from the exhibition of their films by demanding a huge percentage of the box office, especially for the first week. Government also filed suits against Technicolor and Eastman Kodak on the accusation these firms were monopolising the production of colour films<sup>3</sup>. In 1948, Kodak made its patents available for the competitors. It was the end of the Hollywood monopoly (Thompson and Bordwell, 2003: 327-328; Parkinson, 1995: 155-156; Dixon and Foster, 2008: 172-173; Nowell-Smith, 1990: 445).

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<sup>2</sup> Created in 1938 the HUAC was set to investigate citizens and organisations suspected of having communist ties and sympathies.

<sup>3</sup> The techniques to make colour films had evolved from a three-strip system patented by Technicolor to a single strip of film capable of recording colour patented by Eastman Kodak.

After the strict enforcement of the Hays Code in July 1934, the representation of women on the silver screen was altered significantly. The 1934 version of the Code contained the initial document written by Lord and Quinley and changes added in 1931. However, the Code continued to be altered by adding sections about crime (1938), costumes and profanity (1939) and cruelty to animals (1940). The document set explicit rules about what could and could not be presented on screen and the stages in which the Association of Motion Picture Producers would intervene. It named the constituents of the committee that was to scrutinise the scripts and a preview of each film. The text revealed a belief in the moral duty of cinema, in accordance with the sociological studies of the time that had concluded cinema had a defining influence on the audiences. In this sense, the Code recognised and defended the moral importance of film, admitted it affected audiences in a way other arts did not, therefore it had to function as a role model to improve the standards of mankind. It expressed a belief that cinema was morally responsible for the public, and could improve or lower the moral of people, of all people since it reached all classes, all ages, all ethnicities and both genders (Leff and Simmons, 2001: 285-300; Dixon and Foster, 2008: 130-133).

In this sense, women's 'bad behaviour' was to be punished to provide a discouraging effect. In the 1930s and under censorship, prostitution and murder was of course a bad conduct for a woman but so was social unconformity. Even if these women repented their wicked lives, they would still be punished. The theme of self-sacrifice as evidence of female repentance became very frequent. In films such as *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) by Josef von Sternberg, *Camille* (1936) by George Cukor, *Klondike Annie* (1936) by Raoul Walsh, *Stella Dallas* (1937) by King Vidor, or *Jezebel* (1938) by William Wyler the 'sinful' leading female character performs an ultimate act of love in the form of selflessness. That act of love may be for a man, a child, as well as an act of volunteer service for the community, or duty to a country. This, however, is not enough to allow these characters to have a happy ending. Their last act indicates they realised their bad conduct and what is supposedly the right thing to do, but it was too late, and they would be punished, so that the character, her way of life and doings would never be alluring to the audience.

Set in the middle of the nineteenth century, *Camille* tells the story of a courtesan, Margerite (Greta Garbo) who lives off very rich men. However, she falls in love with Armand (Robert Taylor), also rich, but his father does not approve their

relationship. The father convinces Marguerite she should go away from his son's life; after all, given her lifestyle, she will only bring Armand disgrace and unhappiness. Because she truly loves him, Marguerite makes the ultimate sacrifice before succumbing to her illness. She gives up their relationship so that he may have a good life, and perhaps someday he may find a good woman to marry.

A similar type of story appears in *Klondike Annie*. Rose also known as 'Frisco doll' (Mae West), is a singer at a gambling house and lover of a Chinatown boss. Her lover's jealousy leads Rose to kill him in self-defence. Wanted for murder Rose embarks on a ship to Alaska. There, she pretends to be the nun that had died in the ship. With the help of the ship's captain, Rose convinces the police the deceased woman on board is the escaping 'Frisco doll'. As Sister Annie, Rose makes an extraordinary missionary work in Alaska, while she falls in love with Jack (Phillip Reed). Because she loves him and does not want to ruin his life, she decides to leave, give herself up to the authorities and face trial.

Yet another tale of self-sacrifice, *Stella Dallas* is about an ambitious woman, Stella (Barbara Stanwyck). She comes from a working class family who manages to marry a factory executive, Stephen (John Boles). The problem with the couple is that they are from different social backgrounds and it becomes increasingly obvious as time passes. Stella loves the new lifestyle of parties and luxury but she fails to behave according to her new social and economic status. Eventually, the couple separates and their daughter, Laurel (Anne Shirley), stays with her mother. As time goes by, their economic situation begins to deteriorate, leaving mother and daughter with just enough money to eat. Stephen's business, however, flourishes, and he reenounters his former rich fiancée, Helen (Barbara O'Neil), now a widow with three sons. Laurel starts to spend time with her father and Helen. She begins to admire Helen and loves the opulent lifestyle. When Stella gets some money from her ex-husband in exchange for signing the divorce, she spends it on ridiculously lavish clothes and goes to a resort, so her daughter can be in a rich environment as she was at Helen's house. As some of Laurel's new friends ridicule Stella, the mother starts to believe she shames Laurel. Stella comes to believe Laurel should be with her father and Helen. As Laurel tries to deter her mother from sending her to live with her father, Stella successfully and intentionally shocks her daughter with her low-level behaviour. Laurel goes to live with her father and Helen. Years later, she marries a very rich young man in a ceremony

Stella sees only through a window along with all the other curious people standing on the street.

Bette Davis' character, Julie, in William Wyler's *Jezebel* is strong-willed and rebellious. Because of that, she is considered a bad woman since, like Stella in *Stella Dallas*, she is unable or unwilling to succumb to her fiancé's idea of what it is to be a good and respectable young woman. She is also incapable of submitting to the social protocol and expectations of what a suitable feminine behaviour is. Her engagement ends. Years later, Julie asks for his forgiveness and wants him back but he has already married; it is too late. Once again, she turns bad and again she is punished. Jealous, Julie tries to provoke her former fiancé and, in the process, a man is killed. In the end, as an act of redemption and risking her own life, she decides to take care of her former fiancé who is ill and going to be quarantined in an island.

Sternberg's *The Devil is a Woman* presents an interpretation of the Spanish Carmen's story. Concha (Marlene Dietrich) is a *femme fatale*; she manipulates and takes advantage of men, drives them mad for her and destroys or leads them to destroy their lives. She has many opportunities to be happy but, with tendency to self-destruction, she runs from these men who love her and whom she seems to like, if not love. In the end, ready to run off with Antonio (Cesar Romero), one of the many men she has led to ruin, Concha, apparently loving him, makes the honourable thing. She sacrifices any feeling she has for him and stays behind while he leaves the country. Her sacrifice, in fact, may have saved him having in mind her tendency to ruin men's lives. Concha serves to show a woman like her can destroy men's lives and her punishment is the continuation of her mediocre life.

Post-Code Hollywood made an effort to demonstrate the behaviour of these women was not acceptable. Marguerite, Rose, Stella, Julie and Concha are punished for their behaviour, for their proudness, for their wrong choices, or for not adjusting an idea of womanhood. All of these women make sacrifices. Marguerite goes away from the man she loves to protect him and dies. Rose does the right thing and gives herself to the authorities. Stella gives up her daughter so the girl may have a better future. Concha chooses not to go with Antonio, which is, in fact, the best thing she could have done for him, keeping him away from her bad influence. Their endings are sad; they are not forgiven.



In the 1940s, with Hollywood's Production Code in strength, Hollywood tries to prove that good women are married women. There is the sacrificing wife who saves the situation, the working woman who almost loses her family because of her job, and there is the spinster, who lives off the crumbs of other people's lives. There are also women dragged into complicated and dangerous situations, especially in Hitchcock's films and there are very bad women, *femmes fatales*. When female characters are bad, then they are mad, evil and dangerous to know. That is the case of John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) by Tay Garnett and Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947).

*The Maltese Falcon* is a typical detective film involving murder and a valuable statue. Mary Astor plays Brigid, a seductive woman who lies, manipulates and kills. In the end, she has to pay for her crime. In *The Big Sleep*, another detective story, the two leading female characters are quite distant from the naïve young girl or the self-sacrificing woman of the previous decade. Carmen (Martha Vickers) pretends to be demure and childish but is in fact cruel, has a gambling addiction and takes drugs. Vivian (Lauren Bacall) is spoiled, smart, ruthless, serious, intelligent, sometimes sinister, mysterious, a gambler, independent and divorced. It is Carmen, and her out of control addictions that drag her sister and the detective into a story of murder, gambling, blackmail and mystery. Once all the mysteries are resolved, and Carmen seems to have killed a man, she is supposed to be sent away to find treatment and stay out of trouble.

In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Cora (Lana Turner) is a very dangerous woman. She is married to a much older man whom she kills with the help of her lover. The murder is discovered but they manage to get away with their crime. By the end, Cora dies in a car accident and Frank (John Garfield) is sentenced to death for murdering her, which he did not commit. Cora has seduced Frank, convinced him to murder her husband, and, in the end, her accidental death leads to his death penalty. She is a very dangerous woman to get involved with, like Rita Hayworth's Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai*. In Welles' picture, Elsa pretends she is a victim of blackmail and is being forced to marry. In fact, she is as bad and dangerous as her husband. She kills a man and they both intend to accuse her lover of the murder. She ends up killing her husband and him killing her.



Figure 1: Rita Hayworth's dangerous Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947).

While some of the films of the period represent dangerous women, murderers, who seduce men and drag them into their plots, in Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) it is a woman, Alicia (Ingrid Bergman), who is dragged into a complicated and dangerous story of espionage by an agent, Devlin (Cary Grant). Alicia is the daughter of a convicted Nazi. She is upper class and leads a destructive and somewhat promiscuous life. To get closer to the man she has to investigate she marries him. When her cover is exposed, she is slowly poisoned and almost dies. Her future is uncertain, one supposes she survives the poisoning but it is not clear if she and Devlin, who love each other, end together.

The average woman—not a murderer or a spy—may be either a career woman or a housewife. In a time when women were pressured to return to the home because of the unemployment rates, and the Production Code enforced the housewife ideal, women were discouraged from building a career. In these films, a career might endanger family life. The dedication of a woman to her work may destroy her family or the prospect of a family, and, thus, women have to choose between family and career; they cannot have both.

In Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940) Hildy (Rosalind Russell) is a reporter. Hildy feels divided; she loves the rush of being a reporter, but she also wants to quit to become a dedicated wife. She had already been married to her editor but the marriage had failed. Hildy is popular, independent and professional, and she loves her job but

she wants to marry and have children. She believes her job makes her less of a woman, for that reason she says she wants to get married and live in a place where she can be a woman; she wants to feel 'respectable' and have 'a normal life'. She actually thinks having a career has a dehumanising effect, at least for her, since she says when she becomes a wife and a mother she will be 'decent and live like a human being'. She does not feel like a woman in that job but rather 'a newspaper man'. However, she loves her job and she is the first person to follow a good story. She loves the excitement and the rush of being a reporter. Hildy is a divided woman: between what she actually feels and what she thinks. She is torn between what she loves doing, and what she thinks she should be and behave; between her nature, which is going after news scoops, and what society expects of her and what she herself thinks a woman should be. Her anxiety, in fact, is rooted in pre-conceptions and her own stereotypical construction of womanhood. The story proves she cannot go against her nature. In the end, she returns to her ex-husband and, supposedly, she has chosen to continue her career next to a man who is just like her. Having in mind her deep-rooted ideas about womanhood one might assume she does not intend to be a housewife and have children, since she could not cope with the idea of being both a wife and mother and a career woman. According to her beliefs, because of her nature she chooses to be 'a newspaper man', to be a lesser human being. Yet, '[i]t is as a newspaper reporter, rather than a wife and mother, that she discovers her true "womanliness," which is to say, simply, herself' (Haskell, 1973: 135).

In Garson Kanin's *My Favorite Wife* (1940), Ellen, played by Irene Dunne, almost loses her family because of her work. She was on an expedition when she was shipwrecked. She almost died and spent seven years on an island. After years, she is declared dead. When she returns, her children, who were very small when she left, do not recognise her and her husband has married another woman. Eventually, she manages to get her family back but the judge in charge of annulling the husband's second marriage makes an interesting point when he asks what a married woman with two toddlers and a husband at home was doing on an expedition in Asia. In the mentality of the 1940s, this is an absurd situation and serves the purpose of educating other women. A married woman with small children should be at home taking care of her family and not in an adventure. Because of Ellen's recklessness, she almost loses her family and her life.

In 1942, *Woman of the Year*, directed by George Stevens, presents a story focused on the success of a woman, Tess (Katharine Hepburn). Tess has a very successful career. She is very intelligent and fluent in several languages. She has had a very privileged childhood and education, studying in Switzerland and at La Sorbonne. She is popular, sophisticated and independent. She is a political columnist, fights for equal rights for women and has her own office with a male secretary. This inversion of stereotypical roles is frequent during the film in order to show how ridiculous it would be if the situations were inverted, at least to a 1940s audience. A male secretary is actually fit for a woman who defends gender equality in a time when certain jobs, such as secretaries or telephone operators, had been redefined as women's jobs. In other instances the male leading figure, Sam (Spencer Tracy), who marries Tess, has certain behaviours that could be considered typically feminine in the forties. That is the case of a scene where Tess does not notice Sam's new hat. He behaves like a wife whose husband has not noticed her new hairdo. In another situation, Sam arrives expecting his wife at home waiting with his dinner ready, but he has to go cook not only for them but also for the secretary. Of course, this inversion, apparently funny, is what wears down their relationship and cannot be maintained for long. Despite being celebrated as 'The Outstanding Woman of the Year', Tess is still a failure. Socially she is a success but privately Sam considers her a failure and he even accuses her of not being a woman at all. In this sense, she is a failure because she cannot handle both a career and a husband and child, though she thought they had the perfect marriage. In the end, Tess is willing to give up her job to be just a housewife, to cook, clean and sew. However, she is a disaster in the kitchen and is 'allowed' to work, although less than before, and certainly in a way so not to outstand her husband's professional achievements. The film is made to demonstrate women cannot be too successful or too perfect, so that the women in the theatre audience would not feel inferior in contrast with a woman who is very intelligent, beautiful and with a successful career. Tess must have faults: she cannot perform household work, like clean or cook, and she certainly cannot have everything, both a successful career and be a perfect wife and mother. As she cannot be both she inevitably has to choose to be a wife and mother, though working more as a hobby than to build a career. According to the movie, the right choice is to be a housewife, take care of a family, to submit to gender stereotypical roles.



Figure 2: Tess trying to be a good wife and her husband's scepticism in *Woman of the Year* (1942).

The presentation of housewives was more sympathetic to women. In the forties good wives tend to be represented as supporting, sacrificing, and caring. Nowadays a Christmas classic in American television, Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) is centred on the good deeds and misfortunes of a man, George (James Stewart). He saved people, including his brother, with consequences to his own health. He lost his father and took over the business while he put his brother through college, expecting that later his brother, Harry (Todd Karns), would take care of the business so he could fulfil his dream of traveling the world. When it comes to Harry's turn in the family business, he marries and goes to work for his father-in-law. George decides to settle down and forget his dreams; he marries Mary (Donna Reed) and cannot even afford the honeymoon. They have four children. One day, George misplaces a big money deposit and, out of control, fears bankruptcy and charges of embezzlement. On the verge of committing suicide, an angel shows George how things would be if he had not been born. In this Dickensian perspective of what would have been, George is shown how much different the world would have been without him, not just to the people he saved from dying, but to the whole town which has become a place of vice and poverty. Recovering his will to live, George is greeted by his wife, family and friends who have contributed with money to help him. Although the film is centred on George, Mary has a defining role as the person who tries to solve the situation while George was having a nervous breakdown. While he was contemplating suicide, his wife was doing something to resolve the situation. Throughout the story she never

complained; she did everything in the house including applying wallpaper, cleaning, and taking care of their four children. She is clearly strong, determinate and able to solve difficult situations. Yet, if George had not existed, according to the alternate reality, she would have ended up as a lonely and uptight unmarried librarian. In this sense, she would only be truly happy with George and being a housewife. This suggestion might seem a tad romantic but it is also diminishing for women, suggesting that a woman must take a chance and marry the first man that comes to her life; otherwise, she may end as a sad spinster because marriage and children is the only truly fulfilling position to a woman in the 1940s.

Another wife who saves the situation is Gerry (Claudette Colbert) in Preston Sturges' *The Palm Beach Story* (1942). Tom (Joel McCrea) and Gerry are married and have financial difficulties. Gerry uses her appearance to get what she wants and she gets money just by looking good and being nice and smart. Tom is a struggling architect who cannot finance his projects. Gerry decides to leave her husband not because she does not love him anymore but because she thinks she has held him back from reaching his potential. In addition, she thinks she is a bad wife because she cannot cook or sew. Gerry is practical but Tom is proud, feels uncomfortable and disturbed by his wife's ability to use her charms to get money to pay the bills. While attempting to leave her husband, Gerry meets one of the wealthiest men in the world, John (Rudy Vallee), who gives her an entire wardrobe and jewellery. When Tom arrives to make her reconsider, she presents Tom as her brother. While John courts Gerry, Tom deals with the attention of John's sister. Gerry convinces John of financing her 'brother's' projects. When the reuse is discovered and Gerry confesses to John that Tom is actually her husband, John maintains his business promise. Gerry manages to end the story with her husband and money for his projects. John and his sister end marrying Gerry's and Tom's twin siblings. As Mary in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Gerry saves the situation. Gerry takes advantage of her beauty and manages to finance her husband's projects. Tom who felt uncomfortable by her paying the bills using schemes has no problem in accepting John's proposition, which was also achieved by Gerry's beauty and smartness. Gerry is a clever woman as well as unconventional. She is clearly not the traditional wife and she thinks a good wife should know how to cook and sew. Gerry is presented as a type of woman more suitable to be the wife of a rich man, who does not have to do anything, rather than a homemaker like Mary. Despite being

obviously intended to be a rich wife, who does not need to perform tasks as cooking or sewing, she still thinks those are important skills in a wife, showing a deeply ingrained conception of femininity linked to domesticity.

Having in mind the Production Code enforced an ideal of womanhood directed towards marriage and bearing children, in which being a housewife as the pinnacle of female virtue spinsterhood was to be presented as unadvisable. In *Woman of the Year*, Ellen (Fay Bainter), Tess' 'spinster' aunt, is a regretful woman. Ellen admits to her niece that she regrets not having married and not having raised a family. Tess's aunt Ellen is the example not to follow. Ellen was also a very accomplished woman professionally who has realised it was not worth it, as she says: 'I'm tired of winning prizes, they're cold comfort; this time I want to be the prize myself', and about being single Ellen feels it was 'the wrong choice'. Although Ellen never expressed any intent or any feelings against her singleness, as Tess says she never thought of her aunt 'as being someone's wife' and thought her aunt was 'above marriage', deep inside Ellen wished and longed to share her accomplishments with someone. Ellen admits she made the wrong choice in dedicating her life to her career, after all 'success is no fun unless you share it with someone'. Ellen is the living proof a career cannot possibly be sufficient to fulfil a woman. Ellen, characterised as a woman who has realised the importance of a family yet too late, is the example not to follow, the type of woman Tess would become if she did not submit to her 'duty'. A woman can only be completely happy with a family to take care, particularly a husband and a child of her own, after all Ellen raised Tess when her mother died and Ellen is still an unfulfilled 'spinster'.

*Now Voyager* (1942), directed by Irving Rapper, presents the evolution of a female character, Charlotte (Bette Davis). Charlotte is a single woman from an upper-class family, in her thirties and living with her domineering mother. Diagnosed as psychologically ill, she goes to get treatment in a sanatorium. Away from her castrating mother, she recovers her mental health. Not ready to go home to face her mother, she decides to go on a long cruise. Charlotte has a brief love story with Jerry (Paul Henreid), an unhappily married man, with two daughters, but who will never leave his wife. When the cruise ends, they decide not to see each other again. When Charlotte returns home, her family is stunned by her changed appearance, her newly found independence and emotional strength. Her mother, though, is determined to regain control of Charlotte. Later, already engaged to an eligible widower, Charlotte

sees Jerry and he tells her his youngest daughter is having emotional trouble just as Charlotte had. Realising she does not love her fiancée Charlotte breaks the engagement. Charlotte's mother dies of a heart attack during an argument with her. Feeling guilty, Charlotte returns to the sanatorium where she meets Tina (Janis Wilson, uncredited), Jerry's daughter and sees herself in the girl. When they both get better, Charlotte returns home and takes Tina with her with the doctor's approval. Jerry is willing to let Tina live with Charlotte but they will keep their distance. Charlotte accepts to take care of Tina as a way to feel close to him. Tina will function as a kind of surrogate for her father. When Jerry asks Charlotte if she is happy, her poetic response is 'don't let's ask for the moon; we have the stars' meaning that she is fairly happy, not completely, only relatively.



Figure 3: Charlotte's initial appearance in *Now Voyager* (1942).

Charlotte displays a psychological and physical evolution. In the first scenes, she is shy, unattractive, seems crazy, bitter and is blunt. She behaves strangely and contrived. She locks the door of her bedroom, hides books and cigarettes. As a late child, tormented by a controlling and castrating mother, she strives for attention. Even her family treats her with condescendence and her niece makes fun of her. However, the audience is told Charlotte was not always like this. When she was in her twenties, she was beautiful, happy, in love and not prude—maybe meaning she had had sexual intercourse. Apparently, her mother was responsible for her transformation into a drab 'spinster'. There is no need to define her beforehand since



(w)hen Charlotte makes her initial appearance, the audience has a pretty good idea of who and what she is at first glance. She fits the classic stereotyped image of a spinster and we have compartmentalized (sic) her as such in our minds before she has a chance to speak her first line. Charlotte is dressed in a drab, ill-fitting dress; her hair is pulled back in a bun; and she wears old-fashioned, wire-framed spectacles. Her presence screams "spinster": her demeanor (sic) seems mousy, her eyes are cast down, and she is constantly wringing her hands as if she is uncomfortable with herself. Obviously there is something abnormal about her entire demeanor (sic). (Mustard, 2000: 1-2)

Living with her elderly mother, Charlotte submits to the stereotype of the 'spinster' who assumes the role of caretaker. In the 1940s, with no family of their own and not needing to earn a life, upper class single women stayed at their parents' home, and, when their help was needed, they would take care of their elderly or ill parents. Charlotte is this type of woman, the 'spinster' who makes her mother company. Her mother, in turn, makes sure Charlotte keeps an unmotivated and depressed mood in order to submit her daughter to her will and needs. The mother manipulates and plays with Charlotte's self-esteem to keep her bound. Away from her mother, Charlotte immediately improves her confidence and apparently does not need glasses anymore. On the cruise, she is beautiful and well dressed; she makes an effort to be interested in everything and everyone. She makes the opposite of what her mother has always told her. Still struggling to regain confidence, she defines herself as an ugly duckling. She believes her mother did not want her, and she sees herself only as an aunt, 'poor Aunt Charlotte'. Her mother and family clearly bullied, diminished and psychologically tormented her. Deprived of affection for years, when Jerry calls her darling she cries of gratitude and thanks him for making an 'old maid' happy. Her mother wants her to resume her old life, to return to the way she was. Her mother believes that by having her so late in life, Charlotte is expected to be obedient and to take care of her in old age. Charlotte eventually realises she is no longer easily manipulated by her mother; she does not fear her. Charlotte even dreams of getting married and have a family of her own. However, finally freed from her mother's constraints, she has fallen in love with the wrong man, a married man. She eventually accepts that she is not of 'the marrying kind' but she is regretful about not having pursued the ideal of marriage and a family. Charlotte makes a remarkable evolution from a shy and repressed person into a defiant and confident woman. She even confronts her mother: 'I didn't want to be born. You didn't want me to be born. It's been a calamity on both sides.'

Despite Charlotte's psychological and physical evolution, in the end she is in the same situation as she was before. She has substituted the caring for her mother

for the caring of a surrogate daughter; she continues to be the 'aunt', the woman who lives off the crumbs of others. She pretends to be a mother. Charlotte's situation is the same; she is to dedicate her life to raise a child who is not hers just to feel closer to the man she loves, who is another woman's husband. This is Charlotte's punishment. Ellen was punished with spinsterhood because she devoted herself to her career and has realised the real path to happiness yet too late. Charlotte, a victim of a disturbed mother, is punished by falling in love with a married man; her consolation is to raise his daughter who is exactly like her.

Ellen and Charlotte are examples of 'spinsters' who would rather have married and have their own children but who had the misfortune of finding the wrong man, or were naïve to think they could be happy without the marriage and family structure. Ellen and Charlotte are testimonies that women need a husband and children to take care of, to feel complete, to feel useful, and to give meaning to their lives. They both tried to fill that void by taking care of others, children or an old mother, this way soothing a supposedly typically female characteristic that is taking care of others. They tried to fulfil their maternal instinct.

The finest examples of filmic womanhood were the ones with demure yet strong, supportive and dedicated wives and mothers. Women who behave properly socially. The ones who tried following a career and being wives and mothers at the same time would be taught they could not have both. Strong-willed and overly ambitious women were turned into villains, dangerous, murderers, *femmes fatales*. 'Spinsters' missed their cue; they failed to marry and build a family when they were supposed. They are failures of femininity and eventually end up as carers for family members and friends. They had one opportunity to be happy and only one; if they fail it is over as Ellen, Charlotte and even the alternative version of Mary in *It's a Wonderful Life* may attest. Hollywood's proposal of femininity was certainly harsh but it was a conservative utopia. The reality was not that simple or straightforward. Apart from female main characters, many other women are presented in these films. It is frequent to see librarians, telephone operators, servants and store or café attendants. Though their presence is just contextual, only extras, these ephemeral characters represent working class women and their presence in society performing jobs that had become typically feminine in the forties. The real women, working mothers, highly educated women and all the women working at the Hollywood studios were evidence that women

could be active and productive members of society, not hidden at home taking care of the house and children.

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