

Warner Bros. Forgotten Men: Representations of Shifting Masculinities in 1930s
Hollywood

By
Michael Brian Faucette

Submitted to the graduate program in Film and Media Studies and the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

Chairperson

Date Defended _____

The Dissertation committee for Michael Brian Faucette certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Warner Bros. Forgotten Men: Representations of Shifting Masculinities in 1930s Hollywood

Committee:

Chairperson

Date Approved: _____

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Introduction

By the end of 1930 Warner Bros. developed into one of the major studios in Hollywood. Harry Warner used the companies' success with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 to expand the company so that by the end of 1930 Warners' owned 51 subsidiary companies, including 93 film exchanges, 525 theaters in 188 American cities and the huge studios in Burbank and on Sunset Boulevard.¹ Many of their theaters were in the

'populous East' especially in Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey, which in turn led to the development of more 'city based' realistic views of American life.²

However the companies' sense of enthusiasm and prosperity were tempered by net losses of nearly 8 million dollars in 1931 and 14 million in 1932.³ The drastic downturn in their economic status resulted in a cutting of costs throughout the company and the switching of the Warner Brothers political affiliation from Republican to Democrat. The Warner Brothers worked to help elect Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 by staging rallies for him in Los Angeles that they broadcast over their radio station KFWB. They contributed to his campaign with financial and promotional support and when he was elected in November of 1932 Roosevelt promised to make Jack Warner Los Angeles chairman of the National Recovery Act that was to be a key component of Roosevelt's New Deal.⁴ The support of Roosevelt by the Warner Bros. impacted them personally as well as economically.

Film scholars Giuliana Muscio and Nick Roddick argue that of all the studios the Warner Bros. were the most supportive of Roosevelt and in turn produced films that reflected their backing of the New Deal and the administration's political goals, including a scene in the musical like *Footlight Parade* (1933) where the image of Roosevelt's Blue

Eagle, the symbol of the National Recovery Administration and Roosevelt's face were featured prominently.⁵ I argue that Warner Bros. not only produced films that supported the New Deal but in the process were responsible for crafting an image of masculinities on screen that were noticeably more complex and incongruous at times. What is evident in looking at the company records for Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell and Errol Flynn that are the focus of this study is that there was in fact no single unified approach adopted by the company to construct and market each of these men's films. In fact, what the records make clear is that Warner Bros struggled to define each of these men's screen masculinities. Warner Bros. could define masculinity as "hard" in the persona of James Cagney and his violent acts such as shoving a grapefruit into a woman's face in *The Public Enemy* (1931) as well as displaying "soft" qualities in the persona of Dick Powell as he sang love songs to swooning young women as they dreamily listened and watched him perform.

Lewis Jacobs argued that many of the films of the 1930s that were made were in fact 'trivial.' While some of the studios like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount and RKO and their pictures reflect Lewis Jacobs's criticism that the films of the period were 'trivial.' Warner Bros. sought to make films that were both profitable and illustrative of the concerns of the people. Of Warner Bros. Leo Rosten writes:

Warner Brothers emphasizes drama and melodrama, fast-moving stories with hard-surfaced characters in muscular situations. The Warners' pictures aim at the powerful rather than the pleasant. The Warners' roster of stars suggests the characteristics of its output: James Cagney, Bette Davis, Edward G. Robinson, Pat

O'Brien, Ida Lupino, John Garfield, Humphrey Bogart, and, for many years, Paul Muni; even the studios "glamorous" personalities—Errol Flynn, Ann Sheridan—thrive in violent rather than genteel locales. Warners specializes in emotions, not manners...”⁶

Rosten's view of Warner Bros. has come to be accepted as the standard definition of the studio's house style and the types of stars it employed. In fact, in *The Genius of the System* Thomas Schatz echoes Rosten's assessment when he writes that, "Warners shunned the high-gloss, well-lit world of M-G-M and Paramount, opting instead for bleaker, darker world view. Warners' Depression era-pictures were fast-paced, fast-talking, socially sensitive (if not downright exploitative treatments of contemporary stiff and lowlifes), of society's losers and victims rather than heroic or well-heeled types.”⁷ What Schatz identifies as the major themes and types of characters explored in Warner Bros. is emblematic of the assumptions about the studio and the nature of its pictures and business model based on selective accounts and examples of the films they produced.

In an attempt to illustrate the more multifaceted nature of Warner Bros. as a business, its films, and concern over how to fashion male images onscreen this study seeks to answer the following questions: How might the films of one studio like Warner Bros. with its emphasis on male centered drama deal with the changing dynamics of American masculinity that emerged during the Great Depression? How do the star personas and films of Warner Bros. 'forgotten men' like Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell, and Errol Flynn point towards the greater complexity of masculinities at Warner Bros? How does Warner Bros. construct an image of masculinity both onscreen and off

that make their male stars seem active and in control of their careers despite the realities of working within a system where control lies in the hands of the studios? How are race/class/ and the body used to define masculine identity in each of these men's characters? In order to lay the framework for my argument I will first discuss those film historians and scholars who have examined Warner Bros. through the lens of masculinity. The ways in which previous historians and scholars have told the story of Warner Bros. the company and its "house style" reveals a bias towards the production of male oriented films through genres. Genres like the gangster film, detective, and adventure films have been employed to argue that Warner Bros. was studio that sought to present images of the working class and dynamic, violent men. However, this perception of the studio overlooks the other types of films that they produced and more importantly the various qualities of masculinity exhibited by other performers.

Literature Review

Warner Bros. and Masculinity

Robert Sklar analyzes the studio's business model and development of screen masculinities in his book *City Boys*. Sklar analyzes the ways in which Warner Bros. formed the screen images of James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson and John Garfield. He argues that the dominant type of masculinity presented by Warner Bros. was that of the "city boy," a term he uses to describe how masculinity shifted in the 1930s to include a combination of the rough, rugged, frontier elements of the Western man with those of the modern man of the city.⁸ The screen ideal of the "city boy" that

Sklar locates in Warner Bros. films of the 1930s is free of the consumption practices, which other scholars have argued was a key component in the re-shaping of American masculinity. Instead he argues that the man of the city is shaped into a new aggressive figure that consists of elements of urban America with that of the frontier.

Sklar's book is a useful model to consider how a studio might actively seek to craft a masculine image around a star both on and off screen. However, while Sklar's study is important for our understanding of a certain type of masculinity in the 1930s, his concept of "city boys" does not address the broader range of masculinities that were performed in America and at Warner Bros. in the 1930s. This study fills that gap and as I point out the nature of screen masculinities and male characters that Warner Bros. constructed during the Great Depression depict a screen image of American masculinity that is often more complex and contradictory than film scholars have acknowledged. In fact, men on screen at Warner Bros. were just as capable of portraying moments of tenderness, dependence and strength of convictions as easily as the more electric, aggressive, violent, and domineering model of masculinity that were the hallmarks of James Cagney's screen persona. In this study I am offering a corrective to the general understanding of masculinity as a unified idea at Warner Bros. in an effort to demonstrate the intricacies the studio faced when trying to present images of American masculinities onscreen.

Many of the ideals of masculinity such as aggressiveness, physical force, brutality, and male sexuality (that historian Gail Bederman identifies as emblematic of the shift from a Victorian, bourgeois model of masculinity to that of the middle-class and

a consumer based model) are at the heart of Robert Sklar's book. Like Rosten, Schatz, and Roddick Sklar focuses on the more well-known and bankable box office examples of Cagney, Bogart, and Garfield on the Warner Bros. lot during the 1930s and 1940s in order to argue that this was the primary type of male image and male star crafted by the studio. Rather than arguing that Warner Bros. masculine images were the result of star performances Schatz instead focuses on the role of the producer. He links the male centered focus of the Warner Bros. house style to Daryl Zanuck. He notes that, "once Zanuck became production chief in 1930, his taste permeated Warner's entire program. He emphasized male action films and promoted a stark vision and hard bitten dramatic style at every opportunity—in script conferences, preproduction meetings, editing sessions, and even while prowling the sets."⁹ It is clear that for Sklar and Schatz Warner Bros. represents the idea of a studio that celebrates a working-class view of the world, and more importantly the idea of American masculinity being determined by action, violence, struggle and labor. Warner Bros. gangster films of the early 1930s like *The Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931) and *Little Caesar* (1930) are representative of Sklar and other film historians who argue that it was the gangster figure on screen who was aggressive, and a rugged individualist as played by James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson that epitomized Warner Bros. ideal screen masculinity. Sklar argues in his book *City Boys* that "[James] Cagney established a new cultural type on the American screen and in the world's imagination. It was the urban tough guy—small, wiry, savvy, and street smart, a figure out of the immigrant ghettos and ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago, New York."¹⁰ Robert McElvaine in his history of the Depression analyzes the character

of Rico in *Little Caesar* played by Edward G. Robinson. He argues that “[Rico] is the epitome of the self-centered, acquisitive man, one who will use any means of competition to eliminate (often literally) his rivals.”¹¹ In each of these cases the filmic image of masculinity is one that celebrates the self-made man as the positive and ideal figure of American masculinity and the “American Dream.” Warner Bros. sought to create a vision of America that presented the inconsistency of American experience as a result of the Great Depression.

In looking at the range of masculinities exhibited in films from Warner Bros. during the 1930s this study seeks to construct a more fully rounded picture of Depression era masculinities as represented at the studio in the films of Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell and Errol Flynn. All of these actors were involved in the production of some of the company’s most important films of the decade and each of these men’s height of popularity occurred during the 1930s.

There is perhaps no better figure than George Brent that exemplifies the complexities of masculinities on screen in the 1930s for Warner Bros. Brent became a major star during the 1930s. His popularity onscreen was defined by his attractiveness, sexuality, and tenderness alongside Warner Bros. major female stars as well as his ability to display a more aggressive portrayal of masculinity when called upon. In his role as a star at Warner Bros. Brent’s image was constructed around his appearance, his connection to beautiful women, including his on and off screen partner Ruth Chatterton, and his ability to portray more complicated characters that illustrated how American masculinities were changing as a result of the Depression and the growing interest in

consumer culture. Brent like many other male actors in Hollywood struggled with the demands of stardom and the ways in which it reduced him to a passive figure. Stardom for male actors proved to be difficult because on one hand they were sold as ideals of masculinity but on the other hand they could not conform to more traditional notions of masculinity as active and in control of one's labors because they were the property of the studios. Still, it was important for Warner Bros. and the other studios to sell an ideal image of screen masculinity where men were linked to such activities as hunting, boxing, archery, playing polo, flying airplanes, etc. in an effort to show that these men were in fact rough and rugged when away from the studio lots. In effect these men and their screen masculinities are representative of the performance of gender during a period of crisis and great social change.

In the next section I review the various gendered models that will be used in this study. These models of gender are useful in formulating an understanding of how masculinity as a critical lens can shed new light on the nature of Warner Bros. efforts to represent complicated models of masculinities onscreen at a time when men strived to define their roles as citizens, workers, and men even as the nation struggled under the weight of the devastating effects of the Great Depression.

Gender Models

Judith Butler in her landmark work *Gender Trouble* argues that in order to more fully understand gender and its function we must first re-think gender as a type of performance. She argues that “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.”¹² In effect Butler is pointing towards an idea that

in order to discuss or even “perform” gender one must be aware of the effects and pre-constituted assumptions that surround gender formation. For Butler it is problematic to associate masculinity with the male body or femininity with the female body because the two sex system that privileges heterosexual normativity relies on the construction of masculinity and femininity linked to specific sexed bodies. Butler re-thinks the notion of desire and its order of sex-gender-desire to demonstrate how gender is culturally constructed and that “when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as female one.”¹³

Butler also argues that a more useful model to consider gender is to think of gender as a *corporeal style* or an act that is intentional and performative.¹⁴ The idea of gender as a style is intriguing because it allows us to reconsider the idea of gender as fixed on a continuum and instead view it as fluid, and constantly changing depending on the purpose and historical context of those who employ gender as a means of organization and control.

Todd W. Reeser argues in his study *Masculinities in Theory* that Butler’s model of gender as performance and *corporeal style* are extremely useful when trying to define and understand masculinity because if we consider it as akin to style “it implies it is open to change” thus providing the possibility to see how various forms of masculinity transition from fashionable to passé, while revealing that styles of masculinity do not disappear but simply shift or are appropriated to fit new models.¹⁵ Reeser’s notion of

masculinity as style is one that this study employs to show how previous models of masculinity at Warner Bros. shift in an attempt to characterize how the company addressed the difficulties faced in trying to fashion an image of screen masculinity during the 1930s.

R. W. Connell argues in *Masculinities* that the primary organizational model of masculinity in the current Western order is that of *hegemonic masculinity*. This type of masculinity is defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”¹⁶ Embedded within this hegemonic model, Connell argues are three distinct models of male-male relations: subordination, complicity, and marginalization. Subordination is the means by which the dominance of heterosexual models of masculinity are solidified as the norm thereby making heterosexuality legitimate and homosexuality or effeminacy seem abnormal. Complicity in Connell’s model speaks to how those men who cannot live up to the ideal and hegemonic model of masculinity simply accept this model in an attempt to maintain their status as white middle-class heterosexual men. Marginalization for Connell is illustrative of how working-class and African American men are marginalized from the hegemonic model because of race and class while also serving as models by which white middle-class and elites can define their own masculinities.¹⁷

It is important to consider how the male body and the body in general are involved in the formation of gendered norms and how those norms are then presented

onscreen. The body has been of interest to female scholars in film studies as they attempt to explain how the female persona and form function within mainstream filmmaking. Mary Ann Doane argues that, “the body becomes increasingly the stake of late capitalism” especially in the way that “the effective operation of the commodity system requires the breakdown of the body into parts—nails, hair, skin, breath—each of which can constantly improved through the purchase of a commodity.”¹⁸ While Doane restricts her argument to an analysis of how females were depicted in Hollywood films in connection with consumer products and audiences, it is important to consider how the representation of masculinities onscreen and within the larger culture reflected the destabilizing of male identity in connection with consumer products as well as with audiences alike. Reeser argues that “the male body functions as a kind of tabula rasa or inscriptive surface for masculinity and for culture, and discourse is inscribed on that matter, asserting its power through inscription and reinscription.”¹⁹ This study looks at how Warner Bros. constructed masculinities onscreen during the 1930s to model the intricate qualities of American masculinities as men struggled to understand what their roles were in a nation paralyzed by massive unemployment, even as the influence of commercial capitalism increased.

Historical Models of Masculinity

Michael Kimmel argues that the ideal form of masculinity in America is that of the self-made man in his book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. He argues that the concept is one of the key terms by which masculinity is conceived and theorized in the American academy. He states that, “what it means to be a man in America depends

heavily on one's class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country."²⁰ For Kimmel "American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other" because "manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us.

Throughout American history American men have been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened."²¹ Thus for Kimmel American manhood is based on a model of domination because of a fear that American men may in fact be susceptible to weakness or passivity and thus it is imperative that American manhood constantly be proven to others through the acquisition of power and the continual re-invention of perceptions of American manhood in the realm of culture, politics, and economics. Kimmel's analysis provides a historical and interpretive model of how the mythos of the self-made man has been a key factor in the formation of an understanding of American masculinity and the nation.

Historian E. Anthony Rotundo argues that manhood and the need to assert its value within American history has consistently been linked to the experiences and fears of the Northern middle class- in particular geographical and social spaces of New England. In his book Rotundo argues that there were three phases of manhood that were used to formulate an "ideal" type of manhood in America for the middle-class: communal manhood, emergence of Republican form of government, and passionate manhood.

The first phase of manhood in operation in colonial America he discusses was that of "communal manhood" where a man's identity was "inseparable from the duties he owed to his community" and his family as "head of household."²² According to Rotundo

“the ideal man” at this time was “pleasant, mild-mannered, and devoted to the good of the community. He performed his duties faithfully, governed his passions rationally and submitted to his fate and to his place in society, and treated his dependents with firm but affectionate wisdom.”²³ This model of manhood would be supplanted by the notion of “self-made manhood”

Rotundo argues that a second phase of manhood emerged as the “result of the birth of a republican form of government, development of a market based economy and the growth of the middle class in America in the late 18th century.”²⁴ He further explains that, “men rejected the idea that they had a fixed place in any hierarchy, be it cosmic or social. They no longer thought of themselves as part of an organic community from which they drew personal identity” and this led to the formation of men thinking of their own desires first and the adoption of values and characteristics such as personal ambition, greed, and aggression.²⁵

The third phase of American manhood that Rotundo identifies is that of “passionate manhood” which develops within the middle class around the late 1880s. The emergence of “passionate manhood” combined with elements of the dominant form of “self-made manhood” to create a form of manhood that embraced values such as competition and aggression in middle class culture because the middle class began to fear the power and influence of women and the lower classes. Rotundo explains that the body, athletics, and a fear of feminine influence in both the home and the workplace led middle class men and politicians like Teddy Roosevelt to fear that America was becoming effeminate as a result of the expanding influence of women in the domestic and public

sphere. As more and more women became politically and socially active men felt it necessary to re-masculinize the nation through a sense of “strenuous manhood” that could literally be embodied in the male body and metaphorically in the nation. Roosevelt argued that

The timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the overcivilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues, the ignorant man, and the man of the dull mind, whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills stern men with empires in their brains...these are the men who fear the strenuous life, who fear the only national life which is really worth leading. They believe in that cloistered life which saps the hardy virtues in a nation, as it saps them in the individual.²⁶

His assertions of dominance in the male body and a belief that American manhood could only be based in an active life influenced the ways in which American men thought of themselves and their roles in their homes and the nation. This perception of American manhood was foreshadowed by Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote in 1840 that the American man “was restless in abundance perpetually endeavoring toward greater achievement—to the extent that leisure became an irritating diversion and he would travel five hundred miles in a few days as a distraction from his happiness.” What makes American masculinity unique according to de Tocqueville is the constant need for self-improvement, lack of interest in material goods, and the desire to work hard in an effort to earn self-respect and the respect of other men. De Tocqueville is describing an America before the influence of the industrial revolution that began in the 1860s and the

urbanization of the nation. Yet between “1867 and 1910 the proportion of “middle class” men who were self-employed dropped from 67 % to 37 % so that the typical middle class man was no longer a small farmer or self-employed businessman, but a corporate bureaucrat or a clerical worker.”²⁷ While greater economic prospects appeared as a result of the move from a nation based on agriculture to one based on factories and corporate culture, American manhood, especially for middle class men seemed to be in crisis. It was this sense of crisis, which resulted in the formation of an American male identity that celebrated activity and labor rather than one based on appearance and consumption.

For Teddy Roosevelt men who embraced a masculine role linked to a fascination with personal appearance and consumption were “timid” or lived “a cloistered life.” These men for Roosevelt reflected the dangers to the nation and to other American men because they were guilty of sapping the life out of the country and ultimately because they were effeminate in nature and body. In fact in 1902 the term “sissy” was defined as “someone who was weak, slender, smooth-faced, polite, submissive, and anxious to please.”²⁸ Many of these qualities had once been celebrated as a positive form of American manhood but in a country faced with industrialization and excessive wealth, men like Roosevelt believed it was vital for the nation to instill more active values into defining masculinity.

To separate themselves from the body of the “sissy” many middle class men began to embrace more strenuous forms of manhood, which included a celebration of homosocial spaces and interactions through sport. Middle class masculinity embraced a vision of manhood that celebrated American masculinity as bestial and savage in

connection with the adoption of lower and working class male behaviors such as cursing, excessive drinking, and gambling. The growth of consumer culture and the loss of the ability to define one's masculinity via labor led to these changes in belief and behavior.²⁹ These anxieties drove middle class men's continuing desires to separate themselves from women, other men, and people of color. The result was the creation of an American ideal in popular culture, political discourse, and geographical spaces where "civilization" acted as the key term to represent white male superiority over the nation.³⁰ For example in the case of Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarazan* a white man is shown with the ability to dominate the natural world and other men while nevertheless retaining the capacity for "civilized life."

As more and more American men moved from having independence and control of their labor to working for wages, and less ability to control one's own destiny, the ideal of the "self-made" man as the preeminent marker of American masculinity came under fire. However, for Roosevelt and those who endorsed Victorian ideals of masculinity like "moral manliness", strength, altruism, self-restraint, and chastity, the men and young men who would come of age fighting World War I represented the end of an era.³¹ These young men would be the last generation connected to the ideal of the "self-made man" as it related to American enterprise and farm culture.

According to Gail Bederman it was the idea of civilization promoted by the government, media, and economic systems that typified American masculinity in the period from 1880-19197. The notion of civilization as an organizing principle pointed towards the increasing militarization and imperialistic spirit of America, a spirit that

would lead to involvement in war and that would be challenged in the 1920s by behaviors and models of masculinity that would be labeled effete or decadent.³² These models emerged even as American culture was rapidly changing due to the effects of technology, transportation, urbanization and a growing emphasis on sexuality.

With the passage of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote and access to political power American manhood seemed once again to be in danger of being feminized. This event along with the “jazz age’s” destabilization of gender roles along with the after effects of World War I functioned to challenge American notions of manhood as “self-determined,” “manly” or “tough.” The idea of manhood changed as a result of a growing focus on the idea of the self and appearance as ideal markers of identity and gender. The fears of middle class men within the country that it was becoming a nation based on consumption, the accumulation of material wealth, and luxury signaled to them that the model of “strenuous manhood” as advocated by Teddy Roosevelt was in jeopardy.

Stardom and Consumption

As an important element of classical Hollywood filmmaking the star emerged around 1914. Richard de Cordova’s study of the historical development of ‘stardom’ *Picture Personalities* explains how stars were created and for what purpose. The star emerged from the desires of viewers to know more about the people onscreen they were watching in films. Therefore it became important for the studios to reveal to audiences things about the performers such as their names, marriage status, talent background, and physical characteristics of their bodies. Using this information the studios were then able

to craft the stars into a model of consumption that “worked to construct a particular kind of consumer around the star as commodity, what is perhaps more commonly referred to as the fan.”³³ The relationship between the fan and the star ensured Hollywood studios that they would have audiences for their films and more importantly illustrated the changing nature of gender and identity within twentieth century America.

In *The Star Machine* Jeanine Basinger examines how the Hollywood studio system manufactured stars and screen types in the classical period. She notes that, “the type needed to be right for its times, it needed to seem natural to the star, and it needed to become so welded to the star that it seemed not to be a role at all but a secret peek into what the actor was really like.”³⁴ Thus in some cases the star’s actual biography and studio biography would be conflated and in some cases included in the characterizations of the various characters that they would play, such as a reference to their ethnicity, home town or a type of occupation or hobby that they were particularly adept at. For example in the case of Errol Flynn, his status as Irish was referenced in his role as Wade Hatton in *Dodge City* and his expertise as a boxer were referenced in connection with his character of Geoffrey Wicks in *The Perfect Specimen*. Basinger points out that in “old Hollywood everything audiences knew about star ‘types’ they learned by accumulation, by going to movie after movie. Roles were added up to create an unarticulated dialogue between fans and the star on-screen. It was high level of nonverbal communication, yet a simple language of sex, desire, and pleasure that everyone could speak.”³⁵ However before stars could be created, the studio first needed to find their type whether it was the “tough guy,” “sex symbol,” “All-American boy next door” or the “gentlemanly leading man.” As

Basinger charts “types” were the life blood of the studio system in its attempts to create stars. Yet, those “types” could result in “malfunctions” where the failure of the studio system to sell an actor or actress as a certain type was not embraced by audiences.³⁶

While Basinger is focused on the idea of failure in connection with the idea of “types” I argue that in looking at how Warner Bros. attempted to represent masculinity onscreen illustrates that “types” were a first step in creating this image.

In his books *Stars* and *Heavenly Bodies* Richard Dyer uses the idea of stardom to show how Hollywood crafted star images in an effort to create an ideal form of consumption and identification for viewers. Dyer argues that stars “are examples of the way people live their live their relation to production in a capitalist society” because “stars are involved in making themselves into a commodities; they are both labor and the thing that labor produces.”³⁷ In effect what Dyer is describing is how the star’s image and persona that are created by the studio and an invisible array of laborers: make-up artists, costume designers, camerapersons, directors, producers, writers is then developed into an ideal image that can be sold to viewers. However the end result of the star image, which seems natural and in control is in fact a construct that is highly regulated and in Dyer’s estimation reflects the impact of living within a capitalist system where labor is produced but often workers do not possess that labor.

Equally important for considering the value of stardom and the image for Dyer is a discussion of how gendered norms like female stars as mothers and sex symbols and men as active and heroes impacts the formation of stardom, especially within a system where the stars often in fact do not possess any real control over their careers, at least in

the classical Hollywood period. Dyer points out that many male stars such as Clark Gable or Humphrey Bogart were connected to sporting activities such as playing polo, hunting, fishing, flying airplanes, and exercising in an attempt to deflect the criticism that male stardom was akin to a life of dependence and control because the studios in fact often did control most aspects of the performers' lives.³⁸ By promoting an image of male stars as active and sportsmen, the studio publicity machinery made it appear that the men were in control of their labors and leisure time rather than simply being the property of the studios and having no real authority over the status of their labor. The tension surrounding the idea of masculinity as active and producer oriented and masculinity as passive and consumer based was at the heart of the fears of modern American men in the 1910s and 1920s. I will first examine how masculinity scholars and historians have explained the formation of American manhood and its importance to our overall understanding of gender is constructed through a myriad of historical, social, cultural and political forces.

Class and Consumption

Lizabeth Cohen argues in her book *A Consumers' Republic* that the Great Depression was instrumental in the re-shaping of the American economic system so that the emphasis was no longer on the producer but on the consumer. This shift in economic thinking Cohen argues is emblematic of Roosevelt and his "New Deal" vision of a planned economy where the narrow self-interests of large corporations and banks would be balanced by the needs and efforts of American consumers.³⁹ In one of his campaign speeches during 1932 Roosevelt signaled the change in thinking noting that, "in the

future we are going to think less about the producer and more about the consumer.”⁴⁰

Cohen primarily focuses on the role of women as consumers during the Depression but men felt the impact of consumerism as well. The value of commerce and commodities for theorizing masculinities cannot be overstated, especially when discussing how scholars have argued that American masculinities increasingly were affected by the forces of consumer capitalism such as advertising, magazines, and films. The function of consumer capitalism in forming male images and identities is an important component to consider when discussing filmic images as well as masculinity during the 1930s.

One of the earliest volumes to address issues of class in connection to the analysis of films is *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*. The authors represented in this edited volume offer a variety of approaches to thinking about class and its impact on the production and interpretation of films. The authors argue that by shifting film studies from a focus on theoretical models to an examination of class then it provides a more nuanced picture of how films are interpreted and used by audiences, scholars, and the filmmaking industry. By focusing on class as an analytical tool these authors are able to show how filmic elements like genre, narrative, stars, and even film history have been formulated in an attempt to ignore the idea that class is something that operates within America, especially because class is a subject that is often elided in America in favor of the idea of the “American Dream.” It was the idea of the “American Dream” as sold by Hollywood that perhaps changed Hollywood’s narrative and thematic content as the industry solidified in the late 1910s and into the 1920s.

In his book *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* Steven J. Ross examines how the industrial base of Hollywood slowly transformed in the silent era from issues of class and political filmmaking into narratives that were designed for middle class audiences rather than those of the immigrants and working class who initially were the ideal audience. This transformation Ross argues is emblematic of the changing nature of the relationships between American's and their labor, purchasing power, and the emerging image of Hollywood as a place of dreams that sold the image of wealth, leisure, and the self as the ideal form of American identity.

The importance of analyzing the relationship between class and feature film production is addressed in Peter Stead's study *Film and the Working Class*. His chapter on what he refers to as "the sociological punch of the talkies" and "the propaganda mills of the 1930s" is especially useful when trying to formulate an approach to consider how Hollywood attempted to provide audiences with entertainment that addressed the contemporary concerns of the Great Depression, and urbanization even as the studios themselves faced economic struggles. Stead argues that the studios, in particular Warner Bros. had to negotiate the need for entertainment and social purpose as they sought to make films that did not ignore the Depression but also that did not dwell on the harsh economic realities of the time. Even more important for the studios, Stead argues was the ability to depict a unified vision of America that was politically active without seeming dogmatic. With the Depression and consistent struggles for work, class then became a crucial component of how Americans and the studios understood their position within the economic system. Still, it was also against this backdrop that consumerism developed

into a key means of economic production and one of the main forces involved in creating this model was that of the magazine.

Tom Pendergast in his book *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950* examines how American masculinity was changing as a result of the developing influence of consumer culture, fashion, and wage labor rather than the self-determined life on the farm or as a type of craftsman within fashion and men's magazines. He argues that "magazines strove to digest what was most important about contemporary goings-on in the culture, they provide a window into the concerns of the day."⁴¹ Pendergast looks at how more respectable magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* attempted to address the changing nature of American masculinity as the first men's fashion and lifestyle magazine *Esquire* was launched in the 1930s. *Esquire* which began in the height of the Depression depicted an image of masculinity that could be urbane, fashionable, consumer based and "manly" thus illustrating that it was okay for men to be interested in fashion, culture, and food because these interests did not make them effeminate. These emerging models of masculinity that emphasized masculinity as determined by issues of the "self" and consumerism were best represented by the changing fortunes of the upper and middle classes in America.

The importance of class and the accumulation of wealth and objects cannot be overlooked when discussing how American masculinities were changing as a result of the formation of a larger middle class. In his book *Playboys in Paradise* Bill Osgerby notes that, "as the twentieth century progressed, forms of masculinity began to emerge in which personal gratification and hedonistic leisure were valued and sought after. Alongside the

quest for a revived sense of robust manhood and the rise of a family oriented ‘masculine domesticity’ then there also took shape a masculine identity at ease with the developing realm of commodity consumption.”⁴² Masculine identities developed in the 1920s that shifted from a producer-oriented model based on the notion of hard work that had once been the dominant form to one that was based on consumption and appearance.

Corresponding with this shift in the models of masculine identities was the development of the Hollywood star, an individual that embodies the impact of living within a society where appearance and consumption become more important than substance and production.

The idea of consumerism was vitally important to Hollywood studios as Sarah Berry points out in *Screen Style in 1930s Hollywood*. Berry focuses on the impact of women as models of fashion and consumption, but many of the ideas that she addresses about the nature of stardom and screen femininity I argue can be applied to a discussion of screen masculinity as well. Berry argues that because “male identity” and “status” have been linked to a vision of masculinity in relation to work rather than consumption. Hollywood’s strategy of screen fashions and consumerism in the 1930s were more effective when directed towards women. Berry argues that in effect what Hollywood of the 1930s was creating was a “mythology” where the symbolic was celebrated over the real.⁴³ In Berry’s estimation Hollywood was selling the image of social mobility through fashion, class, and gendered identities. This formation of new identities was the result of the growing availability of fashionable clothes and products for average income women. Still, I would also argue that what is new in this period is a growing awareness that men

were developing into consumers as well. Just as the image of high fashion was used to sell women clothes and products, the image of the businessman was used to sell an ideal masculine identity to men with male stars appearing in ads in the fan magazines like *Photoplay* wearing the latest suits, or sports attire. Roland Marchand in his book *Advertising the American Dream* points out that advertisers in the 1920s and 1930s represented American masculinity through the figure of “the business man” who was “master of all he surveys” whether it was in the imposing figure of the skyscraper or the quaint comfort of his home.

In depicting the ideal image of masculinity as that of the businessman, Marchand illustrates how advertisers were involved in selling an image of masculinity that was “efficient.” While the image of efficiency was important, what also was important was to depict masculinity as free of class distinctions, therefore many ads often either ignored men in working class occupations or depicted them as subordinates to middle-class men in the workplace. The working classes were often depicted as being free of consumption practices thereby making them seem even less important than the image of the “business man.” The image of masculinity that advertisers created as the ideal; that of the businessman is shown to be more important than images of working class men because the businessmen possess the necessary income to purchase consumer goods such as radios, fashionable clothes, and expensive foods and the leisure time to enjoy them. In effect what Marchand’s study shows is how ads from the 1920s and 1930s can be used to interpret how masculinity was being transformed from a model of the self-made man to one where consumption was used to sell an ideal image and products.⁴⁴ One example of

how this change in identity and image was sold to the consumer was through that of the movie star. The male stars of the 1930s like their female counterparts were used to sell the image of America as a place where consumption and appearance were the key markers of the American identity. This identity was predominantly white and represented the perception of America as a land where freedom combined with hard work could be harnessed to create the possibility of success for anyone.

Issues of Race in Classical Hollywood

Recently many scholars have begun to rethink how we view and understand race and its impact on the formation of institutional and gender systems by focusing on the idea of “whiteness.” George Lipsitz argues that American society is responsible for the development of a “possessive investment in “whiteness” whereby “public policy and private prejudice” work together to create a cash value for “whiteness” that serves to provide advantages for individuals by maintaining a system based on inequality and discrimination.⁴⁵ This system Lipsitz argues was the result of the Great Depression and the adoption of laws like the Wagner Act in 1935 and the Social Security act both of which excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, thereby denying coverage and protection that were guaranteed to whites from American minorities.⁴⁶

Richard Dyer analyzes how the idea of whiteness came to be viewed as the dominant framing position of normalcy in film and photography. In his book *White* Dyer explains how the absence of a discussion of white as a color has impacted our understanding of what is considered normal and abnormal, beautiful and ugly, civilized and barbaric, positive and negative, and active and passive. In Dyer’s estimation it is the

idea of white that has become the default model to consider humanity because “whites are not of a certain race, they are just the human race.”⁴⁷ In effect what Dyer charts is how the white body remains unmarked and therefore maintains its dominant position within the world.

There is perhaps no industry that has been more devoted in the “possessive investment of whiteness” than Hollywood. In *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* Daniel Bernardi and other film scholars analyze how classical Hollywood was involved in the formation of an ideal image of America where “whiteness” was depicted as the norm. Hollywood retained “whiteness” by changing performers names, ethnicity, and by marking their performers as white through the media and the very lighting set-ups that were employed for each film.

By focusing on how Hollywood institutionalized “whiteness” each of the scholars reveal the difficulties encountered by the studios and their personnel because many in Hollywood in the 1930 were in fact Jewish, working class and ethnic. This fear of racial prejudice, then led to the desire for assimilation by the studio heads and owners as well as performers in an attempt to show their patriotism and commitment to American culture.⁴⁸ While this study does not focus on race in its discussion of Warner Bros. and masculinity it does recognize the difficulty in trying to consider how American masculinity was presented onscreen in the 1930s because in many cases the ideal image that was projected was that of a white middle-class man, rather than someone of color or someone who was ethnic or working class.

The need to show race as something invisible or unmarked in America as Dyer, Bernardi, and Lipsitz note can also be applied to how we approach the issue of masculinity in film. In fact Reeser argues that it is much more useful to consider masculinity as something that is unmarked if we are going to be able to illustrate how gendered constructs impact our understanding of masculinity and its function with society and in popular culture.

Film Studies and Masculinity

In the 1990s film studies began to re-think previous assumptions about how gender operated within Hollywood. Scholars like Gaylyn Studlar, Dennis Bingham, Steven Cohan, Susan Jeffords and Peter Lehman began examining how Hollywood had constructed images of masculinity in an attempt to show how masculine images as well as feminine ones served to create an ideal form of gender that was often problematic. Each of them illustrated the value in re-thinking gender and analyzing films by focusing on how masculinity was constructed in order to show how Hollywood manufactured ideal screen images of masculinity. By focusing on Hollywood and the shifting nature of American masculinity onscreen throughout various decades and in select films they provide the model which this study draws upon.

The shifts in the representation and depiction of the American male in the 1920s have been analyzed by Gayln Studlar in her important study *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age*. In this book Studlar traces what she calls the “transgressive aspects” of masculinity in order to show how “American masculinity negotiated various social and sexual dilemmas of the time” such as “the perceived

rebellion of women against sexual and domestic norms” fear of ethnic immigration and the shifting nature of middle class lifestyles as a result of modernization.⁴⁹ Against this backdrop of social change Studlar analyzes the films and careers of four the silent era’s biggest stars: Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, Rudolph Valentino, and Lon Chaney. Studlar argues that each of these men’s screen masculinities spoke to the larger questions and fears of middle class American men as they struggled to understand their place as men in a society where many of the traditional notions of masculinity were being challenged and altered. She argues that it was “Hollywood’s depiction of masculinity in an era in which America felt process-driven and unsure of the meaning of rapid cultural change” that greatly influenced how American masculinity was defined and presented to American audiences in the 1920s. Focused on big business, open expressions of sexuality, and the commercialization of the body this new masculinity dramatically increased and in the process altered the landscape of what masculinity meant and how it functioned within American culture. Rather than the image of the “self-made man” that Kimmel argues was the ideal form of American masculinity, Studlar argues that with the appearance of the businessman as the epitome of American masculinity in the 1920s it was important to create an image of the businessman as masculine. Studlar thus connects her analysis of screen masculinity to cultural and political movements of the silent era in an effort to show how films responded to the destabilization of American masculinity.

Dennis Bingham looks at the films and star personas of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson and Clint Eastwood in his book *Acting Male*. Bingham focuses on how each of these three men represent an image of stardom “that addressed the consequences of white

male privilege before a mass audience” that can be read as “a polymorphous presocial bisexuality that can have tremendous appeal although generally not to male spectators.”⁵⁰ Bingham views each of these men and their relation to stardom, and masculinity as an act that then reveals the illusory qualities of masculinity and masculine authority.

The chapter on James Stewart is especially useful for this study because Stewart arrived in Hollywood in 1935, a transitional year in terms of screen masculinities. In fact Bingham documents the difficulties MGM faced in trying to determine Stewart’s masculine image because he was not a he-man, or a sex symbol. Therefore MGM began to promote him as the image of an ideal small town American man who preferred the simple things in life rather than the accoutrements of stardom.⁵¹ Bingham argues that Stewart’s gangly physique and small town attitude marked him as “boyish” and middle-class. His focus on Stewart’s body and characters as models of his screen masculinity provides us with another model of 1930s masculinity in Hollywood that challenges the notion that the ideal type was that of “tough guy.”

Steven Cohan argues that “a culture’s representations of masculinity in crisis...often reflect a perceived ‘feminization’ of men.”⁵² In his book *Masked Men* Cohan analyzes 1950s masculinity onscreen as an example of a masquerade. He argues that the normative model of 1950s masculinity ‘the man in the gray flannel suit’ was in fact an incoherent “portrait of the typical American male” because in many cases the actors attempt to play manly roles were subverted by the apparatus of stardom that transformed them into a spectacle; thus valuing the man for his looks and body rather than for his sense of agency.⁵³ Cohan looks at how masculinity is depicted in the 1950s in

connection with what is omitted such as issues of race, class, ethnicity, or homosexuality in order to show how normal masculinity was formulated in opposition to these concerns.

Cohan examines the stardom of Cary Grant, Gregory Peck, Humphrey Bogart, Charlton Heston, William Holden, Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, Rock Hudson, and Tony Curtis along with the popularity of certain genres like 'sword and sandal epics' and themes such as 'the organization man' and juvenile delinquency in order to illustrate the intricate nature of screen masculinities that were in operation in Hollywood during the 1950s. Like Studlar and Bingham Cohan uses the films of the 1950s to discuss the larger questions about the changing nature of masculinity onscreen and in America.

In her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* Susan Jeffords uses the presidential body and American culture to argue that Hollywood films of the 1980s attempted to reflect an image of American masculinity that was more muscular and "hard" in opposition to the so-called "soft" bodies that were illustrative of the effects of Jimmy Carter's presidency on Hollywood and America. Jeffords states that the correspondences between "public and popular images of Ronald Reagan and the action adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and good old Americanness" made the election of Reagan and his economic and political agenda possible.⁵⁴ In her analysis Jeffords shows how certain films produced during the 1980s connect to the larger themes and concerns of the Reagan presidency, a presidency that she argues was based on the idea of re-masculinizing America and imposing its political, economic, and military will upon the "weaker bodies" of third world countries and even its allies. The Reagan

presidency she argues was responding to a period where multi-national corporations many of them owned by foreigners (Asians, Germans, Mexican) threatened American masculinity and the nation. Jeffords close analysis of screen masculinities in terms of body type, character, and themes offers a useful method to consider how filmic bodies may be represent cultural as well as political notions of masculinity and identity.

Both Studlar and Jeffords analysis of screen masculinity focus on the difficulties involved in trying to explain how screen masculinities may represent larger concerns than simply those of the producers or the story itself. In seriously analyzing stardom and masculinity they both demonstrate how male bodies on screen may operate and be interpreted at different points in history as emblematic of larger concerns about the nature of American masculinity.

David Greven argues that we can read the portrayal of masculinity in Hollywood films produced in the 1990s to the 2000s as an example of the struggle between narcissistic and masochistic modes of manhood. In his study *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* Greven charts how queer identities and concerns became central themes along with a consistent effort to depict American masculinity as self-aware and often parodic. He focuses on how the male body has been constructed onscreen so that masculinity can be shown as performative and fetishistic.⁵⁵ The primary shift in current depictions of masculinity that Greven identifies is the focus on the actor's body rather than performances or characters as illustrative of a specific type of masculinity.

Each of these studies provide approaches and models to better help us understand how to think about masculinity in film and how films can represent masculinity as an

item of anxiety that is constantly in flux. Reeser argues that perhaps it would be more useful to consider masculinity as always in a state of “becoming” or a series of possibilities.⁵⁶ In approaching masculinity in this way, Reeser argues that we can view masculinity as a myriad of masculinities thereby recognizing that masculinity is never something that is static and that there are in fact more than one definitions of masculinity.

In my analysis of the films produced by Warner Bros. in the 1930s I intend to show how the studio used the cultural and political concerns of the nation in an attempt to craft stars and characters on screen that could embody the complexities of American masculinity in during the Great Depression. America masculinity during the 1930s I argue is different from that of the 1920s in that perceptions of masculinity were challenged by massive unemployment, fears of feminine influence, debates about the role of ethnic identities, worries about the state of “youth” and a fear of the male body being sexualized and consumed as an object of desire. I view the 1930s as a decade that represents a continuation of the development of a new commercialized masculinity that began in the 1920s on the one hand. And on the other hand as a period where the male body in film corresponded with an attempt to signify the formation of a national identity grounded in the various forms and ideas about the nature of American masculinity that was weakened by the impact of commercialism and the loss of male confidence in the government and the economic system of capitalism. The tensions over a vision of masculinity as active and in control versus that of passive and dependent were elements over the debate about the causes and effects of the Great Depression, and possibly suggestions for moving the nation ahead.⁵⁷

The Great Depression and New Deal

The complete breakdown of the standard cultural definitions and awareness of masculinity during the 1930s led to a sense of panic because men could no longer be categorized solely by their work. One New Jersey man spoke of his feelings of guilt stating that, "I haven't had a steady job in more than two years. Sometimes I feel like a murderer. What's wrong with me that I can't protect my children" the necessity of an occupation to feel masculine and of use is highlighted as is an overwhelming sense of anxiety.⁵⁸ These feelings of nervousness were not only limited to adult males, as is indicated by a letter a young boy wrote to President and Mrs. Roosevelt asking for advice about his father's situation. "My father, he staying home. All the time he's crying because he can't find work. I told him why are you crying daddy, and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house. I feel sorry for him. That night I couldn't sleep."⁵⁹ Just like the man in New Jersey the little boy displays a sense of unease about his father's status and ability to provide for the family and both represent the difficulties faced by men as they struggled to survive during the 1930s. The generation of men, who were heralded as heroes for their service in World War I returned to an America buoyed by the prosperity of the war and America's economic dominance as a result of the destruction of Europe. These men found themselves facing a massive shock "to their ability to prove manhood by providing for their families at the advent of the Great Depression."⁶⁰ However, the shock that these men experienced would affect the ability of men across the nation to determine their own self-worth and in the process lead

to a real “crisis of masculinity.” This crisis would be felt and seen in the art, literature, music, and especially the films produced during the period from 1932-1939.

The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 and the implementation of his legislative policy “The New Deal” in the Spring of 1933 signaled to the nation that here was a president who understood their plight and recognized that men of all classes and ages were feeling crushed by the economic realities of the Depression.⁶¹ Roosevelt had to instill confidence within the nation and especially American men who were unemployed by selling a program that embraced masculine challenges and in the process transform a culture that had endorsed the image of the “self-made man.” Historian Robert McElvaine argues that “American Dream had turned into a nightmare” and that the self-made man could not be repurposed for the 1930s.⁶² The old values of “moral economics” such as selfishness, aggression, greed, and self-centeredness that McElvaine identified as markers of *laissez faire* economics practiced by three consecutive Republican administrations, are also markers of the ideal notion of masculinity as the self-made man.⁶³ The connection between these ideals of American business and masculinity thus provided the space for Roosevelt to argue for a new vision of economics. The end result would be the development of the image of “New Deal masculinities” where men could be both passive and active, producers and consumers, independent and dependent but only through the shared experience of the Depression. One of the key areas of shared experience that McElvaine documents is the changing dynamics of gender relations as does Studs Terkel in his book *Hard Times*. Both McElvaine and Terkel show how men lost their sense of control and purpose as a result of the Depression. In focusing on how men were impacted

by the Depression they argue that it is important to consider the impact of gender on an understanding of the Great Depression.⁶⁴

Barbara Melosh also argues for an analysis of gender and its connection to the New Deal. She notes that “New Deal administrators saw their tasks as imposing some stability on a cultural landscape that seemed alarmingly disordered; for them representation was the act of recovering or inventing a shared national culture.”⁶⁵

Hollywood filmmaking in the 1930s offered the possibility of building a shared national culture because “movies were the preeminent form of popular culture in the 1930s” with an average of “60 to 75 million tickets purchased each week.”⁶⁶ Film historian Andrew Bergman argues that the movies of the 1930s served to reinforce the ethic of success.⁶⁷ Bergman only focuses on the canonical examples of 1930s films to make his case for the continuation of the success ethic. But his assessment of the films and Hollywood in general and its response to the Depression is problematic because as McElvaine notes movie audiences of the 1930s had become disenchanted with this vision of America as reflected by the overwhelming victory of Roosevelt over Hoover in 1932.⁶⁸

In her study of the *Unemployed Man and His Family* Mirra Komarovsky a sociologist writing during the Depression interviewed men and their families to study how the economic crisis was impacting people in their homes. One of the men in her study stated that “after a while you get so you don’t care a damn any more, and that’s the way I feel.”⁶⁹ Another man told the researchers that “when you are not working you do not get so much attention...when money goes, love flies out of the window.”⁷⁰ Both of these responses illustrate how the Depression created a sense of defeat and instability

within the homes of men who faced long- term unemployment. As a result one of the men expresses a pessimistic view of the world and another notes the value of labor and a paycheck in ensuring a sense of purpose, respect, and love from one's wife.

Barbara Melosh, illustrates how the section administrators of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture later known as the Section of Fine Arts used their influence over artists who were competing to produce works to be installed in public buildings to create graphic and visual models of American men and women that celebrated the nation's rugged frontier spirit and also endorsed the view of masculinity as key to the nation's health and recovery. The ideal male body for the Roosevelt administration Melosh argues was located within images of farmers and laborers. She describes the ideal male form in her analysis of Allen Thomas's mural *Extending the Frontier in Northwest Territory*. "The powerful lines of the man's body, shown in the arduous work of plowing, accentuate masculine strength; his body angles resolutely toward the horizon."⁷¹ It was the image of masculinity as strong, muscular, and hopeful that she argues acted as the national image of masculinities at the time. However, as I will show throughout this study the image of masculinity during the 1930s is indeed even more complex and often contradictory because the 1930s were a period where millions of American men were out of work, and as a result felt as if they had no self-worth or place within the society. Because of the economic instabilities it had become more difficult to differentiate men from one class to another. In essence, there had been a great equalization in terms of gender and class that Roosevelt seemed to better understand than Hoover. The fears and hopes of America would be the subject of numerous films, books,

magazine articles, and paintings. And perhaps no company better encapsulated those fears in their films than Warner Bros.

Methodology

This study uses gender theory, history, and discourse analysis to analyze selected films produced by Warner Bros. in the 1930s that starred Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell and Errol Flynn. For the study I watched all of the films produced by these men during their tenure at Warner Bros. Drawing upon Gayln Studlar's theories of masculinity, stardom, and American culture as well as her argument that one must rely on a re-investigation of film history using contemporary sources in order to better formulate theoretical models within film studies, I examine the ways in which the classical Hollywood studio model functioned to create male stars and how their characters represent a masculinity in flux.⁷² Masculinity is in flux in other eras to be sure, but what is interesting about the 1930s is how invested studios, like Warner Bros. were in fashioning an image of masculinity that exhibited the difficulties faced by men in the country as a result of the Great Depression while also depicting an image of masculinities that recognized the shift to a society and economy based on appearance and consumption. Whereas screen masculinity in the 1920s had illustrated an image of masculinity that was strong willed and capable of proving one's masculinity, 1930s screen masculinity represented an image of American men as tender, sensitive, emotionally strong, as well as physically active. Often the films of the 1920s were set in the distant and fantastic past where screen heroes like Fairbanks, Valentino, and Barrymore were shown to be men whose success was located within fidelity to their own self-interest. The 1930s screen

masculinity more often than not was located in contemporary urban environments and revealed an image of masculinity that was often cynical, sometimes self-sufficient, and marked by desire and practices of consumption.

In selecting the films for this study I chose a mix of canonical films like *I am A Fugitive from the Chain Gang* (1932), *Captain Blood* (1935), *Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), and *42nd Street* along with films that were produced but which have been ignored because they have been considered inferior in quality and popularity such as *Purchase Price* (1932), *The Perfect Specimen* (1937), and *Happiness Ahead* (1934). Examining both popular and unpopular films gives a balanced sample on which to base my argument. In addition to watching and analyzing the films I examined the studio's records about each of these four men. In looking at the production, story and legal files for Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell, and Errol Flynn I learned how the company handled each of these men in terms of contracts, publicity, and story development. I examine the contracts and budgets for the selected films in an attempt to show how important each of these films was for the company at that time and how the films served each star's career.

I also used film reviews from major daily newspapers in the largest American cities of the time, in three distinct geographical regions to get a sense of how these men and their films were received. I used reviews from *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Examiner*. Using the *LA Times* and the *LA Examiner* provided me with an industry town view of the business and these films and their reception that along with the reviews in the trades: *Variety*, *Motion Picture Herald*

and *Film Daily* allowed me to see how exhibitors and critics responded to these men and their films.

Chapter Breakdowns

Warner stars like Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell and Errol Flynn illustrate the complexities encountered by Warner Bros. during the 1930s to fashion representations of masculinities onscreen using “types” at a time when the dominant forms of masculinities were under assault from the pressures of the economic hardships of the decade and the changing state of what masculinity meant to contemporary audiences. Therefore in order to better understand what screen masculinities represented for Warner Bros. and how the varying forms of masculinity were being redefined as a result of the Great Depression, this study examines the films, star personas, screen images, and thematics associated with the actors Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell, and Errol Flynn during the Great Depression from 1932-1939 in order to answer the following questions:

In chapter one, “Paul Muni and Mutable Masculinities”, I examine how Warner Bros. used a “prestige actor” like Paul Muni to enhance the studio’s profile as a major player in the production of films. Muni was one of the few actors within the studio system model that possessed control of his career and it was his ability to refuse some scripts, lobby for others, set his own working conditions, and to ensure his own sense of self worth that sets him apart from so many other stars at Warner Bros. and in Hollywood. This sense of independence can be read as a form of masculinity and is in keeping both onscreen and off with the idea of “New Deal” masculinities because Muni

recognized that it was more important to make films that spoke to the greater good of American audiences than to make films that were trivial and good for his career, in some cases. Furthermore what makes Muni's career so rich and complicated are the ways in which he was sold as a savage masculine figure by the publicity department, in opposition to the more "soft" aspects of his character as genteel, cerebral, and someone with strong convictions that he perpetuated off-screen by refusing to accept the label "star" and by separating himself from the demands of stardom such as attending premieres, publicity tours, interviews, and being regularly in the public eye.

In chapter two, "Transgressive Masculinities: George Brent and Female Passions," I examine how George Brent's status as a figure of sophistication and romance were combined with his qualities of youthfulness to transform him into one of the company's leading romantic men. However, as I illustrate Warner Bros. fought to fashion him into a new type of screen love interest that combined violence and aggression towards women popularized by Clark Gable and James Cagney with a sense of tenderness, warmth, and respect for women. Brent's screen persona, I argue, links him to the notion of "the companionate marriage" that celebrated the shift of "middle class ideals of marriage from nineteenth century notions of duty to aspirations for friendship, mutuality, and sexual expression."⁷³ Brent's status as a contract player and a matinee idol make him an unlikely candidate for commodification, but Warner Bros. used his films, relationships, and his image of the urbane man to sell an image of masculinity that corresponds with Marchand's reading of the advertisements of the period

In chapter three, “Shifting Masculinities: Dick Powell and Boyish Pep,” I examine how Powell’s early status as a lead juvenile performer informs and complicates his later roles at the studio. Powell shifts from the image of a beautiful and fastidious male singer to that of a young man struggling to survive in the economic realities of the Depression all the while trying to maintain a sense of optimism and belief that with a little hard work, great things are possible. Powell’s connection to youth serves to demonstrate how masculinities in the 1930s were rapidly changing. By looking at Powell I demonstrate how young men, in particular, struggled to realize their own masculine potential in a manner that was in keeping with their own desires and those of the nation.

In chapter four, “Glamorous Male Bodies: Errol Flynn and a Return to Aggressive Vibrancy,” I examine how the star persona of Errol Flynn signals a return to a “Fairbanksian” type of masculinity of the 1920s. Flynn’s persona in the 1930s connects to the re-emerging interest in costume films and adventure tales may signal movie studios anticipation of US entry into war at any rate they indicate a return to a particular narrative of American nationalism and a feeling of Pro-Britishness.⁷⁴

In focusing on how race, class, and gender impacted the formation of American masculinity onscreen in the 1930s this study provides a picture of how Hollywood and in particular Warner Bros. attempted to address the Great Depression. The image of masculinity that Warner Bros. produced was one that showed the difficulties men faced at the time and established the various models, which the company would employ to fashion male stardom and masculinities onscreen.

Chapter One

Paul Muni: Mutable Masculinities and the New Deal

“Muni knows how to make every moment in a performance count and is willing to take his time in doing it. He leaves no blurred edges, nor any frayed outlines. They are sharp, clear, in full focus because he sees them himself, and commands the fluency and vitality to show what he is thinking about. There is power and richness of texture in his acting, and a sort of personal violence that is carefully used for touches that are compelling and unforgettable.” (Theatre Arts, 1931)⁷⁵

The style of performance that theatre critic John Anderson identifies as representative of Paul Muni illustrates the multi-faceted nature of the performer and his abilities. Anderson’s assessment of Muni employs words like “violence” and “vitality” that suggest masculine connotations along with the idea that in Muni’s performance there are no wasted movements, nor artsy gestures to deviate from the main thrust of his performance. It was these qualities that Muni discussed when he stated that:

If I were to use a principle at all in acting, it would be that if the mind—the basic generator—functions alertly and sums up its impulses and conclusions to a correct result; it is possible for the actor to achieve something creative. Technique, which comes with practice, gives you the firm foundation on which to build your structure. But unless the mind sends out the sparks, the forces that stimulate the body to perform a series of actions that generate a spontaneous emotion, nothing creative can happen.⁷⁶

Thus for Muni acting is a labor of the mind in conjunction with the body. While Muni never explicitly labeled his style of performance as anything other than a craft, film

scholar Richard Dyer classifies it as a type of repertory/Broadway performance. He argues that “certain stars [like] Paul Muni, Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn—were able to draw on their theatre background.”⁷⁷ This type of performance style is notable for the ways in which it emphasizes that “the performer should be hidden behind the character s/he constructs and in no way play him/herself.”⁷⁸ In short, the performer and his/her performance should be mutable thus limiting the possibility of the formation of a screen persona that was for audiences instantly recognizable from one film to another. It was this style of performance that Muni transferred from the stage to the screen and as a result made it difficult for Warner Bros. to fashion him into a star.

Muni was born Muni Weisenfreund in Lemberg, Austria-Hungary on September 22, 1895. In 1928 he left the New York stage for Hollywood and signed a seven-year contract with Fox studios for \$500 a week. Muni changed his name at the suggestion of Winfield Sheehan who was president and head of production at Fox in 1928. Muni had initially wanted to honor his father by using the name Favel, but the executives at Fox thought the name sounded too ethnic. Perhaps in a moment of irony Muni suggested either Minneapolis or St. Paul as new first names because he had played in those cities. Sol Wurtzel, another executive at Fox smiled and said, “Paul Muni. It’s a beautiful name.”⁷⁹ Immediately after signing Muni Fox released its first publicity release on him stating that, “William Fox has personally discovered and placed under a seven year contract the celebrated Russian actor Paul Muni.”⁸⁰ What is interesting about this early press release is that Fox endorses his foreign status and transfers his nationality from

Austro- Hungarian to *Russian* possibly because of the public's fascination with anything Russian.⁸¹

Muni's first of two films for Fox during the late silent era, was *The Valiant* (1929) in which he plays James Dyke a convicted murderer who goes to the electric chair denying his identity so that his family will be saved from the humiliation of his actions. The film did poorly at the box office despite the critical acclaim for Muni's performance.⁸²

The second film he made was *Seven Faces* (1929) in which he played seven characters through the use of make-up and costuming. His performance in these seven different roles displays Muni's range and his ability to transform himself using make-up and movement. However, unlike many of his counterparts (such as Lon Chaney whom Studlar argues used his extraordinary grotesque physicality to portray extreme suffering on and off camera as a marker of masculinity), Muni's masculinity instead reveals the ethnic qualities of American masculinity that had been overlooked or suppressed.⁸³ Muni was critical of relying on make-up alone to build character preferring instead to use his body, facial expressions, and mental analysis of a character.⁸⁴ The film was not successful and as a result Muni was released from his contact with Fox because the company was in transition as its founder William Fox Muni's biggest supporter was removed from the company.⁸⁵

It was his ability to depict ordinary people from the streets that interested Warner Bros. when they later signed him to play in *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang* in 1932. Muni claimed that his inspiration for his characters and performances at Warner Bros.

was “taken from the street, real types everyone recognizes.”⁸⁶ He was signed by Jake Wilk, the company’s story editor and talent scout in New York after director Mervyn LeRoy, who replaced Roy del Ruth as director on *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* saw Muni perform in the play *Counsellor at Law*. LeRoy was so impressed with Muni’s performance that he wired back to the studio executives in Los Angeles: This is our man!⁸⁷ By signing Muni Warner Bros. acquired a performer who had gained a great amount of respect and attention for his work in the theatre as well as for his budding film career in which he had already been nominated for an Academy award for Best Actor in his debut film for Fox *The Valiant* (1929).

Muni’s stardom and image represent the complexities Warner Bros. faced in trying to market him as representative of a masculine experience within America in the 1930s because he was both Jewish and a foreigner. Nicholas Sammond in his discussion of how Paramount handled the Marx brothers notes that in the 1930s Jewish producers and studio moguls worked to fashion themselves and their products as indicative of the assimilationist spirit of the time by foregrounding the idea that ethnicity, and class could be overcome by any individual with a little hard work and American pride. Sammond views this strategy by Hollywood as an example of how “whiteness” impacted the formation of films and Hollywood stars.⁸⁸

Unlike many stars in Hollywood and on the Warner Bros. lot Muni was able to control the trajectory of his career despite the fact that he was a part of a system that utilized the seven-year option contract. These exclusive contracts ensured that any actor who worked for a studio was only allowed to work for that studio, and that the studio

could loan an actor out if they chose to. However, in the case of Paul Muni his contract shows how important he was for Warner Bros. and demonstrates Muni's masculine authority as akin to that of the self-made man. The need to create an image of masculinity as self-reliant yet accepting of consumerism was at the heart of the American economic system that Roosevelt created in the 1930s and that many of the studios attempted to emulate in the formation of their male stars.

Paul Muni: The Star ?

Richard Dyer points out that, "stars are produced by the media industries, film stars by Hollywood."⁸⁹ According to Dyer stars are not just their films, "but the promotion of those films, and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs... as well as interviews, biographies, and coverage in the press of the star's doings and private life."⁹⁰ For Dyer "stardom is an image of the ways stars live" and how they are presented as images in the media and public discourse.⁹¹ Dyer also states that stars can articulate for audiences what it is to be "a human being in contemporary society" and even more importantly "stars matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us: and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people."⁹² In the case of Paul Muni Warner Bros. sought to make him into a star through many of these avenues but Muni's control of his image, performances, and stories made it more difficult for Warner Bros. to market him as a star. Paul Muni's stardom does not meet all the requirements of a star in Dyer's framework, but his stardom and choice of film roles make it possible to discuss how his performances mattered to audiences, the critics, and to illustrate the complicated issues faced by Warner Bros. to fashion him into

a star. However such control did make Muni appear to be more connected to the harsh realities of the struggles of Americans as they sought to survive the pain and shame caused by the Great Depression.

Warner Bros. was unsure of how to market Muni because he constantly reminded them and the press that he was not a star, but an actor. Muni first expressed this image of himself after he was signed by Jake Wilk telling him “No! The mere idea of becoming an acting robot at the beck and call of a studio is too terrible even to think about! No more long term contracts.”⁹³ Muni was first signed to a one-picture contract that was one of the most unusual and exclusive contracts for any star working within the confines of the Hollywood studio system in 1932. The contract for his services paid him \$15,000 dollars in five equal weekly installments of \$3,250.00 dollars a week. It also stipulated that he was to work no more than twelve hours a day and seventy hours a week. The deal also provided him with the right of refusal of stories submitted and only required that he make one film a year, and after completing the film that he was to be allowed to continue working on stage when not in the employ of the studio making films. It also ensured Warner Bros that they had exclusive rights to his name and likeness for advertising his films but both parties would share commercial advertising rights.⁹⁴ This deal made Muni one of the most powerful and highly paid actors in Hollywood and ensured that he would maintain control of his career and image.

In an effort to keep Muni happy and working, Warner Bros. devised a marketing campaign that avoided using the label “star” and instead focused on his physical appearance from role to role. In the article “Movie Stars Don’t Last, So Paul Muni

Refuses Star Rank” located in the studio press book for *I am A Fugitive* Muni details his thoughts on Hollywood and stardom. “Stardom is a kind of slavery to the public. Instead of finding the actor for a part the producer has to find parts for his star. It’s bad business and soon becomes a vicious circle.”⁹⁵ Muni further stated that, “I don’t want to be a star. If you have to label me anything, I’m an actor—I guess. A journeyman actor. I think star is what you call actors who can’t act.”⁹⁶

Muni struggled against this vicious circle throughout his screen career because he did not wish to think of himself as a star. He did not do interviews, did not attend Hollywood premieres or parties nor were he and his wife to be seen at fancy nightclubs. If Muni was a star then he was not the typical class of star because he was not capable of producing consistently large box office but he did attract acclaim, respect, and interest from audiences, critics, and his fellow performers for his obsessive attention to detail. Moreover with Muni, like George Arliss Warner Bros. now had a “prestige” actor which they emphasized in the billing on marquees and in ads referring to him as Mister Muni. Muni avoided star status throughout his career in Hollywood and derided the usage of the term up until his death in 1967. Muni’s dedication to his craft as an actor and his desire to control his own destiny were the two qualities that differentiated him from the other actors working on the Burbank lot and they were also the two qualities that most often frustrated Warner Bros. in their efforts to define Muni’s screen persona and to sell his image to the public in the ten films he made for Warner Bros. from 1932-1939.

However it is clear from looking at this article and the studio biography crafted by the publicity department for Muni that they differed with his assessment of his place in

Hollywood and his view of himself and acting. The author focuses on his physical characteristics when they describe his look and stature on the lot noting that, “rather smaller than he appears to be onscreen Muni nevertheless gives off an impression of power. He has a fine head with a pugnacious nose and a stubborn upper lip somewhat contradicted by kindly brown eyes and small expressive hands, which he kneads into one another when he talks. He speaks rapidly, forcefully and with a precise selection of words.”⁹⁷ The use of words like “pugnacious” and “power” to describe his body and movements illustrates that Warner Bros. were attempting to market him as both a unique figure and someone who was similar in look and performance with their other major male stars such as James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson. However, this discussion of Muni’s physicality also calls attention to the fact that Muni possessed qualities that are not as ruggedly masculine, such as his “kindly brown eyes” and “small expressive hands.” The article thus reveals the contradictory nature of Muni’s screen persona and further illustrates the difficulties faced by Warner Bros. as they tried to market him as their new example of the hard-boiled leading man type that was popular with the studios and audiences in 1932. A type that was labeled “the rough, tough, two fisted direct he-man” in the article “Which Movie Star Dominates You” that appeared in *Photoplay*.⁹⁸

His studio biography demonstrates the company’s desire to overlook his training in the Yiddish theater because they claim that he was born in Vienna:

But came to America with his parents when four years old. He was educated in New York and Cleveland schools, in between tours of the country made with his parents who were professionals. He was practically brought up before the

footlights...he went on his own getting a thorough stage training in vaudeville in a Boston stock company and later in New York in theatre guilds and art theatres...established himself as one of America's foremost actors in "This One" and "Rockne Julie" after which he made a tremendous hit in *Scarface*. Back to Broadway again he scored a hit in "Counselor at Law" after which Warner Bros. engaged him to play in the chain gang picture. He is now playing 'Counselor at Law' for the second season.⁹⁹

Together the article and bio establish the difficulty that Warner Bros. faced throughout Muni's tenure at the studio as they struggled to sell him as both a hard-edged powerful masculine presence and as an actor whose range and sensitivity made him recognizable as one of the great actors of the time.

Warner Bros. addition of Muni signaled to the rest of the industry that Warner Bros. were serious about making prestige pictures, also commonly referred to as "A" class pictures. "A" class pictures were designed to be important for audiences and critics alike, and demonstrate the artistic potential of filmmaking. However for Warner Bros. it was important that their "A" class picture reflect a level of prestige that was in keeping with their standard ripped-from-the-headline films that depicted the gritty, urban realities of life in America during the 1930s, even as the other studios were churning out westerns, melodramas, wholesome comedies and films based on best-selling books. Moreover the studio's "A" class features would need to reflect the studio's idea that films could be used to educate and entertain.

Combining Harry Warner's philosophy that movies should serve the public good as well as entertain and producer Daryl Zanuck's cynical vision of America the Warner Bros. house style was developed in the early 1930s. In their early 1930s films Warner Bros. crafted an image of America where the working classes faced the challenges of living within an urban environment. The heroes of their films were gangsters, secretaries, reporters, detectives, and killers because all of these types were part of the urban landscape that was marred by corruption, crime, and immorality. Ethan Mordden notes that, "Warner's people could be the men and women you passed in apartment hallways, dressed so, lit so, speaking so."¹⁰⁰ In effect Warner Bros. differentiated itself from the other major studios by making films that spoke to contemporary concerns and more importantly could be produced quickly and cheaply. For, unlike the other major studios that owned large chains of theaters, Warner Bros. operated as if it were a minor studio spending about 125, 000 dollars on the production of each film. The cycle of films made under Zanuck's reign from 1930-1933 encapsulated this view of America and, by using newspapers and magazines as source materials and newspaper reporters as writers, Zanuck hoped to infuse the cinema with a new life, one that was topical, exciting, raw, and reflected contemporary fears and hopes.¹⁰¹ It was the role of James Allen in *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang* that exhibited Zanuck and the Warners model of "burbanking" in the way that the experiences of a single man were used to show the horrors faced by contemporary society. This film determined the future trajectory of Muni's career at Warner Bros. and how they handled the depiction of his masculinity onscreen and off.

Tortured Masculinities and Disciplining the Male Body in *Fugitive from a Chain Gang*

A prime example of this type of “topical” as scholar Andrew Bergman labels the socially conscious films made during the 1930s is Warner Bros. film *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932). *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang* traces the rise and fall of James Allen (Paul Muni) as he returns from World War I. He is a man changed by his experience as an engineer, which has made him more self-confident and desirous of living a life where his labor matters and where he can make a better life for himself. This life he believes can only be found working in construction, not within a factory. At first family pressure forces him to return to the factory but ultimately he can no longer accept the position of a factory clerk and quits. He travels the country looking for work in construction only to realize that there are no jobs. He tries to pawn his war medal, (the ultimate symbol of masculine achievement) but discovers that his medal like his labor and masculinity are worthless in this new society. He ends up in a flophouse, where he is tricked into helping a man rob a diner. The man holds a gun on Allen and the owner of a diner as he tells Allen to empty the cash register. The police arrive and kill the man holding the gun just as Allen removes the money, \$5.80, and for this he is sentenced to ten years hard labor on a prison chain gang. While in the prison Allen cracks under the stress of the routines and authority imposed upon his body and decides to escape with the help of another prisoner.

Allen escapes to Chicago where he finds work in an engineering firm and slowly works his way up from the ground floor to a high- rise office. He finds success but at the

risk of being exposed by an alcoholic named Marie (Glenda Farrell). Who upon learning the truth of his identity blackmails him into marrying her. Marie turns him into the police when she discovers that he has fallen in love with, Helen, a sweet, modest girl of good breeding. Allen agrees to return to the chain gang and serve a 90-day sentence in an effort to free himself from his past, only to realize that the deal that he and his attorney had agreed to was a sham. He escapes again, only this time he is a man without a future, or hope of employment, and as a result of being constantly on the move for fear of capture he loses his morality as echoed by the last line of the film “I steal.”

For many film scholars and historians, it is this film that defines the Warner Bros. house style and demonstrates the studio’s ability to make films that carried within them a strong message of social conscience.¹⁰² The film proved important for Muni as well as the studio earning him a nomination for Best Actor at the 1932-1933 Oscars. Because it was released before the election of Roosevelt and what I am referring to as “New Deal masculinities” which developed at Warner Bros. in 1933 I argue this film acts as a transition between the image of masculinity as that of the self-made man and that of masculinity as compassionate and cooperative.

The story of Robert Burns, a man who had been wrongly imprisoned, escaped, and written an expose of his time working on a chain gang in Georgia was prime source material for the Warner Bros. cycle of prison and gangster films and also spoke to the studio’s desire to maintain costs by making films that were taken from the headlines of major newspapers. Burns’s story was first serialized in *True Detective Mysteries* in 1931. It appeared in 6 issues (from January until June) and according to George Custen, Zanuck

read either the serialized version or the book en route to New York from Hollywood on business.¹⁰³ Zanuck saw potential in the story because he believed that it could continue the type of gritty, urban stories that Warner Bros. was currently making and could perhaps enable the studio to make a film that was hugely successful at the box office. Zanuck wired Esme Ward, one of the studio's readers and ordered her to write up a report of the book for Jack Warner and the other executives.¹⁰⁴ Ward felt that the book could not be adapted for film because of censorship issues. She wrote to Zanuck that, "this book might make a picture if we had no censorship, but all the strong and vivid points in the story are certain to be eliminated by the present censorship board."¹⁰⁵ Yet, Zanuck would not give up on the property and eventually convinced Jack Warner that it was a film that the studio should make. They paid Robert Burns 12,500 dollars for the rights to his story *I am A Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*.¹⁰⁶ To further signal that this film was to be one of the studio's most important films of 1932 they assigned Roy del Ruth, one of their highest paid directors to direct the film. However, del Ruth turned down the assignment noting in a memo that "when the whole public is so depressed... that many of them are leaping out of windows, such a terribly heavy and morbid film" in which "there is not one moment of relief anywhere" seemed ill advised.¹⁰⁷ Del Ruth was not alone in his assessment of the film as Will Hay's had been quick to warn producers to avoid the temptation of making quick profits by producing films that capitalized on the incendiary and anxious events of the early 1930s.¹⁰⁸ Zanuck refused to abandon the project despite Hay's and the other studios concerns about the graphic and disturbing nature of its subject.

There are three reasons that Zanuck refused to give up on the project despite the controversies and fears that the film would not be successful. First, recent prison films had done very well. Pictures such as *The Big House* (1930), *Up the River* (1930), *Ladies of the Big House* (1931), *The Criminal Code* (1931) and *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932) had proven that prison themes interested American audiences. In fact, Thomas Doherty notes that this cycle of prison films “like the gangster film bespoke the insurrection, under the eyes of guards closed in by concrete architecture, but never quite suppressed.”¹⁰⁹ Thus prison films allowed studios like Warner Bros. to build on their successful gritty, urban films that focused on gangsters and poverty and expand the scope of contemporary views of life in America. In the context of a country facing wide-spread economic crisis these films illustrated a world where shelter and three square meals were provided daily, but at the cost of one’s freedom, a cost which for some was none too high, especially for men and young boys who felt as if their self-worth had been lessened by the Great Depression and a government that was non responsive to their plight. Second, the film’s source material and Burn’s harrowing tales of life on the chain gang and two escapes had gripped the attention of the nation. What made Burns’s narrative fascinating was that it was a human interest story that spoke to the horrors of living in a country where military service was not respected and the criminal justice system could ruin a man’s life without real evidence of a crime having been committed. And for Depression era audiences, his economic troubles, while the product of the 1920s, reflected their own miseries as a result of the stock market crash in 1929. Finally, the film called upon the talents of Paul Muni, who had received rave reviews for his performance

in *Scarface*. In an effort to deflect some of the criticism the studio encountered for purchasing the rights to the book and setting in motion the development of a film version Warner Bros signed Paul Muni to play the lead part of James Allen, who is modeled after Robert Burns. Along with director Mervyn LeRoy who had directed the successful gangster film *Little Caesar* (1931) these two men shaped the look, feel, and tone of the film to create a movie that spoke of the miscarriage of justice and inequalities of economic opportunities in the country. Equally important to the development of the film were the three screen writers involved in the process: Brown Holmes, Sheridan Gibney and Howard Green who together worked to craft a screenplay that maintained the reportage style of the book and also used the material to critique and comment on the state of America prior to the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in March 1932.

Fugitive may have been designed to be a socially conscious film as Warner Bros. executives and personnel have argued but the film also tackles the difficult experiences of American men, especially veterans of World War I who struggle to find dignity and a means of economic survival. Director Mervyn LeRoy claimed that in some ways it was “the most important film I ever made, because it had an immediate and profound effect on our culture. I can think of very few films that actually altered laws and corrected heinous conditions, and *Fugitive* is among that handful.”¹¹⁰ Muni proclaimed of the part, I would be something less than human not to have seized the chance to expose such evil in *I am a Fugitive*.¹¹¹ The evil that Muni speaks of is the inhumane treatment that men faced in a country that allowed the usage of chain gangs, and harsh measures like sweat boxes, and whips to discipline prisoners. *Fugitive* is an example of what Jonathan Kahana

in his essay “The Forgotten Man; or How Hollywood Invented Welfare” refers to as “Forgotten Man” films because it calls attention to the problem of World War I veterans difficult transition from life in the military to civilian life and how that transition was impacted by economic crisis along with a crisis of masculinity during the Depression.¹¹²

The biggest change in the initial draft of the screenplay was the change in Allen’s occupation from a newspaper/magazine publisher to an engineer who builds bridges. According to Custen this shift in character was Zanuck’s idea because he was afraid of further criticism of the studios depiction of the news media after *5 Star Final* (1932).¹¹³ However, O’Connor notes that the reason the change was made was because it would be easier and visually more interesting to see a bridge being built rather than newspaper/magazines disappearing from a newsstand. There may be some truth to both accounts but I argue that by making Allen an engineer he represents a shift in masculine experiences and expectations. This idea of a masculinity determined by hard work, manual labor, and technology is emphasized in the fictionalization of the film Warner Bros. produced to accompany the film that was to be included a number of daily newspapers.

Bridges had always fascinated James Allen. To him they were not inanimate things of steel and concrete. Instead, every arching span seemed to be the living pulsating proof that a man could make a dream come true. Allen had dreamed of building bridges, graceful ornamental powerful bridges. He dreamed of that through mad months when the Allied armies were marching victoriously toward

Germany over the rough superstructures he and his fellow engineers had thrown together over the carnage laden rivers of France.¹¹⁴

The combination of masculinity, militarism, and technology that are represented in this excerpt display how Warner Bros. and the screenwriters used the figure of the engineer as a type of masculine hero. In her book *Making Technology Masculine* Ruth Oldenziel notes that, “over the span of two and a half decades from 1890 to the First World War, male commercial writers staged the engineer as a male cultural hero.” In these stories she argues the men could be exemplar of the engineer as a member of the ruling and professional classes or he could be representative of working class masculinity as dirty, vulgar, and driven.¹¹⁵ Muni’s performance and the script combine this idea of the gentleman engineer with that of the working class man to create an image of American masculinities that is active and passive in an effort to critique the current status of American masculinity during the early part of the 1930s.

The second draft of the screenplay written by Sheridan Gibney and Brown Holmes was used by Zanuck to change the direction of the film from that of a man forlornly looking for work in the big city to one returning from war to his small hometown where his family and job as a shipping clerk in a shoe factory await him. Instead of making Allen’s struggles the result of capitalism’s inability to provide for him, Zanuck makes Allen’s problems psychological. The shift from viewing Allen’s problems as emblematic of the system to his psyche adds dramatic emphasis to Allen’s character. It also indicates that Zanuck is interested in forming a certain type of masculine figure

onscreen. Allen in this second draft is representative of the notion of the self-made man that Kimmel argues is the ideal form of American masculinity.¹¹⁶

Howard J. Green who relied more upon the book and de-emphasized the allegorical, political model that had been the focus of the Gibney-Holmes treatment, penned the final script. The film was budgeted for thirty four days at a cost of \$198, 845. It began shooting on 7/29/32 and was completed on schedule on 9/6/32. This was one of the most expensive films Warners had made up to that point with Muni earning 16,000 for his six weeks of work. Other than Muni and LeRoy the most expensive parts of the production were the sets. The prison blacksmith shop cost \$4,895 and the mess hall cost \$3,300. The total cost of sets including the trick shots, and blowing up the miniature bridge cost \$44, 830.¹¹⁷ These budget numbers highlight how important this film was for Warner Bros. in 1932 and more importantly how much confidence they had in the film's box office potential with Muni in the lead role.

The film was shot on five sound stages and the prison was built on the Warner Bros. ranch. LeRoy shot 5'30" feet of finished film a day, according to Schatz, even though Muni required more time to prepare.¹¹⁸ Despite all the problems in development the end result is for scholars like Schatz, Mordden, Balio, Roddick and others a testament to Warner Bros.' desire to make films that spoke to the concerns of contemporary audiences and in the process also made a statement about the nature of life in America in 1932.

In *Fugitive* the protagonist Allen's masculinity and humanity come under attack from those who believe in the idea of American middle class masculinity as self-centered,

reserved, and tied to the fortunes of a capitalist system and those individuals who use authority to hurt people rather than help them. According to Andrew Bergman, this film is one of the bleakest ever produced by Hollywood in the ways that it spoke to the horrors and fears of a Depression America audience who like Allen saw no help or relief in sight.¹¹⁹

Even if it is a film that addresses the concerns of Depression-era America there is another dimension to the film that has heretofore remained unexplored: how it addresses the plight of American masculinities as a result of living within a system that R.W. Connell, argues leads to the formation of “hegemonic masculinity.” Building upon Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony as a means of analyzing class relations Connell argues that gender relations, especially masculinity are best thought of a hegemonic system that occupies the dominant position in a given pattern of gender relations and is always contestable.¹²⁰ This power can displayed by actors, politicians, military leaders, etc, but “it is the successful claim to authority more than direct violence that is the mark of hegemony.”¹²¹ While Connell’s theory speaks to contemporary discussions about the destabilizations of masculinity as a result of the progressive movements of the 1960s (Civil Rights, women’s rights, gay and lesbian movement) aspects of it are applicable to a discussion of masculinities during the Great Depression. It was another period wherein masculinities were challenged by the social and economic realities of the time, which in turn challenged the hegemonic forces at work. In the case of *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* hegemonic masculinity captures the fear of unruly male bodies in two prominent forms. The first is the way in which it depicts the horrors faced by veterans of

World War I as the nation ignored their service and pain, all as they were trying to find a means of economic survival. The second is how the film depicts the use of torture and terror as a means of control and fostering normative representations of masculinity.

The opening sequence of the film establishes the theme of disciplining male bodies and its connection to institutional forces. There is a shot of a troop ship returning to America from Europe at the end of World War I followed by a shot of a fictional New York newspaper headline reads “Sunset Division Returning Home Today.” This shot immediately connects the film to the style of other Warner Bros. films and serves as a type of inter-title by introducing the name of Allen’s unit and the location where they will disembark to start their lives as civilians once more. There is a dissolve to the interior of the ship where men are shown in tight quarters playing craps, and laughing and singing as they celebrate their homecoming. One of the men is playing a song entitled ‘There are Smiles.’ The scene is one of genuine camaraderie and depicts a world where masculinities are shown to be equal because each of the men have been transformed by the hegemony of the United States army through their training.

Allen (Muni) breaks up the jovial spirit when he descends the stairs and smiles as tells the men, “Hey pipe down you mugs.” He looks over the scene before seating himself on the third stair from the top of the staircase. By remaining on the staircase he is able to assert himself into their space and still maintain the necessary distance required by his rank. He then says in a more reserved manner, “sorry to break up the game boys, but the old man’s having bunk inspection in an hour.” As he utters this last line, he grins and

motions his head towards the above decks. In depicting Allen in this fashion, the film illustrates how desperately he wants to be seen as just another one of the guys.

In a long shot, Muni is shown with a smile across his face as one arm relaxes on the banister and the other is tucked into his pants pockets. He uses this gesture of hands in pockets throughout the film to exhibit Allen's anxiety and need to control his space. However, in this sequence it is clear that Allen feels comfort and a sense of joy amongst these men alongside whom he has stood side by side in battle and with whom he has learned to love building things. The feeling of camaraderie that the film generates in these early scenes valorizes the military as a space where men's awareness that survival means counting on one another, indicating a level of cooperation and compassion. The idea of cooperation was also part of the growing corporatization of masculinity, but in this scene it is the feelings of camaraderie forged in the fires of war that are celebrated.

A variety of masculine experiences are represented in the opening sequence when the audience is provided with two distinct views of American masculinities through dialogue and the way they are positioned within the frame. The first masculine perspective presented is that of a young Texan who proclaims loudly in a medium close-up that "this man's army ain't been nothing but just one inspection after another." He forcefully points his finger toward the stairs and continues explaining that, "if I ever I get back to Texas on that range again, the first man who says inspection to me, he's just going to be S.O.L. because he'll hear my six-shooter. And I mean sure enough too." The masculinity represented by the Texan is one based on rugged individualism where problems are solved with violence and action rather than discussion. Furthermore the

Texan's masculinity is linked to his labor and connection with the land similar to that of the stalwart farmer whose mythic masculinity, is defined by his independent stand against the forces of nature and capitalism.¹²²

Another masculine perspective that is displayed is that of an older vaudeville performer who is shown in a medium close-up in his bunk with his hands cradled beneath his face and his fingers resting on his cheeks. He looks as if he is dreaming rather than paying attention to the scene. He tells the other men that; "there'll be no inspection where I'm going." At first it sounds as if he is boasting that he has a future in store where he can control his destiny but then he explains that he is returning to "vaudeville with my old lion-taming act." He then rolls his eyes before looking towards the ceiling and asks the question "I wonder if Oscar and Minnie will know me when I get back into the cage?" His perception of masculinity is played for laughs and by doing so shows that there is a danger to being in control of one's destiny. The vaudeville performer's stance on masculinity is not as heroic as that of the Texan or even Allen's. In fact, the way in which it is staged within the film is designed to elicit laughs rather than serious consideration of what it that he is trying to convey to these men whom he has served in wartime with. This combination of jest and danger foreshadow what will happen to Allen later in the film.

Muni's style of performance and the way in which Allen's character is written combine elements of both of these men. In a medium close-up Muni is shown so that it appears that he is preaching to the men as he leans forward and winks, but this moment can also be read as if he is speaking directly to the audience when he says, "I know what I'm gonna do. Get me some kind of construction job...Being in the engineering corps has

been a swell experience and I am making the most of it.” In a following medium long shot he tells them all that, “you can bet your little tin hat [earlier there was a shot of a German soldier’s spiked helmet hanging from one of the bunks] Mr. James Allen won’t be back in the grind of a factory.” As he completes the line, he stands up, straightens his shoulders and returns above deck. Muni’s declaration that he is no longer willing to be defined by wage labor speaks to the problems of the New Deal and its project to sell the notion of the manly worker as the preeminent form of ideal American masculinity. Melosh argues that “the manly worker emphasized the populist narrative of the 1930s” and it is this populist narrative of masculinity that Warner Bros. constructs throughout the film.¹²³

The need for control of male bodies and their anger, one could argue, reaches its height during the Great Depression as both governments (city, state, and federal) and businesses struggle to maintain control of their workers, their profits, and their ability to determine what constitutes positive and negative masculinities at the time. Michel Foucault explains that within Western culture that “discipline” as meted out by institutions has been responsible for the formation of “docile bodies.” Institutions like the military, prisons, and schools Foucault argues, break down individual resistance to the power of the state and the will of the other people within the state, thereby making the body docile through disciplinary actions like imprisonment and surveillance.¹²⁴ These are the forces at work in *I am a Fugitive* that attempt to condition James Allen and his desires to comply with mainstream perceptions of masculinity.

These opening sequences echo Michael Kimmel's notion that for American manhood there has been no more important idea to determine masculinity than that of labor. He points out that the perception of "wartime victories had allowed a generation of men to rescue a threatened sense of manhood and in the expanding peacetime economy augured well for economic success."¹²⁵ For the Texan his labor is that of the cattle rancher and it determines the way he speaks and looks at the world. The vaudeville performer's masculinity is determined by his ability to act and entertain. For Allen there is more at stake than economic success. Like the Texan he wishes to be able to create his own sense of self-worth as is brilliantly shown in the homecoming sequence.

Allen returns home to Lynndale, a composite version of small towns all across America. He steps off the train wearing a new suit and fedora, much to the surprise of his mother, brother and other members of his welcoming home party who expect to see him as a returning hero in his uniform. He steps off the train and looks around the platform for his family. As he hears his mother call out his name, he stands with his arms wide open to embrace her. They share a brief, tender moment and then his brother, his boss, and a young woman named Alice interrupt them to also offer their congratulations and to welcome him home. The two brothers shake hands and as they do so Muni emphasizes the awkward feelings of the character by standing so that his shoulders are slightly hunched over. Allen then turns to see Alice, a girl who it is clear was much younger and looked different before he left for war, as is highlighted when he says to her, "Alice I wouldn't have known you." He stares into her eyes and studies her face intently as he smiles shyly. However when she tells him that she misses seeing him in his uniform

because “it made you look taller and more distinguished,” it startles him. Muni plays this part of the sequence between the young couple in such a way that there is a slight look of guilt and embarrassment on his face as his character reacts to the shock of hearing this young woman judge him as being less of a man because he is no longer wearing the uniform. Her comments and actions speak to how some Americans characterized military service at the time as something out of the ordinary that could then transform a simple man into a hero. For Alice, Clint, and Allen’s mother he is a hero but only when wearing the uniform.

In the following scene in the family home a variety of camera angles illustrate the distorted feelings about Allen’s future role. The brother, Clint, is framed in a medium long shot that is shot from a low angle thus allowing him to dominate the frame as he sits in a chair with arms outstretched and smiling as he says, “now let’s sit down and have a talk-tell us about the war.” In this moment LeRoy designs the speech and the actions to call attention to the way in which for Clint, and many other American men who didn’t serve and therefore could not understand the horrors and troubles that the soldiers had experienced, that returning home to a sense of “normalcy” was difficult. This camera set-up is used again when Clint pompously asks Allen, “what did you think of Mr. Parker [boss] being at the station?”

Allen is framed in a medium shot as he enters the parlor and sits down near his mother. He furrows his brows and looks over at his brother and says, “Clint, speaking of Mr. Parker, will you do me a favor?” He brother replies that he will and Allen continues

saying “well... would you talk to him for me—and tell him I am not going to take the job?”

Clint looks at his brother angrily and demands to know what he is talking about. Allen turns and looks at his mother and explains, “you see the army changes a fellow. It kind of makes you think differently. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life answering a factory whistle instead of a bugle call or be cooped up in a shipping room all day. I want to do something worthwhile. “ Allen’s service in the military has changed him as he no longer wants to work in an office in a factory and instead wishes to take charge of his labor and his destiny. His willingness to challenge the authority and expectations of middle class individuals like his brother and his boss show Allen to be an example of the self-made man.

He stands up, paces in a half circle and then with his hands in his pockets proclaims loudly “I don’t want to be a soldier of anything. You see ma I want to get out. Away from routine I’ve had enough of that in the army... I’ve been doing engineering work in the army and that’s the kind of work I want to do now. A man’s job,” he says as he raises one eyebrow and squares his shoulders. He continues, “where you can accomplish things. Where you can build, construct, create. Do things.” As he delivers these lines he is framed in a medium close-up and then there is a cut as he says “do things” so that his hands are visible as closes them into two fists which can be read as his display of masculine power and a determination to succeed.

It is clear in this sequence that this James Allen is not the same man who left for war. He is no longer willing to take orders and work for mere wages. This is a man who

wishes to take control of his labor but he decides to give up on the idea when his mother tearfully says, “besides, some other job might take you away from me again, Jim. I couldn’t bear that.” His mother’s words pierce his heart as his face is lit from the side highlighting the look of sadness and despair that are on his face as he realizes that his selfish desires may break his mother’s heart. He decides to return to his middle-class job as a clerk in the shipping room of the shoe factory just as he had done prior to the war. Here, Allen’s performance of a dynamic and masculine desire to control one’s own life is played against a mother’s need to love and protect her son, and a brother’s wish to maintain control within the household and the town, because as a minister he is seen to be a leading figure in the community. In both of these cases, Warner Bros. demonstrates the complexities of masculinities as an example of the self-made man and that of a tender, compassionate, confused soul that are emerging as a result of World War I and the Great Depression. The relationship between Allen and his mother represent an image of a mother-son bond where it is more important for Allen to attempt to return his old life at the factory and in the home, than to pursue his own desires. His mother is shown to be a caring figure but her love and respect are problematic because they cause him to give up his own ideas.

Despite being set in the mid 1920s the film incorporates elements of the crisis faced by American servicemen in 1932 as they struggled to find employment and earn the respect of the country. The scenes where Allen struggles to find respect for his service such as in the beginning when he returns home or later when he tries to pawn his medals so that he can buy food echo the plight of the veterans Bonus Army marchers who in

1932 had marched to Washington D.C. to urge Congress to pay out their wartime bonuses early. The original law called for bonuses to be paid in 1945 out to all the men who had served in World War I. However, many of the veterans believed that Congress should pay out the bonuses early so that the men could survive. This led to a confrontation between Hoover and the military, under the command of Douglas MacArthur and Dwight Eisenhower, on July 28th when the military was sent in to forcibly remove the veterans who had built a small tent city under the protection of the Washington D.C. municipal government. A small riot broke out when many of the men were evicted from an abandoned building that they had occupied. The military razed the camps and in the process injured hundreds of peaceful protestors including women and children.¹²⁶

MacArthur argued that the protestors were a mob that represented a threat to the capital stating that it was “beyond the shadow of a doubt” that the Bonus army “sought to seize control of the government.”¹²⁷ The fear of Revolution was in the air as the country struggled to find a voice of reason and someone who was able to offer some solution to the massive economic collapse. However, what these moments also illustrate is that there was an overwhelming fear in the country that men, as a result of mass unemployment, fear, and dissatisfaction were challenging the powers of capitalism and American liberal democracy through organizing political movements, that in turn could develop into active violent protests. In the course of *Fugitive*, it is made clear that what really makes Allen dangerous is his desire to control his destiny and an overwhelming desire to put his labor to use for the good of the entire society, instead of his family, employer or home town. In effect the film shows an image of America where the “American Dream” is dead and as a

result innocent men (heroes) are imprisoned for challenging the system. In Allen's case he is first imprisoned by his job and then labor on the chain gang.

Allen has been taught to think for himself, use his hands and work for a common goal overseas, but now that he is home he is forced to re-think his priorities and accept life within a capitalist system that functions as long as it can form types of "hegemonic masculinities" and in the process create "docile bodies." Allen is shown half heartedly working at his desk in the shoe factory as he stares out the window watching men work together to build a new bridge. Allen's boss tells him "looking at a construction gang doesn't make shoes. Better get busy...file those lading bills." Resigned to his fate as a shipping clerk he looks down at the papers and with little effort begins to file and read them. Allen is no longer the town hero but simply another man who must return to working in an office doing a job he does not enjoy and from which he receives no satisfaction. His loss of self-worth and desire is addressed when Allen again tells his mother and brother that, "I am different. I have seen things. I have been through hell! Here folks are concerned about my uniform—how I dance—I am out of step with everybody—all the while I was hoping to come back and start a new life—to be free—and again I find myself under orders—a drab routine—cramped, mechanical...I have grown in mind and body—that I have learned that life is more important than a medal on my chest or a stupid insignificant job" as they criticize his effort at the shoe factory. Allen's speech is that of a man who is no longer willing to accept a model of life where routine and heroism are celebrated. He convinces his mother that he must strike out on his own and find a job where he can build. His mother finally realizes that no matter how

hard she may try to make his life acceptable in the town that he will never again find happiness with them and she tearfully bids him goodbye. Throughout the film Allen faces one crisis after another as a result of his inability to accept the status quo. It is his desire to be the self-made man that ultimately costs him his humanity because once he has escaped from prison he will never be able to have a normal life because there is always the specter that someone or the police or the government are watching or following him.

Allen wanders the country trying to find work as a manual laborer or engineer after he quits his job as a shipping clerk. At first he finds a good job working construction but then he is told by the foreman that, "it's bad news. We're cutting down—and the new men will have to go." Allen stands and listens to the bad news with a blank expression then shrugs his shoulders and walks away. He is shown in the following shot trying to get work but is told that, "Last week I could of used you-but now I am full up" when Allen asks if the man could "use a good man." In each of the sequences where Allen is shown looking for work all across the country, it is clear that the film is addressing the concerns and frustrations of men in 1932 America rather than that of the 1920s. Regardless of Allen's willingness to work as a manual labor, a job that emphasizes the values of hard work and masculinity, in each case he is turned away because of the bad economic climate. Allen's predicament is indicative of the other service men, and it illustrates a vision of American masculinity where values like hard work, strenuous physicality, and the idea of the self-made man are in jeopardy as a result of a drastic economic climate.

Allen ends up in a flop house after failing to pawn his medals and being unable to find work. He meets another man who is also down on his luck in the flop house. The

man tells him he knows of a place where they can get a free meal. Allen goes along and the man tries to rob the diner just as the police enter. The other man is killed and Allen is left holding the money even though he had not wanted to take part in the robbery and like the owner of the diner was held at gunpoint. Allen tries to convince the police that he is not guilty but to no avail. He is then sentenced to ten years of hard labor on a chain gang for a crime he did not commit, and for the paltry sum of \$5.80.

On the chain gang Allen learns the harsh realities of life in prison as once more he tries to resist the authority of the prison's warden and the brutal jailers, who are photographed using medium long shots so that they tower over the other men in the frame. With their rifles nestled in their arms, these men represent the force of law and order but also the power of the warden who is using the prison for his own personal gain and vendettas. Of all the instances and situations in the film, it is the chain gang sequences that leave a lasting impression for these sequences possess a documentary quality to them in the way the camera depicts the brutality of life on the chain gang and in the camps. These images of the camps, the men and their labor are also reminiscent of the photographs that will be produced by the Farm security administration in the latter part of the decade in an effort to document the events and effectiveness of the New Deal. The film taps into the growing interest in documentary movements as something that could be trusted. John Grierson noted that the documentary film movement of the 1930s "might, in principle have been a movement in documentary writing, or documentary radio, or documentary painting."¹²⁸ James Agee celebrated the power of the camera to record fact noting that, "the camera can do what nothing else in the world can do...perceive, record,

and communicate in full unaltered power the peculiar kinds of poetic vitality which blaze in every real thing and which are in great degree lost to every other kind of art.”¹²⁹ The camera in *I am a Fugitive* records the image of American masculinity as brutal, violent, and lacking compassion for the plight of an innocent man even as he has served his country in war. Like many other early 1930s films this movie is marked by a sense of what Peter Stead calls the ‘sociological punch of the talkies’ whereby many of the studios attempted to address serious issues like the plight of American men and the Great Depression by relying on a sense of realism in the production of the films. Stead argues that films like *I am A Fugitive* can be read as example of Hollywood’s effort to produce politically inflected films at a time when much of the nation was politically active.¹³⁰

William Stott in his book *Documentary expression and Thirties America* argues that, “social documentary deals with facts that are alterable. It has an intellectual dimension to make clear what the facts are, why they came about, and how they can be changed for the better. It’s more important dimension, however is usually the emotional feeling the fact may move the audience to wish to change it.”¹³¹ *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* can be viewed as a type of “social documentary” because it acts as a “social documentary” that calls out to audiences to think about the condition of American men and the criminal justice system in an effort to create a society that is more progressive and inclusive of a variety of perspectives.

It is this idea of a progressive vision of America, which Nick Roddick argues is representative of the film and “the studio’s ideological commitment to basic American values and to the nascent policies of the New Deal” because the film speaks to the

dangers of living within a society that fails to recognize the plight of another human being and worries more about profits than ethics. Roddick reads the film as a pessimistic picture of Depression era America. What the film also highlights are the problems of living in a society where the success ethic and the idea of the self-made man as the sole source of American identity have led to the destabilization of the nation. America in the film has been reduced to a mass of men fighting an economic and political system that ignores their plight and the end results are either a life of crime or life in prison.

Allen is reduced to nothing more than a number in a mass of other men, both white and African American, whose sole purpose is to work hard and learn to accept the authority of the system. The courtroom sequences, the inspections mentioned earlier in the film, and the chain gang, which Allen is forced to join later combine to form an image of the American judicial system that is negative. Each of these institutions are shown to be examples of forces that act to form “docile bodies” that will in turn serve the positive requirements of the state and a capitalist system. However, where Allen had possessed some authority on the troop ship over the men and his own career, within the prison he becomes just another number within a mass of men who are treated uniformly under the lash and guns of the guards.

The film emphasizes that these are hard conditions for any man to bear, but for a man like Allen the prison is too much to bear because he is unwilling and unable to let someone else determine his masculine space, as is consistently highlighted throughout the film. It is in the prison camp where society tries to break down Allen’s resolve to resist the expectations and power of middle class men like his brother and upper class men like

his employer Mr. Parker. The end result is that he escapes but he is no longer an active member of society and in the process his humanity is destroyed.

The film charts his trajectory from the courtroom to the chain gang using a dissolve from the judge's gavel as he issues the sentence to the blacksmith's hammer on the prison farm as Allen is fitted for his chains. Muni emphasizes the weight of the chains by bending over as he walks. This shift in posture signals that the once upright and defiant Allen who sought to make a life for himself outside of his familial and societal Obligations shows that Allen is someone once again dictated to by routines and authority. To make this point, Allen experiences on his first day the full brunt of what his next ten years on the chain gang hold for him, if he is unable to resist his desire to be self-made and instead conform. When he is caught sleeping after the other men have awoken, one of the guards walks over to his bed, tosses off his blanket and pushes him off the bed. He then tosses part of Allen's chain towards his forehead, causing the skin on his forehead to crack open and a little blood to seep out. He will again face violence when on the rock pile, he stops working for a second, to wipe the sweat from his brow only to have one of the guards punch him with his fist and knock him to the ground. One of the older inmates explains the situation to him when he says, "in the first place you gotta get their permission to sweat."

Mervyn LeRoy's comments about directing Muni illustrate the difficulties faced by Warner Bros. as they attempted to craft Muni's screen masculinity as "hard-boiled." LeRoy states in his book that while directing Muni in the rock pile sequence he told him, "Paul you're not hitting them right. You're hitting them like a woman would. Put your

back into it.” This comment according to LeRoy so angered Muni that in the next take he hit the rocks so hard with the sledgehammer that he hit his foot with it and almost broke it.¹³² This version of the events reveals Muni to be prideful and also demonstrates his commitment to his performance.

Besides the scenes on the rock pile, the other moment in the film that serves to illustrate the horrors of resisting authority occurs when Allen critiques the warden’s methods and is beaten. The scene is designed in a long medium shot as Allen, shirtless, is marched past the row of other men in the bunkhouse. As he gets closer to the back cell where the whippings take place the camera shows the silhouette of the whip against the wall followed by the groans of a prisoner as he is beaten. In the next shot the camera is placed so that it frames Allen and the guards from a front angle through the bars as he looks on as the warden continues to beat the prisoner. Muni plays this scene so that Allen’s face displays a moment of anxiety that is quickly replaced by an expressionless look that show he has accepted his fate. It also illustrates that here is a man capable of taking a beating. The other prisoner is released so that his bloody back is visible and then Allen is led into the cell. Allen’s beating is not shown on camera, which is more effective in this case because it allows the audience to imagine the moment. However, the beating does serve to show how the warden uses extreme measures of ‘discipline’ to exert his authority over the prisoners.

There is a cut to a shot of one of the prisoners on their bed, and then the camera dollies along the edge of the men’s beds revealing their faces as they listen to the sound of the whip as it hits his flesh. Unlike the previous prisoner, though, Allen does not make

a sound. He simply takes the beating. He stands fully erect against the bars as the warden whips him unmercifully, then the camera pans away to reveal the horrified faces of the other men as they listen to the sound of the whip cutting into his flesh. Allen's ability to take the beating shows him to be a man of pure resolve, strength, and toughness even as he is beaten for continuing to challenge the warden's authority and questioning the methods of how the prison is run. Allen will take the beatings, but when he realizes that any hope he has for a future is linked to escape, he enlists the help of an African American man on the chain gang to break his chains with a sledgehammer. This scene is illustrative of Allen's "whiteness" as a means of separating himself from the African American man who earlier in the film is simply referred to as a "big buck." The man is shown in a long shot so that his strength and muscles are put on display whereas Allen is more often shown in medium and close-ups thereby placing the emphasis on his face, rather than his body. In effect what this scene shows is an example of "the possessive investment in whiteness" that Lipsitz discusses and Bernardi argues is emblematic of classical Hollywood. Allen's "whiteness" despite his criminality allow him the ability to escape and form a new life for himself because he is 'unmarked' by race.

In the final scene Allen's status as a self-made man and his position of "whiteness" are challenged when he emerges from the shadows outside of his former girlfriend, Helen's home as she drives her car into the garage. A voice off camera whispers "Helen, Helen," the voice startles her until she sees Jim step into the light. He quickly grasps her shoulders and pulls the two of them into the shadows. He tells her that even though he has escaped he is still not free because he can't keep a job, or find peace

of mind. He tells her that he must keep moving and that he hates everything except for her. He hears the sound of a car door which startles him. With tears in her eyes she asks him, ‘how do you live?’ He replies, ‘I steal.’ As Muni delivers the line he slowly slinks back into the shadows with a look of despair, and intense anxiety on his face. The bleakness of this ending can be read as a moment that captures the inability of so many men to find justice and self-confidence in 1932 America. By the end of the film Allen is beaten into submission and destroyed by the system because he has desperately tried to create a space for himself where his masculinity is self-determined. He is reduced to a cog within a societal system that emasculates him because he cannot work and lacks a voice that represents his feelings about America and its promise of a better life for everyone. That voice is yet to come because the world the film represents is that of Hoover.

The film was previewed for Warner Bros. employees, members of the press and other dignitaries on October 14, 1932 at the Wilshire and Western theaters in Los Angeles.¹³³ Early reviews for the film from *Variety* predicted that the film would be box office poison because the film “would not hold entertainment for the women or younger people.”¹³⁴ These fears that the film would not be profitable are displayed in the marketing campaign.

In the press book for the film exhibitors and advertisers are advised that the best way to make the film profitable were to emphasize two angles in the advertising. The first embraced “the straight male appeal through the use of grim stills and factual copy” that includes reproductions of fictional stories on James Allen in conjunction with wanted

posters. The second argued that, “the picture has a decided feminine interest. A simple character is depicted as a man who had 3 distinct affairs with women. This angle should not be overlooked despite the fact that it does not constitute the single theme of the picture.”¹³⁵ This along with the picture’s tag line, “I’ve seen men flogged, sweated, tortured” and images of whips, sweat boxes, and chains indicate that the studio wanted to appeal to women but ultimately believed that the picture would fare better with a male audience. This perception is supported in several of the reviews. The critic for *Motion Picture Herald* proclaimed that this “stark, unrelenting drama... will be red meat for any audience... with such vitality and attention to detail that in its gripping appeal the audience should overlook the bitterness of the story told.”¹³⁶ This reference to red meat speaks to the film’s overly masculine appeal, which is echoed in Rob Wagner’s review. He writes, “talk about roast beef cut thick this picture is sorghum and sowbelly and your enjoyment of it will depend upon your film dietary strength.”¹³⁷

The film opened in New York at the company’s flagship theatre, the Strand, on November 10, 1932 earning \$5100 in its first day screening. The film that was Warner Bros. most expensive to that point and that had been viewed as a real gamble in Hollywood by other studios had paid off. In an interoffice memo to all department heads dated November 11, 1932, Zanuck replicated the telegram he had received of the films performance: “Fugitive biggest Broadway hit in last three years stop thousands turned away from box office tonight with lobby delay held four hours stop... can’t refrain from wiring you tonight as Warner prosperity turns corner in two hundred nine other cities where Fugitive opened.”¹³⁸

It was not only the film that was celebrated by critics and audiences alike: it was also Muni's performance. Fredrick James Smith, critic for *Liberty*, noted that "when you saw that greatest of all gangster films 'Scarface', you carried away an unforgettable memory of Paul Muni in the chief role. This Muni has just turned in another sensational performance... as the chain gang victim."¹³⁹ John S. Cohen, the critic for the *New York Sun*, argued that, "Mr. Muni is touching, dignified, real and ideally cast. A powerful screen personality anyway he brings unquestioned acting ability...he is an asset to the talkies and there is every hope and belief that he is already a continuous and big star."¹⁴⁰ Louella Parsons, the gossip columnist and chief film writer for the *Los Angeles Examiner* noted that, "his role of the fugitive calls for some splendid acting and Mr. Muni gives it."¹⁴¹ Regina Crewe, critic for the *New York American* stated of Muni, " he creates a character vivid in all three dimensions-even four. His very silence shrieks... He burns his way through the story into the consciousness of the audience."¹⁴²

The box office success of the film, along with the positive reviews and its nomination for a Best Picture Academy award for 1932-1933 and Best actor award for Muni, signaled to Warner Bros. that the addition of Paul Muni to the studio had provided them with success and respectability. Muni was to become for Warner Bros. one of their most important players and as a result they would only cast Muni in films that matched the prestige quality of *I am a Fugitive*.

The masculinity that Warner Bros. created in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* for Muni was violent, aggressive, and self-centered. Yet, in the end it is these qualities of American masculinity that the film problematizes. From the script, to the camera angles,

and advertising Muni is transformed from a simple quiet man of the stage into a dynamic presence that electrifies the screen with his movements, the way he delivers his lines and his screen presence. Muni's success in this film would lead Warner Bros. to find other properties that allowed him to explore his acting range and later on develop roles for him where he played characters who were cerebral, strong in their convictions, and sensitive. It was this complicated and often conflicting image of Muni's screen masculinity that Warner Bros. consistently faced in the construction of Muni's screen persona and stardom.

Ethnic Masculinities in *Bordertown*

In Muni's performances in *Bordertown* and *Black Fury* he was able to create two very distinct and realistic performances of ethnic masculinities through his commitment to research, the ways in which he altered his body movements and vocal patterns. The roles of Johnny Ramirez and Joe Radek demonstrate how Hollywood attempted to deal with issues of race, class, and ethnicity in a country where "whiteness" was viewed as the normal mode of American identity. These roles allowed him to display his range of abilities and also spoke to his need to act in films and roles that addressed larger social issues such as racism in the case of *Bordertown* and labor struggles in *Black Fury*.

These films were shot back to back in 1934, a year that was a high water mark for Muni for two reasons. First, he acted in multiple films in a single year for the first time. Second, he would receive a new contract that gave him approval of story, role, script, and script, sole star billing onscreen and in all advertising, consent of loan-outs and an increase in salary to \$50,000 dollars a picture. In addition the contract would limit the

number of personal appearances and interviews and ensured that any script revisions or re-writes had to be submitted to Muni two weeks prior to shooting.¹⁴³ Muni signed the new contract on March 16, 1934 committing himself to Warner Bros. for the next seven years. In offering this lucrative new contract to Muni, Warner Bros. demonstrated their belief in Muni's stardom and solidified his importance to the company thus illustrating that Warner Bros. was committed to other forms of screen masculinity than that of the "city boy" that Sklar argues was the dominant type of masculinity on the lot.

The first picture Muni was to make under the new contract was *Bordertown* based on Carrol Graham's novel *Border Town*. Yet, in the screenplay written by Laird Doyle and Wallace Smith the title was changed to a single word because Warner Bros. believed that the film¹⁴⁴ would be more commercial under a single title. This film marked the first time that Muni would work with another director besides Mervyn LeRoy. Archie Mayo was assigned the directorial duties and a young Bette Davis, who was a Warner contract player at the time and not yet a star was set to play the crazed and dangerous love interest Marie Roark. The film was budgeted for a 30 -day shoot and cost \$365,000 to produce with the largest percentage of the budget going towards Muni's salary of \$72,222.

In the film Muni plays Johnny Ramirez a poor Mexican American in Los Angeles who graduates from Pacific Night Law School after having worked during the day as a mechanic. Johnny is convinced that he will be a great lawyer, earning lots of money but his clients are all poor people from his neighborhood. Johnny loses his first case against socialite Dale Elwell (Margaret Lindsay) because he is poorly prepared for the case. He loses his temper and punches the opposing counsel Brook Manville (Gavin Gordon)

believing that he and his client a poor Mexican farmer have been the victims of discrimination. Johnny is disbarred for his violent actions. Johnny flees Los Angeles leaving behind his mother and hitchhikes to a bordertown in Mexico where winds up as a bouncer in a casino run by Charlie Roark (Eugene Palette). Johnny becomes a valuable asset to the business and Charlie makes him a partner in the club. However, Roark's young wife Marie (Bette Davis) takes a romantic interest in Johnny and murders her husband by locking him in the garage after he has fallen asleep in a drunken stupor while the car motor is running. Roark's death is ruled an accident by the coroner and the Mexican authorities. Marie convinces Johnny to take over running the business and he decides that they should build a bigger, fancier establishment. On the night of the grand opening of the club Johnny, the rich society girl and her male escort who was also her lawyer in the trial that cost Johnny his chance at practicing law. The girl playfully flirts with Johnny, who misunderstanding her attention, falls in love with her. Marie in a fit of anger goes to the police and tells them that she killed her husband with Johnny's help and they are both arrested. While on trial Marie has a mental breakdown and her testimony is ruled invalid and Johnny is freed. Before heading to Los Angeles he then returns to the casino. In Los Angeles he proposes to Dale who mocks him for loving her because they are of two different classes. He tries to kiss her as he drives her to a party, but she jumps out of the vehicle only to be killed when she runs in front of an oncoming car. Johnny tries to atone for his actions by selling the casino and donating the proceeds to a school for underprivileged Mexican American children and the formation of a law school. The film ends with Johnny attending church with his mother whom he has returned to in an

attempt to atone for his rash behavior. In the church he confesses his sins and tells the Father that from now on he will stay amongst his people and try to help them.

Muni's portrayal of a young Mexican American man who struggles against the forces of prejudice and economic privilege illustrates how "on film Mexicans were presented in quite favorable light..." in an effort to use Mexicans as models of people fighting for democracy who in turn provide the lower and working classes with a voice and an identity onscreen according to Hanson.¹⁴⁵ In *Bordertown* Johnny Ramirez is used to illustrate the difficulties that resulted from being viewed as ethnic or "raced" in America in the 1930s. Johnny's struggles to achieve respectability and wealth display how "whiteness" functions to limit the potential assimilation for some groups on the basis of class, race, and gender.

Roddick argues that the film was a star vehicle designed for Muni who was known for playing minority roles. He notes that "the treatment of a radical subject did not necessarily mean a socially conscious movie: the basic conservatism of the narrative form and of the studio system which generated that form could as easily tip the balance away from a 'message' as towards one."¹⁴⁶ Even as actors like Muni attempted to make 'message films' Hollywood was more invested in their persona than their politics, thus they sought to reduce the political edge of these movies while also trying to satisfy the demands of their performers who viewed themselves as actors rather than stars.

The film is also important in that it speaks to a willingness to address issues of domestic racism through the lens of masculinities. Johnny Ramirez is depicted throughout the film as an example of a man who has bought into the American ideology

of the self-made man, but it is his acceptance of this idea that is shown to be dangerous because he is unwilling to accept his mother's suggestions or those of his community. Johnny is shown to be a savage man who is only looking out for his own self-interests as he struggles to gain wealth, power, and respectability. Yet, this film ultimately depicts an image of racialized masculinities that is conservative and at times prejudicial. However, Muni's role as Johnny represents one of the few attempts in film during the thirties to address issues of race in connection with the New Deal. Hanson argues that the cycle of colonial films such as *The Last Outpost* (1935), *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), *Gunga Din* (1939) and *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939) attempted to address the issue of race but in a conservative vein where racial characters were shown as either villains or subservient to the greater needs and desires of the white heroes. Hanson reads these films in connection with the growing racial animosity that was occurring in America in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression especially in the Deep South. For Hanson these films and any discussion of race in Hollywood films of the 1930s are connected to the struggles faced by Roosevelt and his administration to try and tackle the issue of racism and racial inequality.¹⁴⁷

Yet Hanson only focuses on adventure and historical films as an indication of how race was tackled by Hollywood, omitting any discussion of a film like *Bordertown* that attempts to portray domestic race issues. Like much of California, Los Angeles in the 1930s was paralyzed by a fear of migrant labor, especially those who had fled the Midwest after the Dust bowl. However as Kevin Starr documents in his history of California and Los Angeles in the 1930s *Endangered Dreams* one of the key issues faced

by the city and the state was the growing influx of Mexicans. He points out that by 1930 that there were 368,013 Mexicans living in the state making up 6.5 % of the total population. These Mexicans “lived in isolated, well-defined urban pockets, the barrio, or in isolated settlements, the colonial which could run the gamut from a town or village serviced by its own grocery store, movie theater, pool hall, and chapel to a collection of isolated shacks at the end of a remote canyon. Racial, religious, and cultural prejudice, together with the language barrier and class disaffinities...kept the Mexican out of mainstream life.”¹⁴⁸ When the Mexican did enter mainstream discussions it was in connection with issues of labor organizing and the consistent call for equality of working and living conditions throughout the state. The constant fear and lack of knowledge about Mexican and Mexican American’s quality of life during the Depression are represented in *Bordertown*.

In the introduction to *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* Michael Uebel notes that, “racial maleness is the origin as well as the product of local transactions between the social and the psychic, of negotiations among popular forms of representation and political ideologies, and of technologies of performance.”¹⁴⁹ He further states that “reading men in the context of race is thus a dialectical intervention: an attempt to understand men at the (construction) site of specific power relations, each relation mediating the reproduction and transformation of another.”¹⁵⁰ Reading Muni’s performance and the film as an indication of ‘raced masculinities’ and ‘the possessive investment of whiteness’ illustrates the difficulties inherent in trying to discuss a single

aspect of American masculinities. It also provides yet another instance where Muni's mutability served his interests and the economic ones of the studio.

The opening shots of the film establish location and local color—Mexican jumping beans in a window, jalapeno peppers in a restaurant display window, a sign saying 'English Spoken here.' It is clear that this is Olvera Street, the heart of the "Mexican capital" as Los Angeles came to be known during the 1930s because it contained the largest concentrated population of Mexican Americans. That population increased from 33,644 in 1920 to 97, 116 by 1930.¹⁵¹ This increase in the population of Mexican Americans led to fears that these Mexicans were going to take away jobs from white American workers. In fact, John L. Lewis the head of the American Federation of Labor argued that cheap Chicano labor would damage the earnings of American workers and worked to get immigration from Mexico banned altogether.¹⁵² While Lewis represented elements of the Progressive cause in America, it is striking that his fears and views were similar to those of men like Martin Dies (who would later become the founding chairman of the House Subcommittee on Un- American Activities) who also believed that the only way to combat unemployment and the Depression was to expel all Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans from the country. It is into this climate of fear that the film was released and in several key scenes these fears of Mexican Americans trying to assume a place within the ranks of respectable "white" society are explicitly considered and rejected.

When the camera settles on a shot of plaque advertising the 'Pacific Night Law School' in Spanish and English; a tilt down of the camera reveals the same sign in French

and Chinese as well which indicates that despite the progressive vision of the school that it lacks the quality to actually provide people with professional law degrees. The camera then tracks up the stairs of the building and dissolves inside to a graduation ceremony where the students are singing “My country ‘tis of thee” in a variety of accents. The camera pans over the faces revealing that in this room there are white men, Chinese, African Americans, and Mexican Americans like Johnny Ramirez. A judge, the guest speaker functions to provide background on Johnny’s past and it also serves as a lecture on the nature of American masculinity and the idea of an American dream. The judge uses Johnny’s story as the basis for his valediction to all the young men present and the audience. When he begins the speech he is framed in a medium straight angle shot so that it appears as if he is looking directly at the audience as well as the men in the room. He tells them,

It is my privilege and honor to address you gentlemen as you step toward the new careers for which you have toiled, suffered, and sacrificed. Your fathers, mothers, and friends may well be proud of your courage, your determination, your, will to succeed. Your applause must be for these young men not for me. For such young men as one whose history I happen to know who sits among the graduates.

Because he had the courage to lift himself above his environment to overcome handicaps that were certain to make him a criminal. I reveal no secrets when I say to you that this young man was the tough guy of a tough neighborhood. At an age when most young boys were in high school, he was a child problem. A problem to which his parents had no solution but they didn’t need it.

The judge's address is illustrative of how "whiteness" impacts the formation and understanding of race relations in America. The judge believes his speech to be celebratory of the achievements of these young men despite their racialized identities. However his words are tinged with racism when he explains that Johnny was able to "lift himself above his environment" and avoid becoming a criminal. The indication is that because of his status as lower class and his race as Mexican American that Johnny is predisposed to a life of crime and violence.

The judge smiles and points towards Muni's character, which is followed by a medium close-up of Muni with slick black hair, dark skin, dark rings around his eyes, and a look of pride on his face. The combination of the make-up with Muni's steely gaze quickly inform the viewer that this is a form of "raced masculinity" and that he is also a man of fierceness. The judge continues his celebration of the men and Johnny in particular pointing out that,

This boy solved his own problems, he realized his opportunities and duties as an American citizen and with that realization came ambition which has led him to toil at the hardest manual labor by day so that he might study by night and arrive at this point in his career at which he stands now.

The use of the term "boy" is another indication of the Judge's racist views because it is clear in looking at Muni and the other men that these are adult men and not young boys. In using the term "boy" the Judge demeans Johnny's accomplishment and furthermore makes an argument that it is only when these young men have embraced a vision of America based on ambition rather than cooperation that they have achieved success. In

effect, he is basing his assessment of the men on a belief in the 1930s that ‘raced masculinities’ were in different than white masculinities because these men lacked ambition, will power, and a work ethic that would lead to success.¹⁵³

The room bursts into applause recognizing Johnny’s achievements as well as those of the other men present. A montage of diplomas being awarded follows this moment. The awarding of the diplomas and the judge’s speech sell the idea of the self-made man as the ideal form of American masculinity especially when he uses phrases such as “this boy solved his own problems, realized his opportunities” and then discusses the necessity of hard work.

The celebratory scenes of a party in the Ramirez home follow the graduation ceremony. In a long shot Johnny is shown laughing and playing a mandolin as he sings for his guests. This image is used to contrast the earlier image of Ramirez as a serious and fierce man. Johnny’s problems and his past are again referenced at the party when a friend offers a toast, but Johnny’s glass is filled with water rather than wine because Johnny has stopped drinking believing that it was the cause of his past criminal and violent behavior.

In a medium shot Johnny gives a speech, which echoes much of what the judge had initially stated, but what is telling about Johnny’s speech is his use of colloquial phrases and his celebration of Abraham Lincoln. Johnny’s mother is in the left edge of the frame which acts as a visual cue to the closeness of this mother and son. He delivers the speech with a look of pride and smiles broadly as he stands fully erect thereby dominating the frame and the scene.

“Well thanks everybody. All I got to say is this: there was a whole lot of talk at graduation today about hard work and study. Sure it was tough, but then look at Abraham Lincoln (Muni grins and shrugs his shoulders when he says this line). He worked hard, didn’t he? He studied night too didn’t he? You bet! Allright I done it, I mean I did it like Lincoln and I am going to keep on being like Lincoln... it’s like the judge said this is a land of opportunity and in America man can lift himself up by his boot straps. All he needs is strength and a pair of boots (Muni smiles and motions towards the people in the room off camera). And I got them. I am quitting my job at the service station and I am going to open my law office and I am going to keep on working hard. And someday I could be judge of the Supreme Court (he pauses) and I am gonna do it. As he finishes the line there is a cut to an long shot showing the room, the happy guests and their reactions to one of their own who represents all their hopes and dreams to be more than exploited labor that are dashed by the end of the film.

The reference to Lincoln in the speech is illustrative of the importance of Abraham Lincoln as a historical figure during the Great Depression. Morris Dickstein in his book *Dancing in the Dark* notes that Lincoln became the epitome of the common-man hero and was the subject of several books including Carl Sandberg’s multivolume biography. For Dickstein the rise in the interest of Lincoln signified a growing desire during the Depression to recapture and reform an American society that celebrated the ideal of the self-made man in connection with communitarian ideals.¹⁵⁴ The reference to Lincoln also

connects Johnny's struggles in the film to those encountered by African Americans during the Civil War as they too struggled to define their own existence.

The disparities between race, class, and justice are painfully shown in a scene where two young white people dressed in evening attire as they exit a nightclub in the Mexican district of the city. They crash their car into Manuel's truck, an old Mexican American farmer who is one of Johnny Ramirez's oldest friends. The crash it is indicated is the result of their irresponsible behavior and the fact that both had been drinking. This moment in the film serves to destroy the more optimistic events that had preceded it and illustrates the realities that Johnny Ramirez must face, as he learns when he tries to represent Manuel in court.

The courtroom scenes where Johnny defends his friend Manuel demonstrate that even though the Pacific Law School has awarded Johnny a diploma his abilities and understanding of the law are incomplete illustrating that even as he struggled to work and study, that the education he has received is one that is inadequate. He tells the judge, "just one more point", then points towards his client and the defendant. "I found out that the defendant carries no insurance on her machine. She has had so many accidents that no insurance company will accept her as a risk." As these lines are spoken there is a cut to a medium shot of Dale, in her fashionable suit as she halfheartedly listens to the events while doodling on a pad of paper. This is followed by a medium close-up shot of a pair of hands shading the hair on a sketch of Ramirez.

"I object your honor" a voice says uniformly from off camera. "Objection sustained."

In a medium close-up the image of the judge is shown to audiences as he tells Ramirez that “former charges against the defendant however evident and well founded can form no part of the present hearing.” Johnny in a medium shot stares in partial anger at the judge and rolls his eyes.

“Then I’ll move on to another point”, he says matter of factly as he examines his case notes. He then clasps his hands together then raises the left hand and points toward the ceiling stating that, “it is almost sure that at the time of this accident the defendant had been drinking. Was kind of drunk”, he says with shrug of his shoulders.

The opposing attorney shown in a medium shot stands up and calmly says, “I object. The allegation so presumptuously advanced by my learned opponent is no part of this matter. Furthermore there are no witnesses to testify to the condition of my client.”

“Objection sustained, the judge says causing Johnny to look bewildered by the turn of events.

“But your honor I am only trying to prove...”

“The court recognizes what the counsel is trying to do. However counsel should understand that this is not a law school and he should not come before it without proper preparation of his case.” As the judge delivers this statement he is shown in a straight angle medium shot so that it appears as if he is lecturing the audience along with Ramirez thus making it feel like we are being lectured to in an attempt to have us identify with Ramirez.

In a medium shot, now confused and disheartened Ramirez says, “but how can I present my case when he keeps on objecting?” He points toward opposing counsel.

The opposing lawyer rises and with a smile says “I object.”

Ramirez raises his voice and gestures in a slashing motion with his hands in frustration and asks “is that your way of being a lawyer to say I object like a parrot?” Muni plays these transitions in the scene so that they indicate the tension and developing anger of the character using the motions of his hands and the gruffness of his voice.

The opposing attorney rises and smugly says in a medium shot. “I object if your honor please. Counsel’s remarks about my failings are irrelevant, incompetent, and immaterial.”

“Objection sustained, the judge says as he is shown playing with a pencil indicating his growing annoyance at the proceedings.

“Don’t you want to hear the truth? Don’t you want to see justice done?, Ramirez asks emphatically with raised voice as he points toward Manuel. Don’t you realize that this poor old man’s truck was wrecked by this reckless drunken driver... his livelihood has been taken away by a spoiled dame because her old man is rich? What’s more important to this court a bunch of technicalities or the truth?, he asks with a sneer.

There is a cut to a shot of the hands seen previously and it is revealed the hands belong to a woman. The drawing that had previously been shown is now complete and underneath it the word SAVAGE is written in bold letters. The indication is that Ramirez fascinates the young woman because of his passion, good looks and the possibility that he is dangerous not his desire for justice as a lawyer.

The judge dismisses the case and after explaining to Ramirez that the court is interested in the truth but his methods are not in keeping with the practice of law.

Ramirez is shown to be a man who seeks justice but who is unfamiliar with the procedures and practices of the courtroom. The judge points out his inadequacies and the problems with a system where cheap night schools turn out lawyers who are ill prepared for the profession when he tells him, "In failing to prepare your case properly you have failed in your duty to your client. Not only that but you have been in contempt of court. For which I fine you the sum of...no I better make it 25 dollars," the judge determines after looking at Ramirez's brief case and suit. This scene illustrates how "whiteness" has impacted the fortunes of Ramirez's chance at being a lawyer. Whereas white people are able to receive an excellent education and training in the law Ramirez's racial make-up that of Mexican American and his status as lower class prohibit him from entering established universities and law schools. The Judge, Dale, and her counselor consider his training second-rate however their own feelings of superiority lead them to feel pity for Johnny and his client.

"I haven't got 25 dollars," Ramirez tells the judge as he realizes that he has been beaten by the system. The opposing counsel in an effort to illustrate his superiority over the situation recommends the fine be suspended, which the judge agrees to and then ends the hearing.

The young woman takes pity on Ramirez and his client offering to give his client two hundred dollars after the hearing. Her friend and attorney angrily tells her that she cannot do this because it is the same as an admission of guilt and if they wanted Manuel and Ramirez could seek criminal charges against her. She shrugs off his advice and

convinces Ramirez to take the money, until her attorney says, “what’s the good of a promise from a cheap shyster... why he’ll be blackmailing you.”

Ramirez in a fit of rage punches the man with an upper cut to the jaw and he falls to the floor. The two men wrestle around on the floor as several other men try to break up the fight, even as Ramirez is attempting to choke the other lawyer. Finally the men pull Ramirez off the lawyer and in a medium close-up the audience is shown an image of Ramirez with his hair and clothes disheveled and cursing in Spanish. This moment is used to reconnect him to the idea of the SAVAGE that Dale celebrated in her sketch and it also shows that Ramirez’s masculinity in the film is constructed around violence and rage rather than rational thought or compassion; themes, which are further illustrated in the conversation that follows when Ramirez tries to defend his behavior in the judge’s chambers.

Ramirez believes that he is the victim of racial and class prejudice. He tells the judge “you ain’t balling me out because I smacked that big wind bag. It’s because you don’t want a guy like me who comes from where I do to get a break.” For Ramirez the events in the courtroom, the judge’s tenor, and the disdain of the other lawyer signal to him that despite all his hard work, there will never be a real chance for him to rise from the lowly ranks of a laborer to something more. The judge tells Ramirez that, “it isn’t a question of where you come from... it isn’t a question of nationality or creed. It’s you. You are a ruffian at heart. Cheap, bad tempered, brutal and you could be that in any country in the world. Unable to hold your own in a match of professional intelligence you resort to brute force.” The judge’s statements deflate the charges of racism because the

judge is shown to be the voice of reason and thus leads the audience to believe that Ramirez's anger is misplaced and improper in the circumstance, despite the reality that Manuel and Ramirez both have been victimized by a system that rewards the interests of white masculinity in the person of Dale, who wins her case using her wealth and knowledge of the system while ignoring those of "raced masculinities." In effect the film illustrates how white society is able to remain the dominant force through education, wealth, and a view that "whiteness" is more normal than 'raced' bodies. Richard Dyer explains that what allows "whiteness" to achieve dominance within society as a means of representation is the feeling that "because white is not really anything, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything—white is no color because it is all colors."¹⁵⁵ Thus in *Bordertown* the film does not use white bodies to address the problems of race but instead focuses on "raced masculinities" that are depicted as either violent and savage or simplistic and ill equipped to deal with the world.

Ramirez realizes that the Judge will support the opposing counsel's efforts to see him disbarred for his actions. He is shown in a medium close-up with a look of sadness and defeat on his face as he comes to understand that his dream to be as great a lawyer as Abraham Lincoln is not to be. Rather than take out his frustration and fight the system Johnny transfers his anger to his community as represented by the local Priest. He tells the Father about what has transpired and how he feels that he has been discriminated against by the system. He tells Ramirez in warm and loving tones that, "To find one's self that is to find real contentment. You will understand this my son when you are older."

The Father's comments illustrate the belief that the best way to handle issues of race in America is to simply accept one's position and work hard. Ramirez still angry tells the Father that, "in a nice way you are telling me to go back to washing cars or digging ditches or being a farm laborer." To which the Father calmly replies "surely there is no disgrace in such occupations. Many a man has found happiness in them. Our fathers were of the soil. They were good men." For the priest labor of the hands and sweat is viewed as more respectable and protects his people from the chaos and danger that he believes is the result of ambition and a desire to be assimilated into the white world.

Johnny then directly addresses the discussion of labor and manhood when he tells the Father that, "I am only a man, not even a gentleman, but a man. I am going to take what I want from the world." His statement is startling but it also recalls Muni's earlier characterization of Tony Camonte and his struggles to find respectability and self worth through violence and greed and the horrors of injustice faced by the character of James Allen in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. However, unlike previous criminal characters in the gangster cycle Johnny Ramirez has attempted to assimilate only to be turned away for the color of his skin and his economic situation. He explains to the Father that, "I was patient for five years. Studying, working, starving to make a gentleman of myself. And for what so those white people who call themselves gentlemen and aristocrats could make a fool out of me. Break me and bar me from court... I will make the chance for myself (Muni speaks these lines with a sense of anger and passion). I am going to climb. I am going to get power, and money, he says with fierce intensity and his hair askew as he looks into the Father's eyes. He then explains that he must have

money “because I lost my first law case the other fella had thirty thousand dollars worth of education and I had a five and dime one. They laughed at me in court because I didn’t have money enough to pay my fine... And he thought he could insult me like a servant. Not because he was a gentleman but because his old man had a million dollar bank roll and I didn’t. Don’t you see Father, money was what made the difference and I am going to get money!”

The desire for money and respectability is echoed in Johnny’s conversation with his mother as he packs his things to leave home. She watches with tears in her eyes as he packs a suitcase. He tells her that, “the people who love me are poor. They are dirt like me and I want to be more than dirt. A guy is entitled to anything he can grab and I am for grabbing.” Johnny’s criticism of his own family and friends reveals his fear and hatred of being associated with these people. He has bought into the vision of an America where money and power are all that matter and it is for this reason that he desperately tries to separate himself from his heritage.

Johnny’s heritage as a representative of “savage” and exotic masculinity are shown later in the film when Johnny now a successful nightclub owner meets up with Dale and her lawyer friend when they show up for the grand opening of the club. Dale resumes her flirtation with Johnny. He reminds her of the “savage” remark and with a smile she says, “I’ll take my chances. Come along savage”—she takes his arm and they walk across the nightclub to a table where her companions sit. The two of them dance and then Dale returns to the table where her society friends inquire about her relationship with Ramirez. “Out of what cave did you lure that fascinating brute?” They all laugh and

Dale says, "It's the prehistoric in me. Amusing isn't it." A female voice replies from off camera, "I imagine he could be very dangerous." She laughs and says, "if he couldn't, it will be a great disappointment to me." Her comments alongside those of her companions illustrate that for these people of money and society a sexual fling with a man like Ramirez represents the possibility for an intense, even violent liaison that will be fun because of its forbidden and perhaps violent quality. Ramirez's 'raced masculinity' thus is shown to be the opposite of white masculinity that is depicted as normative. The connection between violence, masculinity, sexuality, and race Bederman argues is an inherent component of the American idea of "civilization. It is the juxtaposition of civilization with primitive/savage behavior, which she argues allowed for the development of American manhood."¹⁵⁶

Throughout the rest of the film Johnny believes that he can overcome his race and his past because of his new economic status. Yet, Charlie's wife, Marie, who has murdered in order to be with him tells him that, "Just because you get your neck washed you think you are a gentleman. No one can make you that. You are riff raff..." Dale rejects him using the same logic after Johnny is cleared of murder and he reveals that he loves her. He tells her "I love you... I got dough, lots of it... you are class. I want to marry you." She looks at him strangely and then says, "you can't be serious. Marriage isn't for us. It's not even to be discussed... you belong to a different tribe savage," she says flirtatiously.

"A different tribe, he echoes her statement in shock. You mean?"

“I mean there is no such thing as equality. Now please don’t be annoying.” As she says these words her body language and demeanor change so that the truth behind her actions and feelings towards Ramirez are finally revealed. Johnny grabs her arm and pulls her close to him and stares into her eyes. He squeezes her arm forcefully and says “Equality. Why didn’t you say that the first time I kissed you? You treated me plenty like an equal the night... you made a play for me. I thought you were decent and nice, I thought you loved me... you think you can wash me off?”

“Let go! You are hurting me, you brute,” Dale screams. Her dream of his savagery now had been manifest.

“Brute!” Johnny exclaims in anger and disappointment. She then breaks away from him and he calls after her as he chases her down the street. She is killed before his very eyes and in an extreme close-up of Muni’s face the light from the car headlights is shown indicating the horror that he has witnessed. It is clear that Johnny holds himself responsible for her death.

The film ends with Johnny back in his mother’s arms as he looks at the Father and tells him that his future is “back where I belong, with my own people.” Johnny is transformed from a violent, ambitious man to a quiet, peaceful soul as a result of Dale’s death and his awareness that his actions have damaged his relationship with his mother and his community. They then walk out of the Church as the picture fades to black. Johnny has given up his desire to be more than a Mexican American he has accepted his fate as “raced masculinity.” The conservative ending of the film like some aspects of the New Deal ignores the plight of race even as it attempts to offer what was believed to be a

progressive and socially conscious look at a group of people who had previously been ignored or pushed to the margins. In the end, the film offers a negative portrayal of ‘raced masculinities’ that adhere to more traditional notions of masculinity like the self-made man and demonstrates the necessity to consider the role of economics in the formation of ‘raced masculinities’ in America in the 1930s.

Unlike Muni’s previous films, *The World Changes* (1933) and *Hi Nellie* (1934) *Bordertown* was very successful at the box office and ran for two weeks at the Warner’s newly refurbished Strand theatre.¹⁵⁷ The reason for the film’s success was attributed to the combination of Paul Muni with Bette Davis. This combination was touted in the marketing of the film. One tag line stated “The Beautiful Hell-Cat of Human Bondage flings a challenge to the dynamic Star of I am A Fugitive! Heaven Help Her when she Finds out What a Man She’s Talking To! Another an ad showed Bette Davis saying, “Brother You’ll wish you were Back in the Chain Gang Before I get Through with You.”¹⁵⁸ These ads and taglines show how Warner Bros. was involved in a campaign to build up Bette Davis’s stardom by representing her as a dominant female figure who can control a man like Muni. The ad sells an image of masculinity that is savage and violent while also being submissive. These ad quotes and images show that Warner Bros. was intent on marketing the films two stars in conjunction with their previous roles James Allen (Muni) and Mildred Rogers (Bette Davis) and the linkage of violence, suffering, and depravity depicted in these two films. The ads sell Muni and Davis as characters capable of brutality and suffering.

The reviews for the film were also extremely positive about Muni's performance. *Variety* stated that "Paul Muni in his best screen performance... as a Mexican this time does it realistically and as effectively as he has done Italian and other characterizations in the past."¹⁵⁹ Jerry Hoffman writing for the *Los Angeles Examiner* noted that, "we don't see Paul Muni very often. When we do, however, he manages to make a lasting impression. Here we see the versatile Paul as an ambitious Mexican lad intense, anxious to rise above the peon class in which he was born."¹⁶⁰ Hoffman's review addresses his respect for Muni as an actor who is capable of creating characters that leave a lasting impression and shows that Hoffman connects Muni's portrayal of Johnny Ramirez to a discussion of his race and class. Andre Sennenwald *The New York Times* primary film critics echoes Hoffman's point about Muni's absence from the screen in his review. He noted that, "among the decided advantages of Bordertown is the circumstance that it brings Paul Muni back to the Broadway screen after a discouraging absence, permitting him to scrape the nerves in the kind of taut, and snarling role at which he is so consummately satisfying. This somber chronicle of a raffish and embittered Mexican immerses itself racily in the crude, violent, gaudy life of the bordertowns...the Warner Brothers have produced it in the lively style of screen realism, which distinguishes their melodramas. Finally Mr. Muni brings to the photoplay his great talent for conviction and theatrical honesty, making it seem an impressive account of angry gutter ambitions."¹⁶¹ The more conservative reviewer P.S. Harrison in his weekly newsletter claimed that, "Parts of the picture are demoralizing, but the production treatment given to the entire story is so fine that one loses sight of the unpleasant parts of it...what saves the picture,

however, is the fact that the chief character in the demoralizing parts is not the hero, and he, although embittered because he had been disbarred unjustly, does not proceed to wreak vengeance upon those responsible for the injustice against him.”¹⁶² The reviews and the ads focus on the star performances and a battle of the sexes rather than discuss the issues of race, economics, and masculinity, which the film addresses thereby illustrating that the reviewers were more interested in viewing the film as either a crime picture or star vehicle rather than as an example of Warner Bros. social conscious filmmaking as film scholars and historians have since labeled the film.

Explosive Masculinities and the Wagner Act

Warner Bros. began filming Muni’s fifth picture for the studio that was initially titled *Black Hell* on October 19, 1934 and it was completed on December 4, 1934. It was originally budgeted for a 32 day shoot but took 38 days to complete because of a fire that broke out on the Burbank lot in December of 1934.¹⁶³ The film cost \$436,167 to produce. Muni earned \$61,111 dollars for his work on the film as a disgruntled Polish miner who has been betrayed by love.¹⁶⁴ The film focuses on the issues of class and romance more than Muni’s character’s ethnicity.

Stead argues that “*Black Fury* could only have been made at Warner Bros, a studio which had firmly aligned with Roosevelt and the New Deal and which quite clearly believed that there was a market for films which dealt with topical issues” and “matters of social justice.”¹⁶⁵ The film was partly based on the murder of a coal miner by company police in Imperial, Pennsylvania in 1929, with an original story by Judge M.A. Musmanno, who had presided over the case and Muni had corresponded about the

possibility of making a film about the events. Muni who was constantly on the look out for politically active or socially suitable themes along with his brother-in-law Abem Finkel lobbied the studio to transform the story into a film. Jack Warner and Hal Wallis decided to allow Muni to develop the story into a film when they recognized that the film could be marketed as “a red-blooded drama of life in the raw, of men and primitive passions made desperate by hunger and deprivation, a tale of strife, conflict, of greed and self-sacrifice, of love and devotion, and above all, a stirring plea for human justice” that connected the film back to their motto of ‘educate and entertain.’¹⁶⁶ Even more important was the fact that this film would again allow them to sell Muni and his brand of aggressive screen masculinity that combined strength of convictions with a dynamic persona.

Still Warner Bros. sought to downplay the Judge’s story and focus on it as a vehicle for Muni as is illustrated in the following memo from Jack Warner to Publicity downplayed Musmanno’s involvement in the film

In all publicity on the Muni picture, it would be advisable *not to mention* the name of Judge Musmanno. Musmanno has been a liberal lawyer and judge for years and is a sworn enemy of the big coal companies. We will undoubtedly have to send a camera crew to the mines to get long shots, process plates, etc. And if it is known that Musmanno has any connection with our story, the coal companies will absolutely refuse to let us photograph on their property and otherwise refuse to cooperate with us. After we’ve got all the shots we need in Pennsylvania, after the picture is completed, we can mention Musmanno’s connection with the story

as much as we please. In fact, his endorsement will have definite box-office value.¹⁶⁷

Muni acquired the rights to the play *Bohunk* in January of 1933 in an attempt to expand the story material.¹⁶⁸ The screenplay using these two sources was once again written by Muni's brother-in-law Abem Finkel along with Carl Erickson.

The film was the only Warners picture of the decade to address the question of unionization and industrial unrest. It attempts to address these controversial issues and their impact on American masculinity. Unlike in *I am a Fugitive* here we see images of America as determined by Roosevelt's policies such as the Wagner Act of 1935. The passage of the law was a major component of the re-working of the New Deal that was undertaken in Roosevelt's second term. As a result of the Supreme Court's ruling against the National Recovery Administration as unconstitutional, many of the earlier provisions of the NRA were rolled into the Wagner Act. The Wagner Act was signed on July 5, 1935 and guaranteed workers the right to collective bargaining through unions of their own choice and the union accepted by the majority became the bargaining voice for all the workers.¹⁶⁹ Senator Wagner the sponsor of the bill along with members of Congress was shown a preview of the film on April 8, 1935. Wagner praised the film noting that, "it dramatically presents a phase of industrial strife which we are seeking to prevent." John L. Lewis also endorsed the picture saying that, "while some of the scenes are savage, they are in no sense overdrawn. The public will find the picture a great contribution to comprehension of the deep seated problem involved in industrial relationships."¹⁷⁰

The film centers on the problems of a Polish miner, Joe Radek (Paul Muni) whose sweetheart Anna (Karen Morley) runs away with a company cop Slim (William Gargan) to Pittsburgh. Joe dreams of quitting his job as a miner, buying a farm and marrying Anna even though Anna likes Joe she longs for a different life in the city. Stunned and angry Joe spends all the money he has been saving to buy a farm on liquor. Amidst the miners who are in the process of negotiating for better wages and working conditions there is a spy Croner (J. Carroll Naish) who is secretly working for a detective agency that specializes in strike breaking. Croner has been placed in the community to stir up discontent among the men and to undermine the influence of their union, the Federation of Mine Workers. At a union meeting Joe, a hail-fellow among the miners comes in drunk and looking for trouble. Without realizing the consequences of his actions, Joe joins the chorus of men shouting against the union led by Croner. The men believe that because Joe is with Croner that they too should support the radical element and the men walk out and form a new union with Joe as the President. The next day these men are locked out of the mine by their fellow workers and a fight ensues that leads to the shutting down of the mine. The detective agency seizes upon the situation they have created and convince the mine owner to hire them as head of security. The company then evicts many of the miners and decides to break the unions by hiring “scab” laborers. This leads to even more trouble and when Croner disappears Joe is left behind and viewed as the reason that so much hardship has befallen the men.

Mike Semanski, Joe’s best friend and one of the miners is killed by McGee (Barton MacLane) the new head of the company police. Joe tries to save Mike from the

company cops and is knocked out. Joe ends up in the hospital and while there he learns that the men are set to give up the strike and return to work at lower wages and without protection. Feeling humiliated Anna returns and tries to make amends with Joe. He escapes from the hospital, steals some dynamite and food and sneaks into the mine. With Anna's help he rigs explosives up throughout the mine and then he barricades himself inside in an act of defiance and love for Mike whose death Joe feels responsible for. He tells the company foreman that unless they negotiate in good faith he will blow himself up and the mine. The company disregards his threat and Joe begins detonating the dynamite closing off parts of the mine. McGee goes into the mine to try and stop Joe but in a fight Joe overpowers him and ties him up. Days pass and the strike rages on when Congress and the media become involved. Congress tells the mine owners that these men, whom they have hired, are nothing more than gangsters exploiting the situation for money. The federal government steps in and forces the mine owners to settle the strike. Anna goes down into the mine to tell Joe who comes to the surface a hero. McGee is arrested for Mike's murder and Joe is finally reunited with Anna.

In preparation for his role as Joe, Muni spent time in an East coast coal town trying to learn a Polish dialect and how to work in a mine.¹⁷¹ Muni's look as Joe Radek was created in consultation with Perc Westmore, the studio's chief make-up artist. He cut Muni's hair in a bowl shape and then bleached his eyebrows and the stubble on his chin to make him look more like a young Slavic man. When Muni saw himself in the mirror he said, "That I guarantee you is a Polack born and reborn...Nobody can say I'm not willing to dye for dear old Warner Brothers."¹⁷² The make-up in combination with

Muni's infectious spirit as Joe is visible and believable combined with his hulking walk and usage of a heavily accented form of broken English.

Joe's masculinity is determined in the narrative by two factors. His love for work as expressed when he tells his fellow miners "work and shut up. He like everybody and everybody like Joe Radek" and his love for Anna. He tells the men early on in the film "what for I need meeting? I got Anna!" Later at a company dance he tells Anna "woman is for man—just like rain is for the thirsty ground." For men like Joe who are ethnic Americans and lacking education and an understanding of the finer things in life all that is needed in life is a job and a woman to love. Joe is illustrative of how issues of class and "marginalization" that Connell discusses can impact the formation of masculinity. Joe's status as laborer and his ethnicity marginalize him within "white" society because he is shown to someone who does not possess the necessary capital to engage with consumerism, nor does he have the required intelligence to support the hegemonic system that Connell argues is the foundation of all forms of masculinity. Moreover Joe's masculinity is shown to be irrational at times, especially when Anna runs away leaving him only with his money and his dream of a simple life together on their farm.

Drunkenly Joe enters the union meeting and hears the FMW man Farrell (Joe Crehan) talking about the need for trust and agreements if the men are to maintain the standards and wages they have won. Joe in a fit of anger over the usage of words like "trust" and "agreement" angrily shouts out, "Sure strike. Crooks. Everybody cheaters. Everybody steals. Joe Radek fights. Joe Radek ready to fight. Everybody fight." Joe's statement is the exact force that Croner had been looking for in his effort to foment civil

war within the union. Joe's actions are those of a heart broke man who puts his own interests above the men as is illustrated in the this scene and the following one when Joe wakes up at Croner's house unaware of what he had said and done the night before as he was on his drunken binge. "What I care for union? What I care for anything?" Joe's hurt feelings and disappointment that Anna has left him threaten the future of the union and the miners.

The film does not dwell on the realities of the harsh living and working conditions of the miners and instead focuses on the problems of a single individual, a technique that *Variety* would label "Burbanking" because the film had been produced on the Warner lot in Burbank, and deviated away from a unified social statement.

Yet, the early images of the film inside of the coal mines and in the miner's homes are reminiscent of the imagery of the chain gang in *I am a Fugitive*. Byron Haskin's cinematography on the picture captures the feeling of despair and that combined with Muni's gut wrenching performance as a man who goes from being happy and well liked to miserable and hated make the film a powerful statement about the nature of industrial relations during the thirties and the horrors faced by men who's position in life was determined by the force of their labor and sex rather than actual intellect. The film in some ways speaks to the problems faced by all American men who lacked an education and the knowledge necessary to understand how they were being manipulated by larger forces.

The film's title was changed from *Black Hell* to *Black Fury* according to a memo from Hal Wallis to all department heads dated November 21, 1934. The preview

screening was held on January 10, 1935 and in a memo from Jack Warner to Hal Wallis he emphatically stated “I saw *Black Fury* tonight and I want to go on record right now that I believe—in fact, I am sure this is as good a picture as “*Fugitive*.” It’s really great...everyone present was thrilled by it.”¹⁷³ Warner’s excitement for the film however was not echoed by the general public and theatre owners even as the press book played up the explosive and violent components of the film as indicated in the tag line, “You’ll see Muni let loose a blast of dynamite. The screen’s terrible avenger turns his wrath on the keepers of a man-made hell” rather than the film’s social conscious angle.¹⁷⁴ The ads for the film played up the violence and Muni’s aggressive screen persona with taglines such as one that appeared in *Motion Picture Herald* “This fellow will soon set off a load of dynamite that will knock this industry’s box-office records to pieces” accompanied by a large photo of Muni’s head staring intently at the reader.¹⁷⁵ Or the ad that appeared in the *Los Angeles Examiner* with the tag line “Human Dynamite. Ten thousand men wished him in hell... but it took a Shantytown female to put him there,” that features a large image of Muni looking askance at Karen Morley below him.¹⁷⁶ Together these ads illustrate that Warner Bros. was more comfortable marketing the film’s violence rather than it’s political aspects.

Even so, the critics were unwilling to ignore the film and its statements about labor and the New Deal. Conservative critics like Harrison stated that the film was “a powerful melodrama. Almost devoid of comedy...it is doubtful entertainment for women, because of the brutality in some of the situations...Aided considerably by expert performances, particularly by Paul Muni’s and by authentic settings, the problem of mass

and individual suffering is presented in a realistic manner....Men favorable to union should revel in it.”¹⁷⁷ Louella Parsons wrote that “Black Fury is as vital as its title, as dramatically effective as any picture shown this year and unique in its treatment...dealing with the extremely delicate subject of labor, the picture never for a moment loses sight of the fact that the American Federation of Labor is a great institution and is doing big work.”¹⁷⁸ *Film Daily* stated that “this is the best Muni picture in many moons.”¹⁷⁹ *New York Times* said of the film that “Hollywood, with all its taboos and commercial inhibitions, makes a trenchant contribution to the sociological drama in Black Fury...Magnificently performed by Paul Muni, it comes up taut against the censorial safety belts and tells a stirring tale of industrial war in the coal fields...by all odds Black Fury is the most notable American experiment in social drama since ‘Our Daily Bread.’ It was the review by *Variety* that best captured the spirit of the film and of Warner Bros. and the future direction of the company. They stated that, “Black Fury is basic box office. It has intrinsic celluloid values and a star, Paul Muni, who is no mean marquee equation. But more, this sociological cinematic exposition, by the very nature of its theme, is packaged with promotional potentialities. Provocative and attuned to a day and age where the administrative ‘new deal’ lends added significance to the story...Muni is the fulcrum of the film...a new deal in entertainment or the Burbanking of 1930s America.”¹⁸⁰

Despite the critical acclaim the damage had been done. With *Black Fury* Warner Bros. had managed to alienate some viewers and caused some to fear that the studio were making propaganda pictures rather than simple entertainment. *Black Fury* shows an image of the labor movement that is complicated and sympathetic at a time when many

Americans feared the rise of organized labor.¹⁸¹ For Muni his desire to make films of real social value would be transformed from the contemporary experiences of a Mexican American lawyer or a Polish miner struggling against the forces of racism and corruption. These films signaled the end of Muni's connection to aggressive screen masculinities and ethnicities as Warner Bros. transformed his image from that of a violent, self-made man into someone who was cerebral, sensitive, tender, and most importantly representative of the issues and views of a more middle-class white America.

During the middle portion of the 1930s Muni would make three bio-pics *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) and *Juarez* (1939) that according to Roddick set the model the company would pursue in producing this type of picture: "a narrative of considerable and dramatic excitement built round serious issues and with an idiosyncratic central character who is obstinate and admirable rather than simply likeable."¹⁸² In each of these films Muni created characters that were cerebral, courageous, sensitive, and who possessed strong convictions. Yet, what distinguishes these performances from his earlier ones is the way in which Warner Bros. accentuated Muni's screen masculinity as thoughtful, tender, cooperative and downplayed his earlier portrayal of masculinity as aggressive, violent, and indicative of the self-made man.

Roddick calls these men (Pastuer, Zola, and Juarez) "real-life heroes [who] were supreme individuals, proving what could be achieved by a steadfast adherence to truth, justice and knowledge."¹⁸³ George Custen in his book *Bio-Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* examines these films arguing that they are in fact a genre with recognizable themes, characteristics, and visual styles. He states that, "the

biographical film routinely integrates disparate historical episodes of selected individual lives into a nearly monochromatic “Hollywood view of history.”¹⁸⁴ The bio-pics that Warner Bros. produced during the mid 1930s were a indication of the middle years of the New Deal and its “liberal adherence to the power of the humanist individual.”¹⁸⁵ As Roosevelt sought to instill a sense of purpose and hope in the country and restore a deep seated feeling of confidence in government and economic opportunities, the three bio-pics that the studio made represented the studio’s confidence in their star, Paul Muni, and a belief that perhaps the worst of the Great Depression was behind the company as they began to spend more on the production and marketing of these films than they had previously done.¹⁸⁶

Conclusion

Muni returned to Burbank in the spring of 1940 after performing over 100 hundred performances of “Key Largo” on the New York stage. He was awarded the Delia Austrian Medal of the Drama League of New York for “the most distinguished stage performance of the year.”¹⁸⁷ Muni wanted to make the Beethoven picture but the studio felt that it was not the right time or climate and tried to get him to take the lead part in *High Sierra*. Muni was not convinced of the film and felt that it was going to be another standard Warner Bros. cops-and-robber’s film. He turned down the script and Warner Bros. cancelled his contract on September 17, 1940.

Muni made ten pictures for Warner Bros. over the period of 1932-1939. In each of the films Muni used his clout and talent as an actor to craft unique and memorable

performances. Muni could play the masculine role of domineering authority by wielding a gun or his fists, he could play the great men of history struggling against larger cultural forces, and he could play the simple and tender men who were erudite and compassionate. In all of these performances Muni struggled against the needs of Warner Bros. to make him into another run of the mill star and in the end he was willing to walk away from it all, because he was not interested in playing a gangster figure anymore. Muni was both a figure of prestige and power and it was those qualities that defined his persona throughout the 1930s. In portraying characters that first represented the image of American masculinity as self-centered, aggressive, and violent Muni's performances show how American masculinity was defined prior to the crash of the stock market and the election of Roosevelt. Muni's later portrayals of masculinity show how the effects of the New Deal and new understandings of masculinity impacted the formation of American male identities onscreen and off. Yet, Muni's image of masculinity is one that is defined through a dichotomous relationship because many of his characters are presented as celebrating a more traditional notion of masculinity or embracing a view of masculinity that is sensitive, cerebral, and courageous. Still, in showing masculinity to be capable of representing both more "hard" and "soft" qualities, Muni's characters point towards an image of screen masculinity that presents a more rounded picture of American masculinity during the 1930s that both models the challenges and changes faced by American men as a result of the Depression and changing gender dynamics.

Chapter Two:

Transgressive Masculinities: George Brent and Female Passions

If it is true that man once shaped woman to be the creature of his desires and needs, then it is true that woman is now remodeling man...The world is fast becoming woman-made.

Lorine Pruette *The Nation*¹⁸⁸

The quiet, almost stodgy hero of yesterday seems weak and spiritless to the girl of today.

George Brent¹⁸⁹

In June of 1932 the *Los Angeles Examiner* ran an article in the special Sunday section that discussed the shifting nature of screen heroes and masculinity. The article entitled “Hard Boiled Guys Get Easy Breaks Whilst Heroes Do Fade-Outs” charts the changing dynamics of male stardom and masculinity onscreen in 1932. Columnist James Mitchell notes that, “more than ever in motion pictures, stardom is to be won the hard way. Young men who are getting somewhere in the racket have got to be hard. With one possible exception, outstanding performances during the past year have been strong virile characterizations.”¹⁹⁰ Accompanying this article is an interesting photo layout of the current crop of “hard boiled guys” Edward G. Robinson, Clark Gable, Wallace Beery, Lionel Barrymore, George Raft, James Cagney and Paul Muni. In the center of the grouping is a photo of George Brent with slicked back hair, a beaming smile, and he is wearing an ascot whereas the other men are shown in more solemn poses and they are dressed in more middle to lower middle class attire. Underneath the photo the caption reads, “George Brent is the only conventional type hero of Filmlands new leading men. The rest are hard boiled.” The picture while serving to put names to faces and sell this

new image of screen masculinity also shows how the new “hard boiled” masculinity is linked to representations of the working and lower class rather than that of the middle and upper classes. Brent’s image is in stark contrast to these men because the way he is clothed and the way that his hair is styled represents an image of screen masculinity that is upper class rather than the more rough rugged images of the other men who were associated with images of lower and working class men.

To connect these new men with their reception with female audiences Mitchell further argues that, “motion pictures have become a realm where men are men and women are glad of it.”¹⁹¹ In focusing on the development of the ‘tough guy’ onscreen as an ideal marker of masculinity, Mitchell points out how for female viewers the image of masculinity as violent and in control was celebrated in 1932. In arguing that it is women who are responsible for the shifting fortunes of masculinity onscreen Mitchell shows how women and the consumer model contributed to the re-shaping and re-thinking of American masculinity in the 1930s. For example Mitchell writes that, “if anybody even the villain, who was believed capable of anything, had struck a woman the crowd would have torn down the theater. [But] Nowadays if Jimmie Cagney doesn’t slap Joan Blondell at least once during the evening somebody in the audience probably will get up and volunteer to do it for him. If Clark Gable doesn’t push some girl over a chair the crowd thinks he has turned effeminate.”¹⁹² What Mitchell identifies in this trend is a return to the image of American masculinity as brutish and savage unlike the more polished, romantic and sexualized images of men in the 1920s as displayed by Rudolph Valentino and John Barrymore. According to Studlar both of these men and their screen personas

illustrate the changing dynamics of gender relations as women are provided with the opportunity to sexualize them through the female gaze, and in effect they become objects of consumption for female audiences at the time.¹⁹³ However Studlar points out that these images of masculinity as sexual, romantic, and woman-made were troubling for American middle class men who still celebrated Teddy Roosevelt's notion of "strenuous physicality" as the ideal form of American manhood.¹⁹⁴

Yet, as Mitchell's article documents these images of masculinity as exotic, erotic, and beautiful became less popular with female audiences in the early 1930s. However, even as more hard-boiled images of masculinity became the norm in Hollywood "softer" versions of leading men like George Brent and "styles" of masculinity were still of value. Throughout the decade and indeed in George Brent's career there was a tension between "soft" masculinities and earlier "styles" of masculinity like the more "tough" and savage masculinities in the personas of Paul Muni, James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson, and Clark Gable.

In the first chapter I examined how Warner Bros. depicted images of the self-made man, ethnicity, race and the working class through the persona of Paul Muni. In this chapter I am examine how "soft" masculinities linked to feminine qualities such as compassion and tenderness were applied to discussions of masculine identities related to consumer culture within the middle and upper middle classes. The figure of George Brent characterizes the changing nature of American masculinity for white middle-class America at a time when so many men and the nation struggled to understand their role in the nation. Moreover in the case of Brent and I would argue other men throughout

America in the 1930s it is difficult to examine how American masculinity was constructed without acknowledging the representation of femininity as played by the actresses he was paired with and how their performances impacted the masculinity of the characters Brent played at Warner Bros. in the 1930s. Even though Brent's characters are often white and middle-class thereby making them complicit in Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity more often than not they are a better example of how alternative masculinities can be marginalized in an attempt to make ideals like that of "hegemonic masculinity" or the self-made man seem normal.

George Brendan Nolan was born in Ireland in 1904. He came to America in the 1920s where he acted on Broadway after having developed his skills as an actor in Ireland with the Abbey Theatre. Brent found his way to Hollywood in 1931 and he made six films: four for Fox (*Under Suspicion*, *Once A Sinner*, *Fair Warning* and *Charlie Chan Carries On*) and two for Universal (*Ex-Bad Boy*, and *Homicide Squad*). After completing these six films it looked as if Brent's career would be limited to playing second or third leads in cheaper films, until he was signed to a seven year contract by Warner Bros. on December 28, 1931 at a rate of \$250.00 a week.¹⁹⁵ Despite his foreign status Brent did not represent the challenges faced by studios with dealing with ethnicity because he was Irish. However, what made Brent difficult for Warner Bros. to define onscreen was the combination of his "boyish" charm and non-threatening screen persona. Still these qualities made him an asset when he was signed to play alongside the studios' newest female star, Ruth Chatterton, whom they had lured away from Paramount along with Kay Francis in an effort to increase the studio's prestige status.

Leading Man Potential At Warner Bros.

After signing with Warner Bros. in 1931 the company quickly set about trying to build Brent's image using their model of casting players in initial small roles as they built up their status with audiences.¹⁹⁶ His first part for the studio was as the older Roelf Pool in *So Big* (Wellman, 1932) based on the popular novel by Edna Ferber. Brent's performance despite the fact that it was a minor role was well received by critics. Philip K. Scheur writing for the *Los Angeles Times* noted that Brent played the older Roelf "with an indescribable charm."¹⁹⁷ Louella Parsons noted that, "George Brent...has little chance to demonstrate what he can do."¹⁹⁸ The reviewer for *Photoplay* advised audiences to "see perhaps for the first time, George Brent, reputed another Gable. Maybe. Maybe not."¹⁹⁹

In June of 1932 *Photoplay* ran an article entitled "New Screen Personalities: George Brent another Clark Gable? Don't you dare to say such a Thing" that celebrates Warner Bros. discovery of a new face and persona who is equated with Clark Gable. The author notes that,

The frantic search for more Clark Gables is on! If there is one who can so inspire shekels into the box office there must be others...Every studio has its high hope of the moment. Warner Bros. has theirs. They gave George Brent, as his first role the lead opposite Ruth Chatterton in 'The Rich are Always with Us,' he played the lead with Barbara Stanwyck in 'So Big' and now one with Costance Bennett—if they find a suitable story.²⁰⁰

It is clear that the writer of this article is attempting to draw parallels between George Brent and the recent popularity of M-G-M's Clark Gable. In fact, he goes on to note in the article that, "of course they [Warner Bros.] won't admit that he's one bit like the Metro sky rocket. Oh dear no..." It is then pointed out that the Warner Bros. executives have stated, "Don't compare him to Clark. It will ruin him. He's George Brent, he's not Clark Gable."²⁰¹ Still the writer points out that Brent "got his break because he does resemble Clark Gable not only in type but in background."²⁰² The rest of the article is used to link the two men and their professional experiences and sells the idea that perhaps these two were friends or at least close acquaintances at some point before they came to Hollywood. The need to equate and differentiate Brent with Gable is used to market Brent as an upcoming screen personality while also trying to form an image around Brent that can be viewed as more conventionally masculine.

Yet, this strategy is undermined in two ways. First, the article makes a point of linking Brent's new screen persona with strong female performers and films that are designed for more female audiences rather than male ones. Second, the inclusion of a head shot of Brent smiling broadly at the camera with an ascot around his neck connects him to an image of upper class masculinity and fashion. In depicting Brent in this manner the image sells the idea of Brent as an object of consumption and performance that Berry argues was one of the key factors in the production of female stars in the 1930s.²⁰³ Whereas Gable was linked with notions of rugged working class masculinity, through his portrayal of a more cynical and violent persona, this photo and article point out that Brent's screen masculinity will be linked to images of wealth and sex.

For his first major part at Warner Bros. he was paired with Ruth Chatterton in the film *The Rich are Always with Us* (Green, 1932) a film that some critics labeled a comedy despite the serious and melodramatic tone of the picture. In the film Brent plays Julien Tierney an upper class novelist who possess the income to own a fancy apartment and dine with some of New York's elites like the beautiful Caroline Grannard. Julien constantly flirts with her and declares his love for her but as she is a woman of society and happily married she simply laughs off his gestures until she discovers that her husband whom she had believed to be incapable of having affairs or causing scandal, has fallen in love with a younger woman. She divorces her husband when he reveals to her that he is no longer happy in their marriage. Yet no matter what she does Caroline finds it impossible to set aside her feelings for her husband Greg (John Miljan) so that when Greg is injured in a car crash she agrees to nurse him back to health. Caroline marries Julien just before he leaves for China where he has plans to work as a foreign correspondent.

Unlike many of the other Warner Bros. films of the period *The Rich Are Always with Us* celebrates the image of the idle rich and concentrates on their struggles rather than those of the working or lower class. In fact the publicity department urged exhibitors to sell the picture as an example of "everything [as] luxury and wealth" because "it is highly sophisticated and [has] smart dialogue of the sophisticates class, with plenty of gossip and scandal."²⁰⁴ The critics picked up on the pictures images of wealth and privilege in their reviews. Muriel Babcock noted that, "The Rich are Always with Us is a comedy. It is amusing and sophisticated. Really a tale of triangle within a triangle, it has

for its characters the kind of wealthy, well bred and clever people...²⁰⁵ *Variety* noted that the film would do moderate business but would be most successful with the matinee crowd because it is chiefly a woman's picture.²⁰⁶ Harrison echoes this sentiment in his assessment of the picture. He argues that the picture is "more suitable for sophisticated audiences than for the masses; and among this class women will probably enjoy it more than men, for the reason that they will better understand the heroine's maternal instinct towards her ex-husband."²⁰⁷

Although the picture was classified as being too "sophisticated" by the critics George Brent's performance as Julien was recognized as the work of a budding newcomer. Mae Tinee in the *Chicago Tribune* stated that, "George Brent, who is a leading man the girls will sigh for" is one of the reasons that Chatterton's first Warner Bros. film was good.²⁰⁸ Louella Parsons noted in her review that, "George Brent gives a splendid performance...He is just as promising as Warner Brothers claim, and has one of the most agreeable personalities of any newcomer."²⁰⁹ Muriel Babcock in her discussion of Brent's performance focuses on the comparison between Brent and Gable rather than his actual performance. She points out that, "this was my first opportunity to watch the so-called Clark Gable of Warners at work. Brent does resemble Gable in certain physical characteristics but you will find, I think, that he lacks that certain 'wham' Gable sex appeal. He makes up for it by the possession of more qualities of gentleness and reserve."²¹⁰ Babcock's sentiment is echoed in the *New York Sun* who proclaimed that, "George Brent, the new topic of fan magazines is obviously a neat, gentlemanly edition of Clark Gable."²¹¹ *The New York American* called Brent "the sensation of the film" noting

that, “the stalwart Mr. Brent has a charm all his own. He is no type actor but a well grounded versatile player who knows many tricks of the trade and is rapidly learning others. Some of his strength lies in an utter naturalness discernible even in a certain naiveté with which he makes love. His popularity is assured.”²¹² These reviews of Brent’s work in the film indicate how the critics were responding to Warner Bros. efforts in the press kits and in the fan magazines articles like the one that appeared in the June 1932 issue of *Photoplay* to build him up as a major star. Moreover they also illustrate the difficulties involved in trying to position Brent as a masculine type such as Gable or Cagney. Rather the reviewers note that whereas Gable’s screen image is based on “wham” sex appeal, Brent’s was marked by “qualities of gentleness and reserve” qualities that have traditionally been connected with notions of femininity. The conflation of more masculine qualities such as violence implied in the word “wham” along with Brent’s tenderness illustrate how Brent was perceived by the critics. This reception shows that for Warner Bros. the possibility of fashioning Brent along the lines of a Clark Gable was viewed as a mistake and therefore they shifted his image to be more of a man suited to compassion, submission, and cooperation. To highlight these qualities in Brent’s screen image the studio paired him with their major female stars in order to create a new type of male lead that would attract the attention of female audiences.

The Purchase Price

Warner Bros. built Brent slowly into their top romantic leading man on the lot by pairing him with Barbara Stanwyck in *The Purchase Price* (Wellman, 1932). This strategy was unlike their other more “tough guy” performers like Muni, Cagney, or

Robinson who were cast in roles where they were the leads and the women were secondary characters. The film's working title was "The Mud Lark" and began shooting on April 14, 1932 and was completed on May 12, 1932.²¹³ In the original synopsis of the film prepared by Bob Hussey on February 29, 1932 the female lead Joan is a woman of good breeding and background who has been in love with the same young man for years. But when the young man returns from World War I he is wounded mentally and physically. Joan struggles to recapture their romance but is unable and flees to Canada where she marries a wheat farmer."²¹⁴ This early synopsis offers an interesting insight into how Warner Bros. first conceived the story as a tale of war and young lovers and a woman who is incapable of helping her boy friend recover from his injuries. In this version Joan is shown to be a woman who is self-centered and thus ill-prepared to help her young lover. In the final version of the film her characterization and the story are completely different.

The film tells the story of Joan Gordon (Barbara Stanwyck) a nightclub singer who breaks off her relationship with a married gangster Eddie Fields (Lyle Talbot) in order to marry a Don Leslie (Hardie Albright) a young man from an upper class family but when she finds out that Don's family has had her investigated and learned of her relationship with Eddie, she realizes that Don will never marry her. Rather than return to Eddie, Joan runs away to Montreal where she takes another singing job until some of Eddie's men find her. She pays the hotel maid to help her escape by taking the maid's place in a mail-order marriage. Joan travels to South Dakota where she meets and marries Jim Gilson (George Brent) a wheat farmer. On their first night together Joan resists Jim's

advances and they spend the night of their honeymoon in separate rooms. Joan grows to like and respect Jim and tries to apologize for her actions but Jim is no longer interested in her apologies or her love. Joan and Jim work together on the farm in an effort to save it from foreclosure and the greed of a local wealthy farmer Bull McDowell (David Landau) who desires to have Joan and the farm. Joan tries to make Jim realize she has grown to love him but when she returns to the farm after helping a local woman with her baby, Joan sees Eddie. Jim realizes that Joan and Eddie have a history and then accuses her of being a worthless cheap woman. Joan remains and Eddie and Jim get into a fight when Jim mistakes Joan and Eddie's conversation in a bar for a lover chat. Joan is trying to borrow money for Eddie to help save the farm. Joan continues to work alongside Jim on the farm but it is only when Bull tries to burn their crops that Jim realizes her loves her as they battle the fire together.

In the film Brent plays a wheat farmer who is described in the script as “tall, brawny, poorly dressed in one his one store suit and overcoat...he wears a rag wrapped around his neck...there is a certain granite-like solidity about his movements.”²¹⁵ Brent tries to capture some elements of this version of the character as written on the page, but whereas in the script Gilson seems to be a more masculine presence, by casting Brent in the role Warner Bros. altered the character. Brent plays Gilson as a man of limited resources, proud, capable of violence, hard working, at times stoic, and unsure of his relationship to his mail order bride Joan (Barbara Stanwyck). The character is drawn to be a man of principle whose masculine pride prohibits him from seeing the good in his new bride when she challenges his authority.

Unlike the more refined Joan in the original script in the film Joan is a torch singer who has used her sexuality to acquire jewels, clothes, money, a nice apartment, and a string of men. However, the men are shown to be a means to an end for Joan as she struggles to free herself from the life of a nightclub singer. Joan's hopes for happiness and respectability lay with her love for Don Leslie, a man of refinement, gentleness, and breeding who offers a stark contrast to the crass and hard gangster Eddie Fields. In the portrayal of Don Leslie and his unwillingness to stand up for his love in opposition to his family's concerns and that of Eddie as a man of violence, loose morals and inability to accept Joan's decisions Warner Bros. depict two models of masculinity that both fail to embrace the wishes and desires of Joan.

Joan returns to Eddie and then one day discovers a sense of self-respect. She leaves New York for Montreal where she once again works as a singer. Eddie's men find Joan in Canada, and she finds out Emily (Leila Bennet) the hotel maid sent her picture to the wheat farmer she pays Emily one hundred dollars to take her place in marrying a wheat farmer as Emily had sent the farmer a picture of Joan rather than herself. This exchange of images and identities for money is interesting because in effect Joan is buying a husband, just as much as the wheat farmer is buying a wife.

The theme of exchange, consumption, and sexuality can also be located in the film's final title *The Purchase Price* as well as the tag line for the film that read, "why do girls avoid 'Price' question in Marriage?" This theme is echoed when Joan and even the other women she meets on the train West discuss marriage. On the train Joan sits and listens as several women that she is sitting with discuss they're soon to be husbands. For

these women marriage is both a sexual and economic arrangement as is illustrated when one of the women says after looking at a picture and discussing her husband's property, "you know what they about a man with bushy eyebrows and long nose." The women laugh and then say, "Oh Queenie, you've been married before." This scene captures an image of American masculinity as something that can be easily bought and sold like other consumer goods for these women, who it appears are always looking for a man with better economic opportunities. In light of the debilitating effects of the Depression this scene shows how marriage and male-female relationships are changing. This idea is also addressed in the relationship between Joan and Jim when they first meet face to face.

Joan steps off the train in the middle of nowhere and looks around wondering where her future husband is and what he looks like. The first time Brent appears as Gilson he wears an outfit similar to the one described in the script. He is framed in a medium shot and photographed so that his image appears more harsh than Stanwyck's which uses more medium close-ups and close-ups with a soft look created by diffusing the light. The difference in lighting and framing between the two captures the feeling of awkwardness between them in terms of narrative but also shows how it is Stanwyck who is the star of the picture not Brent.

Jim helps Joan onto his wagon after placing her trunk and suitcase in the back. The two briefly chat and then Jim tells her, "well I guess we ought to be taking the high dive." Joan looks nervous, realizing in that moment what she has agreed to and indicating that perhaps she had not taken the time to earlier consider her actions. Jim tells her that, "I mean get married. We can get the wedding ring and marriage license at the jewelry

store.” Joan is unfamiliar with this method and questions whether that is how one should go about getting the necessary items for marriage. Jim simply smiles and says, “I don’t know. Most people want a wedding ring want a marriage license. Saves time and trouble to get them both at the same place.” Joan finally accepts his logic. This scene like the previous one on the train where marriage is the focus, show the reality that perhaps marriage is less about love and more about economic security and safety. This tension between the need for love and economic security is addressed throughout the rest of the film.

Jim buys the marriage license and ring after haggling over cost for the amount of \$3.50. They then visit the justice of the peace where they are married for \$3.00 dollars. In each case when Jim takes money out of his wallet it is shown that here is a man who is extremely careful with the amount of money he spends. Thus it seems from the outset that for Jim the marriage is little more than a necessary expenditure to acquire female companionship and the possibility of sex.

However on arriving in Jim’s small house, Joan makes it perfectly clear that she is not really interested in having a sexual relationship with Jim. As Jim hints towards the idea of going to bed early, Joan resists stating that, “it can’t be very late yet.” Jim simply nods without responding to her protestations. Joan walks into the bedroom and slams the door as Jim works on moving the bags of seed scattered throughout the house. After she slams the door, Jim grabs a sleeping bag out of the kitchen and makes a bed on the floor near the pot bellied stove. It is clear that Jim’s wedding night is not going to turn out as

he had hoped. As he continues to make himself a bed on the floor he catches a glimpse of Joan's shadow underneath the bedroom door.

Jim is framed in a medium shot when he walks towards the door. His face is lit from the side so that it divides his image into two. Visually it is as if the image is telling the viewer that this simple farmer is more complicated than he appears and in fact he is capable of excessive displays of masculine aggression and sexuality. Jim places his hands next to his belt loops and hitches up his pants a gesture that is used throughout the film to indicate Jim's need to assert his authority and sexuality. The focus on the male body as an object of work and desire is shown in contrast to Joan's, which is clearly shown to be a sexual object.

As Jim is nearing the door there is a cut to a low angle shot of Barbara Stanwyck's stockings on her legs. The camera slowly pulls back as it travels from her legs up the rest of her body and finally on her face. She is wearing a lacy nightgown that overwhelms Jim's senses when he sees her standing in the bedroom. He looks longingly at her and then attempts to embrace her. He begins to kiss her violently. In the scene Brent uses his body as a marker of violent masculinity in combination with the lustful look on his face. Jim's shoulders are squared off as he tries to grab Joan and envelop her with his powerful muscles. She pushes him away telling him "let me go." Jim continues to try and grab and kiss her as she attempts to fight off his urges. Finally she slaps him. He reacts by touching the side of his cheek and then balls up his fist as if he is about to hit her. Instead he storms out of the room, like a petulant child, out of the house and goes to sleep in the barn.

Brent plays the scene so that it is more in line with the “hard boiled” leading men that Mitchell identifies as the epitome of screen masculinity at the time. Along with the clothes, the gruff ways that Brent delivers his lines and the usage of a more harsh lighting set-up it is clear that in this film Warner Bros. are experimenting with Brent’s screen image. Here he is a violent, sullen working-class figure rather than a refined, tender upper class leading man as he played in *The Rich Are Always with Us*.

In her study of the Depression and its effects on American men and families Komarovsky noted that, “possession of money carried with it power and prestige, but it apparently played still a third role in marriage. For some husbands money has provided a margin of tolerance.”²¹⁶ The tolerance that Komarovsky identifies is that of men who realize that their authority and ability to earn has been damaged and as a result it is important to view the contributions of their wives and daughters as positive, rather than as an assault on their status on men. In the film Jim will tolerate Joan’s behavior towards him, but when a wealthy farmer Bull (David Landau) shows up along with the neighbors to celebrate their wedding with a party, Jim’s patience is tested. Bull questions Jim’s masculine prowess when he tells him, “you old coyote how did you ever snare such a pretty young bride. He don’t deserve her now does he,” Bull says to one of his farm hands Forgan a big, gruff man with broad shoulders, and no personality.

Bull represents the image of the wealthy farmer who has used his power to achieve things rather than physical labor. He is dressed in a nice three piece suit, with a gold watch chain hanging from his vest pocket. Bull is also shown to be a man capable of giving orders as he takes charge of the party going so far as to tell people where to drink,

dance and stand. More importantly Bull is a man who does not recognize nor respect another man's authority or a woman's.

He asks Joan to dance but she tells him she is not interested in dancing. Bull disregards her objections and grabs her and begins dancing around the room with her. As they dance Jim looks on in anger and jealousy. When Joan realizes that Jim is jealous and in fact might care for her, her feelings towards him change. Her change of feelings are addressed when playing the party game post office that involves couples going into a room alone to make out or "deliver the mail." Joan and Jim go into the bedroom where Joan has planned to finally allow Jim a degree of intimacy. However, Jim's masculine pride prohibits him from accepting her offer of "a letter and postcard." He tells her that "I won't bother you anymore," with a determined expression on his face. Brent plays the scene so that there is a combination of fear, guilt, and sadness in Jim Gilson's rejection of Joan. She tells him, "Don't talk that way, its silly. I am sorry I slapped you that first night." Jim replies "well I guess you meant it allright," as he turns to walk away from her. Joan pleads with him explaining that, "But I didn't mean it....it was all so fast and I..." Jim storms out of the room before hearing the rest of her explanation because for him there is no way to salvage their relationship.

The party ends and everyone leaves after the alcohol runs out. Jim and Bull get into an argument that leads to Jim throwing Fargan, Bull's head farm hand out of the house. Jim's actions defy Bull's status as a man of property and leadership. But what really cause Jim to become extremely angry with Bull is when Bull patronizes him and tells him that, "everything is all right. Nobody is mad at anybody. Everybody loves

everybody... You go straight to bed and don't do nothing that I wouldn't do." Bull's assumption that after the guests leave that Joan and Jim will go to bed together and serves as another moment in the film when Jim is constantly reminded that other men, like Bull, and the community at large, are questioning his masculinity.

Jim begins to clean up the house after the party illustrating that he is capable of conducting domestic chores because of his bachelorhood. As Jim tries to clean the house Joan tries to seduce him telling him that, "My head is spinning" as she places her head on Jim's shoulder. This action shows that Joan is interested in making Jim happy but Jim's inability to forgive and forget that first night cloud his judgment about Joan and her feelings towards him. As Joan gets ready for bed, she calls Jim into the bedroom after having laid out her fancy nightgown on the bed for him to see. He simply looks over at the lingerie, hitches up his pants and then closes the door rather than accepting Joan's offer of sex. Jim's refusal of Joan's advances along with his cleaning up of the house after the party show him to be a man who is capable of looking after himself and who also wishes to dictate the opportunity for sexual relations.

The next morning as Jim chops wood he and Joan finally have a frank discussion about their situation. Brent plays the scene as if he is a man who has lost his way by emphasizing the indifferent attitude of the character as he is focused on chopping wood rather than noticing the fact that Joan is trying to make amends for her earlier actions.

In the scene Jim is shown in medium close-ups in order to capture the stoic and puzzled expressions that he employs to capture Jim's feeling of alienation and bewilderment at his circumstances after he receives a letter from the bank telling him that

he is going to lose the farm. Jim tells Joan, "I promised you protection and a home. Well I can't give them to you. The bank has just notified me we have got to get off this land." Jim's masculinity is again shown to be under assault, only this time from economic forces, which now have made it difficult for him to adhere to a more traditional notion of patriarchy where the man provides the economic, sexual, and physical protection for his wife. Jim's predicament is similar to other men at the time who struggle with the brutal realities of the Depression

Joan listens intently and then asks "what do you intend to do with me?" Jim tells her directly that he intends to send her back to Montreal, "if I can ever raise the money. No use prolonging the agony." Joan with a hint of sadness asks Jim "has it been agony" not realizing that Jim's perception of their relationship is negative. However, Jim unwilling to show his true emotions simply turns the point of the question around to focus on Joan when he says, "well it has been for you. Things have only just started...Our marriage is hopeless. We started all wrong. Like going into a race blindfolded." Still, Joan persuades Jim to let her stay when she explains that she has nothing or no one to return to in Montreal.

Joan attempts to show that she is useful by trying to clean up their home. As she does so, Jim explains to her the bags of seed represent his life's work. "After eleven years of sweating, and slaving. Ever since I left agricultural college, I starved, literally starved. I fertilized and cross fertilized and experimented with crop after crop until the strain was fixed. This seed will produce the heaviest load of white flower wheat that's ever been grown." Brent delivers the speech with deep concentration and pride in his voice to

indicate that Jim Gilson is more than a simple farmer. He is a man who has used knowledge and hard work to try and make a better life for himself, only to now see it threatened by the forces of capitalism. Jim's speech connects him to the image of the self-made man, an individual capable of achieving the "American Dream" through hard work and practical education. Here is an image of the male body that is willing to sacrifice everything: physical nourishment, comfort, and security in an attempt to create a possibility for a better future.

Jim is a beaten man: beaten by his wife's unwillingness to sleep with him, beaten by men like Bull and beaten by the bank. He has been reduced to a figure of self-pity and woe, but Joan sees the potential in Jim. She tells him that together they will stay on the farm and plant the wheat.

Yet when Eddie shows up on the farm and Jim discovers that Joan has had prior relationships with other men, again he lets his male pride govern his thoughts and actions. Jim questions Joan about the nature of her relationship with Eddie, which leads to a violent confrontation. He badgers her unmercifully asking, "how many others were there besides him?" Joan screams in fear and sadness "you get pleasure from torturing me, don't you." Here Jim attempts to his masculine authority in the marriage and his assumptions that Joan is a damaged woman because of her relationships with other men. He tells her, "a real joke you and I played on each other. A rotten, hopeless failure of a marriage... Oh we were the perfect couple all right. You thought I could give you a home and I thought you were decent." As Brent delivers the line he does with a gruffness in his voice and his shoulders are bared so that he looms larger than Stanwyck in the frame.

Joan screams harder with tears in her eyes, “Shut Up. Shut Up.” As she tries to touch him, Jim throws her down onto the bed and storms out of the room. This act of violence as portrayed by Brent in the scene is out of character with his earlier screen image of masculinity as Julien Tierney and the perceptions of the critics. It demonstrates how perhaps Warner Bros. were trying to mold Brent into a more “hard” image of masculinity akin to Gable and Cagney.

The image of a violent and aggressive George Brent is featured in the fight scene between Jim and Eddie Fields. Jim after visiting the bank and pleading his case sees his wife in a saloon talking with Eddie. Jim believes that Joan is in love with Eddie, but in fact she has fallen in love with Jim and has gone to Eddie to borrow some money to help Jim pay the back interest on the farm. Jim walks over to Eddie’s table in the saloon and rather than speak to him, simply punches him hard in the face. Eddie falls to the ground and looks up at Jim in amazement. The two men then engage in a brutal fight where tables, bottles, and chairs are broken and blood is drawn.

Brent is shown in a medium shot, hair askew with blood on his face as he lunges towards Eddie with hatred in his eyes. This image of Jim echoes the earlier scene where he violently throws Joan down onto the bed. The image of masculinity enacted in this scene is one of violence, anger, and dominance. For a man like Jim who has struggled to prove himself to his wife, fellow farmers and to the bank this moment serves to illustrate that he is capable of aggression and willing to stand up for himself when he feels that his self respect has been marred by Joan and Eddie’s relationship.

It is only after the fight that Jim begins to begrudgingly accept Joan and her assistance on the farm. The real turning point is when Bull and Fargan set fire to their wheat crop after they had worked tirelessly together to plant it. Joan sacrifices her own safety in order to help Jim save the wheat. As they battle the fire, Jim watches with pride as she stands side by side with him trying to save their livelihood. Yet, when Joan falls to the ground, Jim finally accepts the possibility that he might in fact make a life with this woman. He picks her up and cradles her in his arms. He then wipes the soot and smoke from his hand before touching her brow. This moment can be read as the first and only time that Jim shows any affection to Joan. In this moment Brent is also able to show an image of masculinity that is based more in depictions of tenderness and love rather than violence.

Brent is photographed in a medium long shot from a straight angle in the final scene. He walks towards the camera with Stanwyck cradled in his arms. Brent smiles showing off his dimples and youthful good looks. This is the image of Brent as a leading man defined by “soft” masculinities rather than the more “hard” qualities which he utilized throughout the film to capture Jim Gilson’s sense of frustration at his lack of masculine presence.

Stanwyck delivers the final line of the film. She says, “Jim you’ve caught one of those terrible summer colds,” when she hears him sniffle. Well you’ll have to take some quinine and some hot lemonade and a hot water bottle. And I am going to put you right to bed. Brent smiles, kisses Stanwyck and the film fades to the end credits. This last line and scene show that they are equals in the marriage. Jim’s masculinity is secured by Joan’s

femininity and her desire to help him and take care of him. Joan's willingness to help Jim at all costs, despite the harsh silent treatment he gives her throughout the film shows her to be a woman of great strength and Jim to be a man who needs the appearance of control even if his future prospects are saved by Joan's devotion to him.

Critics received the film poorly because of the miscasting of Stanwyck and Brent. Mae Tinee noted in her review that "two fine players are wasted. One of them—George Brent—is ridiculously miscast. It's fortunate we've learned to admire him in other films for as a hick with the sniffles he's pretty hard to take.... Brent merely suffers—for he's too smart not to realize how badly he's being done by. You can see he hates his role with every breath."²¹⁷ *Variety* echoes Tinee's feeling about the casting pointing out that, "both Stanwyck and Brent are 100 percent miscast. For Brent, whom Warners are trying to build up as a male pash, it's a rough deal completely."²¹⁸ Jerry Hoffman in his review of the film for the *Los Angeles Examiner* stated that, "those delighting in making Gable comparisons will find two opportunities... there is George Brent as the farmer-husband and Lyle Talbot, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Gable. Both do very well."²¹⁹ The *Daily Mirror* in its review also looked at problems in casting as the cause of the film's poor quality. "George Brent, who currently has the matinee trade in a flutter, is miscast as the farmer husband. He is one of the most curious heroes you will ever see. Wrapped by an excess of virtue afflicted with an unlovable cold in the head, smacked about by every circumstance, the character is not only unsympathetic but absurd. Brent does the best he can, but even his celebrated charm is lost in this unhappy role."²²⁰

The film was marketed towards a female audience in hopes that they would accept a story where Barbara Stanwyck was a nightclub singer and Brent a farmer. McCarthy writing for *Motion Picture Herald* advised theater owners to market the film with an eye towards female audiences. “You can bring out some exceptional selling points about a woman who would sacrifice wealth, ease, popularity, in the bright lights for the poverty stricken life of a prairie farm. There’s an ideal in that, an ideal that you probably can work up into a strong appeal to the feminine contingent of your patrons. If you can lure the women, maybe they will be able to get the punch that was calculated for the picture.”²²¹ *Film Daily* stated that, “women may go, to some extent, for the sacrifice stuff, but it will depend on how much they can swallow.”²²²

Other reviews of the film focused on Brent’s connection with his relationship with actress Ruth Chatterton whom Brent was rumored to be romantically involved and had worked with in *The Rich Are Always with Us*. In the *New York Sun* the reviewer pointed out that, “opposite her [Barbara Stanwyck] is George Brent, reported engaged to Miss Chatterton. Mr. Brent is supposed to be the runner up to Clark Gable in the “it” boy contest now being raged in the fan magazines. He is an adequate actor, but not much more. Nor on the other hand is Mr. Gable much more. He just happened to get there first.”²²³ Kate Cameron writing for the *New York News* wrote that, “George Brent who has been much publicized lately as one of the most attractive male leads in Hollywood and the prospective husband of Ruth Chatterton is made to appear extremely unattractive in the role of the farmer. He will hardly endear himself to feminine fans in this as he goes sniffing through the film with a damp forelock hanging over one eye and dressed in

rough working clothes...George is an unromantic figure and fails to lend enchantment to this sage of the soil.”²²⁴ From an examination of these reviews about the film and Brent’s role in it, it is clear that for many reviewers the shift in Brent’s persona from a tender, reserved man about town to that of a violent farmer negatively impacted the film’s success. Despite the film’s poor status with critics, it was the interest in Brent’s status as the possible real life romance for Chatterton that interested the critics.

I argue that it was Brent’s relationship to Chatterton and eventual marriage that served to solidify his status as one of Hollywood’s premier leading men. Brent’s status as leading man material onscreen and off was created with the aid of gossip columnist and critic Louella Parsons and other fan magazine articles. Parsons raves over Brent’s potential in her announcement of his impending marriage to Chatterton. She states that, “the career of George Brent has been one of the fascinating stories of Hollywood. Unknown, good-looking and with feminine appeal, he was made a leading man by Warner Bros. He played opposite Ruth Chatterton and their little romance on the screen became a real love interest. Suddenly he became one of the most talked of leading men in this town.”²²⁵ Brent’s status as an actor, unlike other Warner Bros. actors becomes linked to his off screen relationships with his on screen co-stars like Chatterton. For Brent’s status to be linked to the popularity and interest in his relationship with Chatterton shows how Brent’s masculinity was defined in connection with his relationships to women and wealth rather than the concerns of other men in the middle and lower classes.

According to the gossip columnists and fan magazines Brent’s stardom is clearly linked to his connection with Ruth Chatterton and his physical resemblance to Clark

Gable. Therefore, unlike other Warner Bros. players Brent's masculinity is defined in relation to his potential as an image of sexual desire for women. Brent's masculinities onscreen unlike many of the other men working on the Warner Bros. lot in the 1930s, was not defined by his actions, or bad performances but rather his appearance onscreen and off as an ideal image of "soft" and tender masculinities.

Brent's value for Warner Bros. was linked to his ability as an actor to embody both "hard" and "soft" qualities of masculinity onscreen. He was defined by his relationship to Warner Bros. leading ladies such as Ruth Chatterton, Barbara Stanwyck, and Bette Davis, who he would also later have an affair with, after divorcing Chatterton. Brent's screen masculinity was designed to counteract the strong, domineering portrayals of femininity that these women were capable of performing. In many of his roles Brent is characterized in a manner that distinguishes him from other forms of screen masculinities at the time. He is often depicted in relation to more stereotypical "feminine" values such as weakness, tenderness, and an excess of emotions versus the more aggressive self-made man represented by Cagney and Robinson on the Warner lot and Clark Gable at M-G-M. Brent's image and his performances challenge Robert Sklar's idea of "the city boy"²²⁶ as the dominant Warner Bros. image of masculinity. Brent's image as the urbane, cynical, educated middle-class man capable of deep romantic love is in direct opposition to the image of masculinity as reliant on the idea of independence, isolation, and the self-made man.

In her analysis of the murals and plays put on during the Depression under the auspices of the Treasury Section of Fine Arts and the Federal Theatre project, Barbara

Melosh argues that “New Deal gender representations suppressed contemporary sexual conflict through an image that insistently denied men and women’s separate interests. A recurring configuration showed men and women side by side, working together or fighting for a common goal...the comradely ideal.”²²⁷ The new reality of marriage and relationships was that “middle class ideals of marriage shifted from nineteenth-century notions of duty to aspirations for friendship, mutuality, and sexual expression.”²²⁸ It is the image of the “comradely ideal” that I argue Warner Bros. embraced in depicting George Brent onscreen. By showing the diverse nature of male-female relationships during the 1930s Warner Bros. represents the shifting qualities associated with being a man in America.

By shaping masculinities onscreen that combined stereotypical “feminine” elements with more masculine ones Warner Bros. was able to create a model of masculinity that recognized the growing emphasis on consumerism and the self in America at the time. Perhaps no change in male experience more greatly signaled the transformation of America than the emphasis on sex in the popular culture.

The importance of sex and discussions of male sexuality in particular cannot be overstated in a discussion of the changing landscape of American masculinities in the 1920s and 1930s. In his book *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America* historian Kevin White shows how the women’s expectations that men were capable of providing them with adequate sexual experiences influenced the larger understanding of marriage and male-female sexual relationships in the 1920s and 1930s because of the increasing availability of sex manuals and the

expanding discourse about the nature of sex. He states that, “men were required to perform in bed. Men were to be masterly...but while being masterly men were also supposed to display ‘tenderness’ and ‘gentle manhood.’”²²⁹ This shift from an emphasis on only male pleasure in relationships to the idea of mutual pleasures shows the ways that marriage and sexual relationships were altered and the value that was placed on viewing sexuality as a mutual experience. The image of sexuality as a means of freedom and expression was captured in the films produced in the early 1930s. Molly Haskell points out in her book *From Reverence to Rape* that open expressions of sexuality for women were viewed as normal in early 1930s films. She states that, “women were entitled to initiate sexual encounters, to pursue men, even to embody certain ‘male’ characteristics without being stigmatized as ‘unfeminine’ or predatory. Nor was their sexuality thought of as cunning and destructive...rather it was unabashedly front and center, and if a man allowed himself to be victimized by a woman’s sex, it was probably through some long-standing misapprehension of his own nature.”²³⁰

Brent’s performances and some of his films symbolize this level of misapprehension in men during the 1930s as they struggled to find the means to define their own gender while also trying to determine how to relate to women in the face of the economic crisis. One such role for Brent that illustrated the misapprehension and fear of middle class men during the Depression was that of Geoffrey Gault.

The Crash (Dieterle, 1932)

The film *The Crash* depicts the tumultuous relationship between Linda Gault (Ruth Chatterton) her husband Geoffrey Gault (George Brent) and her lover John Fair

(Henry Kolker. John Fair is a millionaire with whom Linda has an affair with in order to secure stock tips. Linda breaks off the affair on the day before the collapse of the stock market in October 1929. Yet, her husband fearful that the market is about to crash asks Linda to use her charm and sexuality to secure an insider tip from Fair, when Fair attends one of their parties. Linda tries but Fair is unwilling to help them unless she agrees to divorce her husband. Linda refuses and then in an effort to cover up her failure to secure the information, she lies to Geoff telling him that Fair says the market is going to keep going up. The next day the market crashes and Geoff loses everything. Afraid of facing poverty as she had when she was a child Linda asks Geoff to send her away to Bermuda with a letter of credit until things get better. In Bermuda Linda meets Ronnie Sanderson (Paul Cavanaugh) an Australian sheep rancher with whom she falls in love with. She returns to New York to get a divorce from Geoff in order to marry Ronnie. When her maid Celeste (Barbara Leonard) steals her pearl necklace in an attempt to save her boyfriend (Hardie Albright) who had embezzled money on the basis of Linda's false stock tip, Linda loses the only thing of value that could be used to pay for the divorce. Linda then takes a job selling expensive gowns in order to earn the money for the divorce. Ronnie arrives from Bermuda and offers to pay all her expenses if she will leave with them that evening on a boat for England. Geoff and Ronnie are introduced and quarrel but Geoff gives up. He then tries to secure funds to get back in the market by blackmailing Fair with love letters he had written to Linda. Fair gives Geoff ten thousand dollars and defeated he returns to his apartment where he finds Linda waiting to say goodbye. However, when Linda sees all her furniture and other things that Geoff has kept

in spite of their poverty, she realizes that perhaps he has loved her all along. He confesses that he has blackmailed Fair and not been the best of husbands and she confesses that she gave him the bad stock tip that led to their financial ruin. In the end, Linda realizes that she loves Geoff and that he needs her to take care of him because without her he would be lost. She decides to stay with him and try to start their marriage over on the basis of love and companionship.

In his history of the Depression Fredrick Lewis Allen notes that, “finally the Panic had come as a natural shock—a first shock to the illusion that American capitalism had led a charmed life”²³¹ As one of the few films to address the hedonistic life style behind the economic boom and bust of the 1920s this film represents an attempt by Warner Bros. to critique the image of “American capitalism” as a “charmed life.” The film explores the illusory image of the ‘charmed life’ through the complicated and tumultuous relationship of Geoffrey and Linda Gault, an urban upper middle-class couple who have accepted the image of consumerism as a model of happiness. The film addresses the problem with viewing the image of upper class masculinity as productive because it shows it to be lacking in character and the ability to produce anything of real value to the larger society.

It is Gault’s reliance on his wife’s charm and sexuality that demonstrate the problematic nature of the screen masculinity with which Brent was associated. For in this role he is a man of wealth and luxury who does not earn his money honestly or with hard work but through the manipulation of other men via his wife’s sexuality and charm. Later

in the film he asks Linda after she has ended her affair with a wealthy banker John Fair to secure some insider knowledge on the future stability of the stock market.

Brent is photographed in a medium close-up using soft focus so that his face seems more rounded and less masculine when he enters Linda's bedroom before their dinner party. The couple discusses the events of their day as Linda continues to dress for dinner. Geoff tells Linda that it was "very strange, 4 million share day—heavy selling and most of it pretty well absorbed. But I can't find any reason for it. Everything looks perfectly serene unless some of the big chaps are getting ready to unload." What Geoff fears is that the market is beginning to get soft or that those who have had the most to gain are about to use their strength in the market to crush the smaller players. In his history of the twenties Fredrick Lewis Allen argues that one of the factors behind the early selling was forced selling where hundreds of thousands of shares were dumped onto the market by traders whose margins were exhausted or about to be called in, and that it was this utilization of speculative credit and value to purchase stocks which acted to over inflate the market.²³² Within this film it sets the audience up for the drastic events to come, it also offers a possible explanation for the Crash, but more importantly it is the moment where Geoff's fears of monetary emasculation collide with his need to maintain a sense of control and wealth. Linda emerges in a fancy black evening gown and in a playful manner tells him to "stop talking about business and look at me. Pay some attention to your wife. Other men find me quite desirable, don't you know?" Chatterton is photographed first in a medium close-up and then a long shot to show off her beautiful face and her desirable body as the epitome of fashion and sex.

The same camera set-up is used when Brent is first introduced in the picture. He too is shown to be an object of desire like Chatterton, because they are both consistently photographed using a three point lighting set-up that emphasizes the contrasts of their face and the ethereal quality of their personas with highlights on their hair and eyes.

Geoff is dressed in a swallow tail coat that serves to mark him as someone of class and refinement. By emphasizing Brent's good-looks, quiet reserve and clothing him in a dinner suit, Warner Bros. have returned to selling Brent in connection with an image of masculinity that is urbane, cynical, fashionable, and upper class. The character of Geoff is connected to a world of consumption, fashion, and leisure in an effort to heighten the image of him as a man incapable of producing real value through hard work or ingenuity.

Geoff smiles and looks longingly at his wife and tells her that, "I am going to pay a little attention just as soon as I get the market off my mind." Geoff is photographed in a medium close-up as he smiles so that the image of his youthful sexuality marked by his dimples is highlighted for audiences. Geoff playfully cocks his head in the scene as he is shown to be a man trying to assert control in his own home. But unlike in *The Purchase Price* where he uses more austere poses and harsh looks, here Brent relies on a playful sense of charm as he smiles, cocks his head and looks longingly at his wife in the film.

Linda angrily tells Geoff, "I wish you wouldn't do these idiotic tricks every now and then, especially with John Fair. If you had insisted I could have had him next week." Linda's statement is in reference to Geoff's constant use of her sexuality in an attempt to secure their wealth, a strategy that Linda is growing tired off, as is shown in the first

scene in the film when Linda breaks off her relationship with Fair. Geoff, unaware that Linda's assistance in securing stock tips from Fair had developed into an affair and more focused on the future of the market tells Linda that, "the market won't wait until next week. It may not even wait until tomorrow. Now if there is going to be a sharp break I need to know so that I can get out in time and get back in lower down...I just have to know", he says raising his voice and hand. "This fellow Fair can tell." Brent's reliance on a combination of charm and dominance in this scene point towards how Warner Bros. were trying to form his masculine image as the conjunction of more "soft" masculine qualities like charm, and an emphasis on appearance with that of more "hard" ones such as aggression, domination, and brutality. Underlining this scene is Geoff's fear that he is losing his grasp of the market and his ability to control his wife.

Linda, now understanding that Geoff wants her to use charm and flirtatious ability to pry information from Fair tries to show Geoff the consequences of his actions as she tells him, "how can I get tips without attracting men? Every time I do you order me not to see them again." She then looks away from her husband hoping that he will change his mind. Linda then realizes that Geoff is incapable of accomplishing anything on his own and asks him, "Geoff can't you possibly manage this?"

Geoff with cigarette in hand takes a seat next to his wife on the chaise lounge and looks into her eyes. Here Geoff is photographed in a close-up with the emphasis on his eyes and gentle lips as he plays the scene as if it is a moment of romance rather than what the narrative seems to indicate that it is: a moment of coercion. Geoff tells Linda, "it needn't involve you. Naturally you aren't going to ask him point blank. Find out if he is

going to Europe and when, or if he has cancelled his reservations. Tell him you have some money to invest. Naturally he will recommend something or tell you to hold off a bit. That's all I want to know." Linda attempts to refuse his request. He then convinces her to flirt with Fair when he challenges her ability to use her beauty and charm to entice men. Linda, hurt by Geoff's assumption, tells him "Geoff you will put me in a hole like this just once too often."

Geoff pleased with his results kisses her hand and tells her that, "this is the last time." Linda replies "it's always the last time." The indication is that Geoff has been consistently using his wife to acquire stock tips and is blind to the reality that his immoral actions are affecting Linda's sense of self esteem and her feelings towards him.

After dinner Linda sits in a dark corner with Fair trying to pry information from him using false declarations of sentiment to which he replies, "a man to be successful can have no illusions about himself. And I have none. No illusions, no ideals, only desires. And I have only one desire Linda." Fair's statement about his own character and feelings towards her reveals that he is a man capable of setting aside all sense of propriety because he has the time and wealth to do so. Fair offers Linda a chance to have excitement and money, but only if she was to leave Geoff." Still, Linda believes her husband to be a good man despite the fact that he has used her sexuality to ensure greater wealth. Geoff's reliance on Linda and her looks presents a image of masculinity that was weak and immoral because he did not make money through honest hard work, but through acts of deception. Yet, as Linda's relationship with Fair and Geoff illustrate these men of wealth are immoral because all they desire is more money and possessions. Both are images of

the problems associated with the values of the self-made man that had developed in the 1920s as America shifted from a nation of small towns and farms to one of industrialization, urban conclaves, and a belief that capitalism could solve any problem.

Linda smiles at Fair and tells him in a soft voice that, “so glad to hear the stock market is going back up. I have some money to invest. What do you think I should do with it?” Fair now sees through Linda’s deceptions and cynically says to her, “Remember your last note written to me...I believe I could repeat them all. Jack my sweet please take me to lunch tomorrow since you helped Geoff make that terrific killing in Cobra copper, you’ve got to help me spend some of it...That note meant nothing to you either. Are you asking me about the market because you want to make another killing?” Linda curtly tells him “No.” Fair still not sold by Linda’s charm tells her that, “it is not my habit to do something for nothing. So I shan’t tell you,” he says as he leans in closer to try and kiss her.

Linda realizes that Jack is not going to help them and simply says “Thank you Jack dearest. You’ve been generous,” as she gets up from the couch and walks out of the room. Fair uses his affection for Linda as a weapon against Geoff because for Fair men like Geoff are not to be trusted or aided. Fair is a man of society, wealth, power, and knowledge and as a result he is capable of offering those in need assistance. However, it is implied that he is opposed to sharing his knowledge with Linda unless she is willing to continue sharing her body with him.

After the dinner party as Geoff and Linda talk in her bedroom the discussion is focused on Fair and what he has told Linda. Linda, in a moment of anger lies and tells

Geoff that, “it was easy, like that—she snaps her fingers. Market is perfectly all right. Everything is going up. This recession doesn’t mean a thing. They are simply trying to shake out the little fellows or something like that.”

Geoff excited by the news and pleased that Linda can still use sex to elicit information triumphantly tells her, “that’s all I wanted to know. Get yourself something tomorrow you’ve earned it.” He then leans back and places his head in her lap and lights a cigarette from hers.

Geoff begins to recognize that money may provide them with commodities but it damaged their chances at happiness. He tells her that, “seems to me the more money we make the more wretched we are. It wasn’t this way when we were poor.” In this scene Geoff and Linda are again on the chaise lounge but we see them in a close-up as they are nestled close together. The themes of poverty and wealth course throughout their relationship. Linda tells Geoff that the problem with their relationship is “this unspoken conspiracy between us. I solicit tips with my charm and you convert them into money. And that has killed everything there ever was between us. Sometimes I am half sick with shame with the things I do.” Geoff realizes in this moment that his actions, which have made them wealthy have also destroyed any real sense of companionship between them. Even more important, it illustrates that he is a man who is incapable of making his own fortune, but the money, for him is the only way to keep his wife.

When Geoff delivers the line, “Do you think I would touch that money if it wasn’t for you? How do you think I could hold you if I didn’t make more money year after year” he is framed in a medium close-up so that the camera can capture the intensity and look

of devotion for Linda in his eyes as he plays the scene of Geoff trying to absolve himself of his actions by putting the blame on Linda's desires. By connecting Geoff's self-worth, masculinity and love for Linda to money the film shows the negative effects of the accumulation of wealth on relationships and individuals. It is these negative effects that are explored throughout the rest of the film.

The next day Geoff buys more stock even as the market is collapsing. Fredrick Lewis Allen noted that with the collapse of the market the paper profits were swept away and in the process the "grocer, the window cleaner, and the seamstress had lost their capital. In every town there were families, which had suddenly dropped from showy affluence into debt. Investors who had dreamed of retiring to live on their fortunes now found themselves back once more at the beginning of the long road to riches."²³³

Geoff and Linda will also experience the "long road back to riches" as they lose their luxurious penthouse, fine foods, clothes, club memberships, leisure, and eventually their love for one another when Linda cannot face the possibility that they may be poor again and Geoff cannot come to terms with the reality that he has built their lives and future on a method of deception. Geoff pawns his cuff links and anything else he can find to secure Linda's passage. She leaves Geoff and New York to escape the realities of their terrible situation. While in Bermuda Linda meets Ronnie an Englishman who is on vacation from his sheep farm in Australia. Linda falls in love with Ronnie because of his intense devotion to her needs and because he is shown to be a man who values hard work. When Ronnie realizes that he too, loves Linda he explains that he cannot remain with her unless she is willing to get a divorce.

Geoff is unwilling to grant the divorce and when Linda runs out of money she goes to work in a high-end fashion boutique as a model. Geoff disapproves of Linda working because as he tells her one afternoon “I want you to chuck this silly nonsense and quit. After all I am your husband and it’s up to me to support you....I have a little pride left. Must you publicly humiliate me?” The scene between the two is framed in a medium long shot so that the emphasis is placed on their faces and bodily movements in the scene. Brent plays this moment between the two using his hands and his eyes, which he half way closes as he delivers the line. Geoff’s statement illustrates his inability to see how he has been humiliating his wife by asking her seduce to men for stock tips.

Geoff tries to show his masculinity when he meets Ronnie, who also shows up at the shop to see Linda. As Linda helps a customer the two men size one another up and Geoff attempts to dismiss Ronnie’s affection for Linda and in the process insults him. Brent is framed in a medium shot as he delivers the line, “so you are flesh and blood after all. I thought you might be one of Linda’s young flings.” Geoff then threatens Ronnie with violence saying, “I ought to punch you right in the face.” In this scene Brent plays Geoff as sullen figure capable of violence in opposition to Paul Cavanaugh’s performance of Ronnie as a mild mannered, sophisticated gentleman. Ronnie uses words and reason rather than violent reactions to explain the situation. He tells Geoff “I can give her the things she needs, the rest will come later,” when Geoff argues that Ronnie will never be capable of making Linda happy because she is a woman who values money and commodities over all other things and people. Finally Geoff grasps the fact that he has lost Linda to this man and leaves without saying goodbye.

In a last ditch effort Geoff takes Linda's love letters to Fair that he discovers and attempts to use them to force Fair to give him a loan because he is "about to apply for a position in the breadline." Fair simply laughs off Geoff's assessment and tells him that he is letting fear guide his feelings and decision-making. In fact, it is fear that drives Geoff; the fear that he will lose Linda without an income because Geoff believes Linda is only capable of loving a man with money with because of her fear of returning to a life of poverty, as she knew as a young girl. Fair writes Geoff a check for \$10,000 dollars and explains that, "we are not gentleman now, we are business men. You are selling something that is not yours and I am buying back something that really never was mine."

On her way to the docks with Ronnie to leave for Europe Linda decides to stop and say goodbye to Geoff. She walks into his apartment and the first thing she notices is that he has kept all her furniture even as he as struggled to survive. The furniture represents for Linda an indication that Geoff has paid attention to her desires, and despite the fact that it is possessions, which catch her eye; it is a symbol of Geoff's love for her. Geoff returns and they discuss all the bad things that have transpired between them. Linda explains that it is her fault that they lost everything and Geoff apologizes for selling her letters for money. Linda takes the check, and tears it up. She is finally willing to set aside money and material comfort and Geoff sees that he is incomplete without her. Geoff places his head in her lap. In the last line of the film Linda tells him, "we are going to begin all over. I am not going to leave you darling. You need somebody to take care of you" before fading to the credits. Her statement shows that Geoff is incapable of taking of himself and Linda recognizes this in the end because he was willing to sacrifice

everything including his love for her. The last scene also speaks to the idea of “the comradely ideal.” Melosh argues that this concept was a major aspect of the artistic side of the New Deal because it embraced the idea of “marriage [as] a trope for citizenship.”²³⁴ In forming this ideal couple from the ashes of the stock market crash, economic hardship, infidelity, and lack of respect for another the picture paints a negative portrait of American masculinities that are defined by fashion and consumerism. For in the end these two people and their troubles illustrate the dangers of a society where the emphasis is placed on appearance, possessions, and the self.

Still Warner Bros. viewed the film to be one of their most important in 1932 and saw it as the film that would transform George Brent from an actor into a star. The publicity department developed a six part feature entitled “The Life of George Brent” to correspond with the film’s release. In the story the studio chart his past and arrival in Hollywood all while emphasizing his romantic good looks “tall, black-haired, hazel-eyed,” his Irishness and most importantly his marriage to Ruth Chatterton.²³⁵

Yet the immediacy of the events depicted and the lack of sympathetic characters impacted the film’s reception with critics who found the picture lacking in interest. In her review Muriel Babcock stated that, “as a motion picture, this matter of fact realism is its greatest weakness. There is not a really good sour villain to hiss, nor yet a real heroic hero or heroine to admire and like.”²³⁶ Marquis Busby in the *Los Angeles Examiner* echoes Babcock’s assessment noting that “maybe it is a good picture, but it will reflect little credit on anyone.”²³⁷ While the reviewers did not like the film for its lack of hero or heroine, they made a point of linking the films box office potential to Brent-Chatterton’s

recent marriage. *Variety* noted that the, “picture release is timely anyhow, coming on the heels of the Chatterton-Brent nuptials.”²³⁸ Still the belief was that perhaps the film would appeal to female audiences as indicated when *Variety* pointed out that the film “may arouse mild interest among femme fans, but for others it makes dull entertainment... Circumstance that has the lead opposite his bride may be the occasion of a flutter of feminine interest.”²³⁹

What is interesting in examining the reviews of the period is the way that they focus first on Chatterton’s wardrobe and then her character’s negative actions. Busby in his review argues that, “you feel that the heroine is a vain, selfish woman... that the husband is weak to be pitied but not deserving sympathy.”²⁴⁰ Muriel Babcock stated that, “Miss Chatterton gives a good consistent performance and manages despite her unpleasant character to be glamorous.”²⁴¹ Mae Tinee noted that, “Miss Chatterton performs in her usual, cautious, rhetorical fashion. She wears some stunning clothes.”²⁴²

Most of the reviews focus on Chatterton’s performance and those that do mention Brent are mildly enthusiastic. “Babcock states that “Brent in his handsome and sullen role in several caddish acts, does good acting but the fans will heartily dislike him as a person.”²⁴³ *Variety* calls Brent’s role “less than attractive. Brent’s wedding to Chatterton would not be enough to sell him to audiences. It would require developing him into a more masculine presence onscreen that could combine elements of a rugged tough masculinity with his screen style of compassion and tenderness that is representative of the fluctuating nature of masculinity during the 1930s.

Female (Curtiz, 1933)

Brent was teamed for the fourth and final time with his wife Ruth Chatterton for this film. In the film he plays Jim Thorne a headstrong engineer who resists the seductive charm of his boss, Alison Drake, a wealthy woman who owns and operates an automobile manufacturing plant that she has inherited from her deceased father. Alison is a modern woman of business who is cynical about love preferring instead to use her position as president of the company to seduce eager, handsome young men who work for her at the factory. However one night Alison grows tired of her society friends and their easy friendships and leaves her own party for excitement and “real” people. She disguises herself as working class by wearing a simple dress and trench coat. Alison meets Jim (George Brent) at a shooting gallery. She becomes intrigued by him when he declines her sexual advances after they have spent an evening together. Jim shows up the next morning at the office where Alison learns that he is the renowned engineer that she had worked so hard to get for her company. She then invites him to her house to discuss business, but when Jim again resists her advances Alison becomes angry and jealous. She hires a private detective to track his movements in hopes of learning whether or not he has a girlfriend. Alison then stages a picnic and invites Jim to it. In order to make him like her she acts as if she is a woman of little skill and knowledge, which excites Jim. They spend the rest of the night together talking about love, and the future. The next day Jim proposes marriage but Alison refuses and he angrily quits his job. Alison finally realizes that she is in love with him and nearly ruins her business when she chooses to find Jim rather than meet with bankers. Alison locates Jim at a carnival shooting gallery

and professes her love for him. Together they race to an airport so that they can make the meeting with the bankers. In the end, Alison removes herself from her company in order to start a large family with Jim. The tagline for the film “see how she bosses him around” encapsulates the tension of the picture. These tensions between a fear of women in the workplace and as possessing a sex drive similar to men are addressed in *Female* in the relationship between Jim Thorne (Brent) and Alison Drake (Chatterton).

Alison first meets Thorne one night when she escapes into the city from one of her own social events. She is in search of someone who will pay attention to her as a simple woman rather than the wealthy and beautiful owner of a large automobile manufacturing company.

Brent is first introduced in the film as Thorne while at a shooting gallery. He is framed in a medium long shot and is dressed in a simple suit with a fedora on his head. Here Brent through the lighting and costuming is characterized as more of a man of the middle class rather than that of the upper class, as well as the fact that he is spending his time at a shooting gallery, which was a fairly common middle-and working-class pastime. Alison watches intently as the good- looking man fires at the targets, but just as Thorne is focused on the targets, Alison is focused on Thorne. She decides to try and catch his attention and so she joins in the shooting competition. The scene is designed as a battle of sexes as there are cuts from each shooter to a target and back. Alison is shown to be the man’s equal but then as they are both nearing the bull’s eye, she deliberately misses the last target. The man with gun in hand briefly glances over at Alison and wryly smiles. He then pays the attendant and turns and walks down the street. She follows him

to a lemonade stand where as he sips lemonade she tries to engage him in conversation with no luck. “Strong, silent, type, huh, “ she says as she looks him over and drinks her drink. Thorne framed in a medium close-up so that the camera is able to show his stoic expression, replies “what do you want me to do, start singing?”

He then asks her where she learned to shoot so well. She sarcastically tells him that she learned from Buffalo Bill. The two continue to laugh and joke with each other. They then go dancing at a cheap dance hall before ending the night eating hamburgers at a hamburger stand. She tries to ask him too many questions, including his name and he sternly says, “You’re too fresh. Eat your hamburger.” He finishes his meal and then turns and walks away from her. She asks him where he is going and he explains that, “we’ve had a big evening. I took you dancing and bought you an elegant supper. Now get on your bicycle and peddle along wherever you’re going,” She just laughs and tells him that she is going with him, but he is not keen on this idea. He explains to her that, “You’re a nice kid but I don’t take pick-ups home with me.” Alison may have believed herself capable of picking up this good-looking young man but when he declines her offer two older women in shabby clothes, that the film indicates are prostitutes ask “what’s the matter dearie, something wrong with your technique” and then laugh.

Thorne later discovers that the young woman he met on the street is now his boss Alison Drake when he walks into her office. Outside of Alison’s large picture window there are images of smoke stacks and heavy machinery that display the mechanical realities of the world in which Alison spends her days as the president of the company. At first, Thorne believes the young girl to be playing another game with him, but when he

discovers that she is Miss Drake it unsettles him and his male bravado. He quickly sits down and stammers “Miss Drake...you...you.” In this moment he has lost all sense of authority and his own self-confidence as Alison tells him in a very brusque manner that she wants to see his blue prints as she stares at her paperwork. “I haven’t got time to talk about it [his plans] now. Come to my house to dinner tonight and we can discuss it then.” Thorne is unaware that Alison uses the business over dinner excuse to lure handsome young men to her house, as is depicted in several instances prior in the film. In this sequence the lighting, framing, and Chatterton’s gaze objectify him. When the sequence begins Alison is shown staring at Thorne as he is bent over a table explaining his plans for the addition of an automatic clutch to Drake automobiles. Despite the fact that Thorne is shown wearing a tuxedo it is clear that he is not a man of wealth because he displays an interest in mechanical things rather than Alison’s beauty or the image of luxury that she displays with her expensive looking dress and furnishings. She stares at his face, rather than the plans, which unsettles Thorne when he asks, “Do you see the advantage of that?”

In the following shot Thorne is positioned within the middle of the frame and dominates the image because Alison is positioned in the foreground in the lower left hand part of the screen. His sexuality is highlighted with the camera’s positioning because he is shown in a medium close-up so that the framing and light emphasize his smooth rounded face and slicked back hair. The costuming of Brent in a tuxedo versus that of a simple suit allows Warner Bros. the opportunity to show the complex nature of his masculinities, as throughout the rest of this sequence and other key scenes Brent’s “soft”

masculinity are employed for female consumption in conjunction with an image that is more “tough” and traditional.

Thorne sees that Alison is not really interested in discussing the plans and the conversations shifts to a more friendly tone. Thorne tells Alison, “You know you’re a very amazing person...because you forget so completely running a factory.” Alison locks arms with him and calmly says, “You mean because I become so completely a woman. Few people have the intelligence to realize that. They confuse the two things [womanhood and business] so hopelessly.” They then talk about the first night they met and she explains that, “I needed you that night. I needed to have some one accept me as plain woman.” She attempts to flirt with him when she tells him, “You know you have a perfectly charming smile.” Thorne taken aback by her comment walks around the sofa and back to the table where his drawings are to study them rather than her. Alison refuses to give up on the possibility that she can seduce him and says, “I think if you had said come here [that night], yanked me into a corner and kissed me I’d have been terribly grateful. It would have made me feel more sure of myself...if someone wanted me for what I am without all this,” she waves her hand pointing to all the luxury items present in the room. However, Thorne is not convinced that Alison is innocent or lacks confidence. He tells her, “I can’t image you being unsure of yourself. A girl who works 12 to 14 hours a day in an office making rapid fire decisions isn’t very apt to become unsure of herself just because she left her office.”

Alison throws a pillow on the floor by the fireplace as the film has shown before in previous encounters with other men and then sits down. She then looks up at Thorne

and motions for him to come and sit next her. Thorne is shown in a low angle with a stern look on his face when he realizes that Alison is not interested in his labors but in his body. Incensed by her actions he forcefully tells her, "You may be President of Drake Automobile Company but I was engaged as an engineer not as a gigolo. And I am not holding my job humoring any little whim of yours. And hereafter when you want to talk business, you can see me at the factory." Thorne is not a man willing to succumb to her charms and flirtations unlike other men and it is this quality about him that drives Alison to strive even harder to make him hers. With this speech it is illustrated that Thorne's masculinity may be "soft" because he is accepting of a woman running a business, he is capable of being tender and attentive to her needs, and he is respectful of her but when she does not show him the same treatment, Thorne's "hard" qualities are displayed. Work and recognition of a good job become one of the central conflicts throughout the rest of the film and it is depicted through Thorne and Alison's constant battle of the sexes.

In an attempt to better understand Thorne from a man's point of view, Alison asks her male personal assistant's advice. He tells her that, "a man of Jim Thorne's type wants a woman who will look up to him. Gentle, feminine, someone he can protect. That's because Thorne is strong. And rather primitive perhaps. The dominant male." Not wishing to be beaten at her own game Alison asks her personal secretary to tell Thorne that there is a company picnic, which he should attend if possible. Thorne shows up at the place for the picnic only to find Alison there and then she tells him that it has been cancelled. She then pretends to be incapable of lighting a fire or getting the water to make coffee thereby performing the image of femininity as weak and reliant on masculine

assistance. It is this shift in the dynamics of their relationships, which attracts Thorne and after much disgruntled behavior he remains and the two engage in an intimate and relaxing conversation.

Thorne tells Alison, “Do you realize that I know you are four entirely different people. The girl at the shooting gallery, she was amusing. Then the girl at the factory, she’s a very efficient, capable sort of thinking machine. And the girl at your house that night for dinner. I didn’t like her.” Alison cautiously asks, “why not?” In one of the clearest examples of the style of masculinity that the film speaks about, Thorne tells her, “perhaps because I am a man and I prefer to do my own hunting.”

Kevin White points out that the one of the key factors involved in explaining or charting the change in sexual relations and understanding of masculinity in the late 1920s into the 1930s was consumer culture. By making men accept the idea that open and aggressive displays of sexuality were appropriate because advertisers of the new consumer culture were celebrating these behaviors as masculine and necessary for the American economy, White shows how America’s Victorian ideals were replaced by the frank needs and desires of the middle class who were developing the means to accept sex as something free of ethical judgment.²⁴⁴ Along with this changing dynamic in sexual relations was the changing nature of the American political scene as women had gained the right to vote in the 1920s and a growing realization that more and more women were to be found in the workplace, once believed to be a bastion of male privilege, rather than in the home.

The tension in the relationship between Thorne and Alison is clearly class based. Thorne is representative of the middle class idea of male-female relationships and marriage as is illustrated when he joyously bounds into her office with a marriage license believing that their intimacy the night before was meaningful. Alison scoffs at the notion of marriage explaining that marriage isn't for me—for us. After all we can be so happy as we are. Oh, let's don't spoil everything.” As she tells him her true feelings, she softly rubs his arm but Thorne isn't willing to accept Alison's view of relationships where free love is the result, and something that she is able to engage in because of her wealth. She does not need a man to take care of her. Alison's statement and her behaviors throughout the film illustrate that here is a woman who is capable of “living like men do” as she tells an old girlfriend earlier in the film. Thorne is merely another employee and conquest for Alison.

He challenges her decency because she does not wish to marry him, despite the indication that the two have engaged in some form of sexual activity. For a man like Thorne, sex is something sacred and a marker of the intimacy shared between two people in love, and this assumption makes him seem more feminine in this moment while Alison's view of sex as a means of recreation connects her to a more masculine ideal.

Thorne is shown in a medium close-up in an extended speech when he gruffly criticizes Alison's morals, behaviors, and actions towards him. This speech is interesting because it marks the only moment in the film where Brent is allowed to display real anger and intensity in a fashion that is similar to his performance in *The Purchase Price*. In fact, Jim Thorne's reaction to Alison's using of him and lack of respect for his love is

performed in a style similar to Jim Gilson's reaction to being pushed away on his wedding night. In both cases, Brent performs a masculinity that is a strange combination of a "soft" masculinity based in emotion and that of a "hard" masculinity linked to qualities of aggression, anger, and surliness.

Thorne tells Alison, "I suppose you think you're too superior for marriage, love, and children. The things that women were born for. Who do you think you are? Are you so drunk with your importance you think you can make your own rules? Well, you're a fake. You've been playing this part so long you've begun to believe it. The great superwoman. Cracking your whip and making the poor fools around here jump. You and your new freedom. Why if you weren't so pathetic you'd be funny...the laughs on me offering a marriage license to a pick-up." He tears up the license and then storms out of Alison's office. Much of this speech can be read as explicitly misogynistic in nature. In fact, it seems to speak to the larger fears of American men that they cannot find the means or the method to determine how to relate to women in the new consumer driven model where gender can be easily consumed and constructed. Thorne's comments even speak to the way in which he views Alison as a soulless individual who is consistently playing a part, whether it be that of proud, confident business woman, or sultry temptress or the coy, demure damsel in distress. Moreover they illustrate the gendered assumptions of American men that women should be demure, chaste, and in the home instead of in the workplace.

The film ends making it appear that Alison has chosen her love for Thorne over the company, her father's legacy and her employees. Instead she is now devoted to

Thorne who tells her that, "I'd like to see anybody take that business from you," when she searches for him rather than going to New York to meet with bankers in an effort to save the company. Thorne understands the importance of the company to Alison and their future thus he is shown to be willing to fight to keep it at all costs. However Alison's fiery, and businesslike demeanor is replaced when she merely laughs and says, "somebody already has taken it away from me. You're gonna run it from now on. I never want to see that factory again." She then tells him that she is going to stay home and have babies rather than continue to battle for acceptance in a masculine arena like the world of business. The ending of the film serves to restore the view of femininity in connection with love, marriage, the home, and irrational behavior and celebrates the image of masculinity as authoritative, rational, and confident.

In his review for the film Mordaunt Hall stated that, "here is a film which is infinitely better than its title might lead one to expect...it has the saving grace of having been produced with a sense of humor."²⁴⁵ Hall also praises Brent noting that, "Brent does quite well as Thorne. He is a strong-minded, good-looking fellow who frowns upon Alison setting her cap at him."²⁴⁶ Jerry Hoffman argued that the film, "is a thin story made interesting mainly by direction."²⁴⁷ However he too, finds merit in Brent's performance noting that, George Brent, in real life the husband of Miss Chatterton, is the strong silent person who arouses the thoroughly feminine instincts of the girl."²⁴⁸ *Motion Picture Herald* urged theater owners to get behind the film because, "here's a surprise package. It is not gigantic, it is smart, clean, clever, genuine entertainment...it should catch the fancy of sophisticates as well as the gallery gang, as both big city and small

town fare.”²⁴⁹ *Variety* believed the film to be poor arguing that, “this story is worthy neither of this actress or the high grade production accorded it.” Of Brent’s performance they noted that, “Brent merely has to refrain from being a push over to stand out over the other men in the troupe.”²⁵⁰ In looking at the reviews it is clear that this was a film that met with mixed reaction, as was Brent’s performance. Brent’s performance as Thorne like that of Jim Gilson relies too much on an image of a “hard” sullen masculinity that Brent was not nearly as capable of conveying and it is for this reason that I argue Warner Bros. continued to struggle with Brent’s screen image.

Brent and Chatterton separated in the early part of 1934. Brent’s status as an available love interest quickly became the subject of gossip columns and articles about the nature of screen masculinity and marriage. Louella Parsons pointed out in her gossip column “Movie Go-Round” that “George Brent is like a kid out of school since his separation from Ruth Chatterton. He never went anywhere before, now you see him looking very gay and handsome at the fights, at the night spots, and at the parties. He’s not being careless about his physical condition either. Softened by his Beverly Hills existence, he has not only taken up polo and aviation but plans on going up into the woods for a week of honest to goodness wood chopping before his next picture.”²⁵¹ Muriel Babcock in her article “Bold Individualism Lost When He-Men Travel Along in Double Harness” critiques the influence of women on Hollywood’s male stars noting that it “only takes one woman to make a tea hound out of a He-Man in Hollywood.” Babcock then discusses the state of Brent’s career and relationship with Chatterton pointing out that, “George Brent was a likable, irresponsible Irishman when he fell in love with Ruth

Chatterton. Loved to hunt and fish. He spent most of his time around tea things until lately when simultaneously with announcement of separation from Ruth he announced he was going wood chopping in the mountains to rebuild his muscles.” Both Parsons and Babcock show Brent to be the exemplar of the man about town who is enjoying the good life and at the same time focused on his career and his pursuit of more masculine activities after separating from Chatterton. In fact, Babcock blames women like Chatterton in Hollywood for making the male stars into more effeminate men.

In her “Keyhole Portrait of George Brent” that was written to sell Brent and his new image in M-G-M’s film *The Painted Veil* Harriet Parsons notes that, “he wanted to stand on his own feet and being Mr. Ruth Chatterton wasn’t his idea of independence. So he’s back in circulation and every unattached girl has a predatory eye on him...one of the town’s most attractive men...but right now he’s not interested, as he is out for a career and nothing is going to stop him.”²⁵² Parsons illustrates how women were objectifying Brent with the use of words like “attractive” and “predatory.” Yet, as she works hard to note Brent is not interested in romance at this point, but only his career and his hobbies like polo and aviation. The image of Brent created in this article is that of a good-looking actor with talent, passion, and an ability to conduct himself in activities that were viewed as masculine, all in an effort to re-invent George Brent for Warner Bros. after his relationship with Chatterton had proved detrimental to the company and for Brent himself.

Brent and Chatterton’s marriage would become the subject of numerous front page stories across America when in October of 1934 a New York judge granted

Chatterton a divorce from Brent on the grounds of mental cruelty. Chatterton was noted as saying that, “he objected to my friends and was disagreeable to them. He was generally disagreeable, sulky, domineering, and unsocialable.”²⁵³ What is interesting about their divorce is the way that Chatterton characterizes Brent. The divorce case paints Brent as someone whose masculinity was marked as “domineering” and “sulky.” The publicity surrounding their divorce and Brent’s eventually freedom coincide with the offer of a new contract to him by Warner Bros.²⁵⁴ Brent comes to signify onscreen for Warner Bros. that: he is both a calm, tender, reserved man capable of compassion and love and he is also a man who struggles to define his masculinity in opposition to strong women.

In each case Brent plays these roles with an element of youthful charm, and quiet cynicism. It is these qualities which he will use as Alan Tanner in the comedy *Snowed Under* (Enright, 1936).

Snowed Under (Enright, 1936)

Warner Bros. began planning production on the film as early as April of 1935. In a memo to Hal Wallis, screenwriters Laird and Doyle discuss the possibility of adapting the property for the screen. They state that

In my opinion ‘Snowed Under’ is a perky and valuable property either dramatically or cinematically...it has much usable and pert dialogue. Too, I believe it is peopled with interesting and smart characters who are not too smart to be believable and whose sense of flippery is not too high-comedy to be in the danger zone. I think all the roles are better drawn than that of Tanner; however, it

would be no task to more highly individualize his portrayal....One feature which recommends the property dramatically, presents a handicap for picturization: the entire story is played in a single set by necessity of the characters being trapped in one house...also it seems to me, that it would not be difficult for us to cast.²⁵⁵

Doyle and Laird's memo is illustrative of the strengths and weaknesses of this project as a film and offers some insight into how the company felt about the potential of a comedy that was played in a single location thus making it resemble a stage play or an earlier form of cinema. In fact, Robert Lord in another memo to Wallis in May of 1935 states that, "we are missing a bet in *Snowed Under*. It should be done as a play before we do it as a picture. It would make a perfect light comedy for the New York market...if it is done as a play you will get the additional revenue and the undoubted advantage of seeing it before trying to put it on screen."²⁵⁶ Despite both Lord and the screenwriters' fears and suggestions, the company went ahead with the film and it began production on December 2, 1935 and was completed on January 6, 1936. The film was made for a cost of \$169,000 dollars with Brent billed as the star.²⁵⁷

In the film Brent again plays a middle-class individual only this time he is the failing playwright Alan Tanner who is unable to complete the third act of his new play. His agent and friend Arthur Layton (Porter Hall) convinces Tanner's ex-wife Alice Merritt (Genieve Tobin) to leave New York and travel to Connecticut where Tanner is in seclusion and help him finish the play. When Alice arrives Tanner is so excited to see her that he kisses her. Alice pretends to need money but then begins to help Alan with the play. As she is reading over the play the deputy sheriff Orlando Rowe (Frank McHugh)

arrives to serve Alan with an arrest warrant for failure to pay alimony to his second wife Daisy (Glenda Farrell). Alice invites Orlando and Daisy's young lawyer, McBride (John Eldredge) inside and offers them a glass of hard of apple cider. She explains to them that if they will only let Alan finish the play then there will be no reason to arrest him because he will have the money to pay the back alimony. Alice goes upstairs to prepare rooms for everybody when she discovers Pat Quinn (Patricia Ellis) a young woman who is infatuated with Alan hiding in one of the beds. Daisy, who has been waiting outside in the car then bursts into the house making a scene. However with the aid of the cider, Alice is able to gain control and everyone goes to bed. During the night as they work on the play the other two women wake up and all three end up arguing about Alan, the play, and their feelings for him. To escape the noise and the women, Alan flees into the snowstorm and goes to his housekeepers Liza (Helen Lowell) where he completes the play. The next morning Alan returns to the house and rekindles his love for Alice when he kisses her passionately. Pat walks in on them and furious demands an apology but does not receive one. She seeks comfort in the arms of McBride. Alice and Alan get into a fight and she knocks him out cold with a fireplace poker. Layton arrives by dog sled with the sheriff to read the finished play. Daisy drops her complaint when Layton offers her a part in the new play and Alan proposes to Alice once more.

Brent is first introduced in the film when he is shown in a medium close-up reclining on a couch and talking on the telephone. The framing of Brent is indicative of his status as the star in the picture while also allowing the camera to emphasize his impish good looks as he jokes with his agent and friend Arthur Layton on the phone

about his progress on the third act for the play. What is interesting in this instance is the way Brent is framed as an object of desire for a beautiful young blonde haired woman who sits across from him and stares at him. In effect Brent becomes the object of the viewer's attention as well as that of the unnamed female character.

The young woman it is later revealed is college age and infatuated with Tanner but when she begins to interfere with his work, he picks her up and carries her out of his house and puts her into her car. He explains that, "I am a very bad education for school girls. Now scoot. I gotta a lot of work to do today." Brent delivers the lines with a cross between sarcasm and gentle indifference thereby showing that his character, whom we discover is a bit of ladies man because of his many marriages, has grown weary of dealing with young women like her, especially now that she is no longer able to craft perfect plays anymore. He tells her that, "now is the winter of our discontent" a reference to Shakespeare's Richard III Act One, scene one. However, where Shakespeare intended the line for a scene of drama, here the line is used as a comedic quip.

Tanner returns to his typewriter where he struggles to come up with anything that is useful for his play until his housekeeper interrupts him. Liza enters the study and informs him that his supper is ready and she is now leaving for the night. She then offers him advice on women and relationships telling him that, "I'll be switched if I know why you city folks, artists, and writers and such is always changing wives. Well, Luke [Liza's husband] says it's like the hot fever used to be. This divorcing, seems like it runs through a whole neighborhood." Brent simply smiles at Liza, annoyed by her comments and says

curtly, “you thank Luke for his good advice.” Liza then leaves and he begins to work interrupted until someone knocks on his door and his first wife Alice arrives.

Alice played by Genevieve Tobin is shown to be a rational woman who uses her wits and knowledge of the world to help Alan with his play and with the many jams which he finds himself in as a result of his good looks and sex appeal. The relationship which is depicted between the two is illustrative of the idea of the “comradely ideal” that Melosh argues is at the heart of all New Deal art. In this case, it is Alice’s tenderness, honest criticism, and willingness to help Alan succeed at all costs that is celebrated as the ideal form of relationship because she helps him at all costs. Yet, their relationship is far from perfect as is shown in two key scenes.

The first occurs when the house is overrun with Alan’s current wife, Daisy, the young girl infatuated with him, the deputy sheriff and Daisy’s lawyer McBride. Everyone goes to bed but Alice and Alan who work tirelessly on the play. Pat is awakened and comes into the study and begins screaming at Alice because she is jealous. The two women argue about Alan as he sits at his typewriter directly in the middle of them.

Allen is framed in a medium shot so that his irritated expression is visible as well as the typewriter and the two women who flank him on the left and the right. In the scene they dominate because they are standing and using more active body movements while he sits passively listening to them criticize his character and actions. In this scene it is clear that Allen represents an image of masculinity as hen-pecked, thus showing that even though it is his home, he in fact lacks any sense of control over it, his love life, or even

his work. The women are the dominant force in this scene and throughout much of the film.

Alice tells Pat that Alan, “is a child my dear, in many ways. He needs mothering and guiding and a good firm hand to get him out of a jam he gets himself into.” Alice’s statement connects to an image of femininity that is threatening because it serves to emasculate men, rather than to help them feel secure in their masculinity. As Alice tells Pat this, Allen looks on in amazement and shock as he realizes that despite his best efforts to control his life and work, Alice has been the guiding force behind his success. While this film and some of its themes appear before the publication of Philip Wylie’s infamous book *Generation of Vipers* many of the ideas that he offers are at work in the film. For example, Wyle argues that, “the mealy look of men today is the result of momism and so is the pinched and baffled fury in the eyes of womankind.”²⁵⁸ The fury which Wylie speaks of in the case of American culture at large is on display in this film when the three women, all who are vying for Alan’s attention allow their petty grievances and desires to interfere with his ability to work.

Alan in a moment of frustration and anger yells loudly at the three women who are standing over him screaming and talking rapidly to one another that, “all I want is a little peace and quiet around here.” Finally Alan gives up. He calmly gets up from his typewriter, walks into the living room, dons his coat and walks out into the snow storm. He goes to Liza’s to complete the work because as he explains, “I’ve just had to leave my own house filled with screaming females all trying to give me advice.” Alan’s decision

to leave represents one of the few moments in the film where he is shown as someone who can take charge of his situation.

The second key scene in the film that addresses questions of gender relations occurs the following morning when Alan returns to find that Alice has spent the night trying to write her own version of the third act. Rather than viewing her act, as a sign of love, he instead teases her for the poor quality of the dialogue and story. Alice incensed by his insensitive reaction takes the manuscript away from him and tosses it into the fire. He attempts to rescue it from the flames but with little success. He then tries to make-up with Alice but she accidentally hits him in the head with a poker and knocks him out cold. Alice believes that she may have killed Alan and faints.

In their final confrontation, Alice behind a locked door tells him that “I don’t want to discuss anything with you. You vain monkey... You selfish old... after I sat up all night slaving for you... you made fun of it.” Alan listens with disbelief as Alice berates him and his bad form, but finally comes to the realization that it is in fact Alice that he loves and cannot live without. He tells her in a moment of hubris, “Darling, I’ll tell him [Layton] you wrote every line of it. In fact, I adore you for having written it.” As he delivers this heart felt speech the comic and tender side of Allen’s persona are highlighted, rather than the more “hard” side, which was earlier displayed when he forcefully yells at the women. Brent’s comedic style of masculinity is similar to that of Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart in that these men represent an image of screen masculinity that depicts women as the dominant force and the men as subordinate. Often these forms of comedy or “screwball films” depict a battle of the sexes where men try to

resist the sense of dominance displayed by the women either through outlandish pranks or witty dialogue.²⁵⁹

The reviews for the film were mixed as were the perceptions regarding the shifting nature of Brent's persona. Frank Nugent writing for the *New York Times* stated that "only a strong sense of duty occupied with the grim realization that things could not possibly take a turn for the worse kept us chained to a seat in the Strand yesterday watching one of the Warner stock companies struggling as best they could with a loud, witless, and tiresome farce."²⁶⁰ Mae Tinee in her review for the *Chicago Tribune* stated that, "here's a little farce that does a lot of puffing, but fails to make the grade."²⁶¹ Tinee did not like the film but she does praise Brent stating, "George Brent is exceedingly attractive as the harried playwright. He's doing himself proud these days, that George!"²⁶² In his review of the film Philip Scheuer argued that the problem with the film was that it was a bedroom farce that had been tamed by the code. "Snowed Under is as innocuous as a nickel string of firecrackers, exploding in loud but harmless puffs from start to finish."²⁶³ Jerry Hoffman in a more positive note about Brent's role in the film wrote that, "it takes a good man to handle three women tactfully (yeh, and a super diplomat to deal with one), but then George Brent is a good man." He then goes on to say that, "the situation makes very entertaining farce comedy. The personalities of an exceptionally good cast are strong factors in putting over a plot and lines which occasionally falter."²⁶⁴ *Variety* predicted that the film "should grab a fair share of business" because it is "a nice comedy entry for the spring."²⁶⁵

Brent continued to make films at Warner Bros. throughout the 1930s playing roles that would allow him to combine elements of “hard” and “soft” masculinities in films such as *Mountain Justice* (Curtiz, 1937) *Dark Victory* (Goulding, 1939), *The Go-Getter* (1937), *Racket Busters* (1938) and *Wings of the Navy* (1939). These complex and often contradictory qualities of Brent’s screen masculinities illustrate how Warner Bros. formed a type of screen masculinity that combined elements of “hard” and “soft” masculinity in an attempt to exhibit the changing definition of American masculinity during the 1930s while also modeling an image of masculinity that recognized the impact of women on men and their understanding of their place in society. Brent’s characters represent an image of middle-class and upper class America where masculinity is defined in relation to the sexual desires of female viewers. It was those desires to see men in more dependent and soft models that mark Brent’s roles in the 1940s where the focus of his screen persona is located in relationship to strong women.

Chapter Three

Shifting Masculinities: Dick Powell and Boyish Pep

Coming of age at a time of economic crisis in a society that placed so much cultural emphasis on the connections between adult masculinity and independence, breadwinning and work had made more than a few young American men nervous and insecure about their futures, quite simply, as men. Joe. L. Dubbert *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (1979)

“Warners coined money with those musicals and I was never paid what I knew I was worth to them. But it wasn’t just money. They always handed me the same stupid story. I never had anything sensible to say. I looked and acted like a dope.” Dick Powell

The success of Dick Powell as a movie star and a crooner, are indelibly linked to the fortunes of Warner Bros. in the 1930s. Powell, like many of the company’s stars such as James Cagney and Bette Davis, felt that the company had never understood or exploited his true talents. Instead, as he emphasizes in his statement to Tony Thomas for *The Dick Powell Story*, “Warners coined money.”²⁶⁶ The studio not only “coined money” with Powell’s films during the 1930s, they also used Powell’s image as the good-looking, cherubic, All-American boy to represent the changes and challenges being felt by young men in America as they attempted to understand their position within society.

Powell represented how Warner Bros. attempted to deal with a new image and “style” of masculinity where the focus was on youth, pep, and the issues of working-class viewers. Dick Powell may have believed his films to be “the same stupid story” with nothing “sensible to say,” but in fact many of his films illustrate Warner Bros. ability to formulate an image of American masculinities as dynamic, hard-working, optimistic, peppish, attractive, and at times tender. It is true that “no movie star ever made a more

radical change of image in mid-career than Dick Powell” when he became the epitome of the screen detective in the 1940s after having played the cherubic, boyish love interest in Warner Bros. musicals.²⁶⁷ However, Powell’s career and the films he made at Warner Bros. from 1932-1939 that have been largely dismissed as trivial, illustrate the shifting landscape of masculinities in film. Powell’s beaming smile, exuberant charm, and positive view of life, love, and America illustrate his importance in re-thinking American manhood and his role in the formation of “New Deal masculinities.”

The types of masculinities enacted during the period of the New Deal could be aggressive, bold, and mutable as illustrated in the characters played by Paul Muni or tender, romantic, and “soft” as featured in George Brent’s characters. In the case of Dick Powell’s characters, the image of masculinity presented is optimistic, dynamic, sexualized, urban, and youthful. The emphasis on personality and appearance as markers of identity in the 1930s, Kevin White argues resulted in the formation of “the popular literature of the youth culture” that “introduced two new styles of masculinity, the male flapper and the tramp bohemian. The male flapper...was coy, sensitive, gentle, but capable of being sexual.”²⁶⁸ Dick Powell’s screen persona combines elements of these two forms of masculinity, thus illustrating the complexity of available screen masculinities during the 1930s, especially for youthful American men.

The Depression impacted America’s young men in large numbers so that by 1930 27.5 per cent of the unemployed men in America were young men.²⁶⁹ The high levels of unemployment among young men and women were viewed as a dangerous threat to the stability of the nation. Kriste Lindenmeyer notes *The Greatest Generation Grows Up:*

American Childhood in the 1930s that, “by the early 1930s, for many Americans, an increasingly visible army of transient teens and youth in their early twenties underscored the worst consequences of the Depression for children, families, and the country’s future.”²⁷⁰ Warner Bros. addressed these concerns with their film *Wild Boys of the Road* (Wellman, 1933), which depicts the horrors and struggles faced by America’s youth, especially young boys, as they struggle to survive while all the adults and institutions around them are collapsing. Roosevelt recognized that it was vital to America’s economic and political system to instill confidence in the youth and more importantly to engage them in the political process and the future recovery.

Historian Richard Reiman notes that, “in its first year the New Deal seemed designed to assist the most vocal and politically potent constituents within the national community. American youth were aided in much the same way.”²⁷¹ The focus on the possibility of “boyish pep” as a powerful potentiality within the New Deal was important for Franklin Roosevelt, as was illustrated with the passage of his first major piece of legislation. Shortly after taking office in March of 1933 he asked Congress to approve a new work relief program for unmarried males aged eighteen through twenty-five. This program better known as the Civilian Conservation Corps was not only a key component of Roosevelt’s New Deal, it was also vital in the formation of a new type of youthful masculinity. Jeffrey Ryan Suzik notes that, “to prevent the possibility of permanent emasculation, or, . . . sissification many Americans believed boys coming of age needed to be given every opportunity to strike out on their own, thereby proving their manly independence and self-reliance—even if social and economic forces did not

cooperate.”²⁷² The desire to instill in young men a love for hard work, a sense of self-reliance, and independence in the face of overwhelming odds was necessary for Roosevelt to foster an image of America as progressive, vibrant, and resilient. Youth were the key for the administration and the country because as Barbara Melosh points out “representations of youth offer[ed] a revealing window into ideologies of gender on public art and drama.”²⁷³ Melosh does not specifically mention film in her assessment of youth and its impact on Depression-era America, but with the popularity of youthful stars such as Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, and Jackie Cooper at the time, it is clear that images of youth found their way into other cultural forms such as film. Melosh further argues that, “youth occupies a crucial place in the American narrative of upward mobility and opportunity. Each generation works to secure a better future for the next, and in American culture youthful prospects are often taken as one index of national progress.”²⁷⁴ However the generation coming of age during the Depression found a country where youthful possibility was greatly diminished by the harsh economic realities of the time. Yet, despite the bleak economic outlook the Roosevelt administration worked tirelessly to fashion an ideal face of youthful manhood that was aggressive, bold, self-determining and one that was also accepting of masculinities that were determined by collective identities. Warner Bros. openly embraced the images and values of the Roosevelt administration’s economic policies in such forms as the NRA and its symbol of the Blue Eagle as well as the government’s emphasis on youth as the emblem of the nation’s future. Dick Powell represented the youthful face of America’s future: boyish, peppy,

attractive, positive, and an example of an easily digested commodity because of his youthful posture, rounded face, and image of innocence.

Early Days at Warner Brothers

Richard Ewell Powell began his career in show business in 1925 when he left his hometown Mountain View, Arkansas and began touring with a dance band “The Royal Peacocks” for whom he sang and danced. He remained with the band until it disbanded and then found his way into another band by learning to play the banjo. Powell grew tired of life on the road and tried his hand at vaudeville and working the Midwest circuit on his own. He was unsuccessful and returned to his role within the Indianapolis based Charlie Davis band, who had begun playing in the major movie houses as well as nightclubs. Powell’s experiences in the movie houses set him up for his next career choice, that of a Master of Ceremonies. “I saw it coming. This was just before talking pictures and every big movie house had stage shows booked out of New York. For about three years, the movie house MC was a kingpin figure.”²⁷⁵ Powell’s success as a MC in Indianapolis landed him a contract in Pittsburgh at the Enright theatre and after a few months, at the more prestigious Stanley, which was owned and operated by Warner Bros. Powell’s first contract with Warner Bros. was signed in January of 1932 and it called for his services to “to act, pose, appear, sing, speak, dance and lead an orchestra and to serve as Master of Ceremonies” for a period of 6 months at \$500 a week.²⁷⁶ During his tenure at the Stanley, Powell also began recording music and singing for the radio. Powell’s popularity as a

performer and singer led Warner Bros. executives in Burbank to suggest bringing him out to Hollywood and trying him in pictures.

Powell's first film for the studio was *Blessed Event* (Roy Del Ruth, 1932). In the film, Powell has a small part as a radio crooner and band leader named Bunny Harmon whose syrupy voice and sex appeal irritate a Broadway gossip columnist named Alvin Roberts played by Lee Tracy. The film, based on the popular stage play by Manaul Seff and Forrest Wilson was moderately successful and for Powell it was the beginning of a new phase of his career in show business. It was Powell's good looks and voice that attracted the notice of the critics. Louella Parsons in the *Los Angeles Examiner* stated that, "Dick Powell, the answer to the maiden's prayer in Pittsburgh, is very likely to keep his spot in the sun on the screen if given roles like Bunny Harmon."²⁷⁷ *Variety* noted that "the picture house m.c. Dick Powell, a fav in Pittsburgh at the WB house there, is likewise very effective as the crooner Bunny Harmon...He suggests possibilities especially for café and back stage stuff calling for a singing voice."²⁷⁸ It was elements of his performance as Bunny Harmon, the youthful man with angelic looks and a tenor, voice that Warner Bros. would draw upon throughout Powell's tenure at the studio and would lead to his eventual stardom.

Yet, Powell was an unknown commodity and despite the positive reviews for his work in the film he was shipped back to Pittsburgh to continuing serving as the Stanley theatre Master of Ceremonies. Warner Bros. executives recognized that with Powell that they had a new face that could appeal to American youth but they were also aware that juvenile parts were growing stale with audiences as a result of the declining interest in

musicals which had adapted the juvenile type from the New York stage.²⁷⁹ However, Powell's personality and sex appeal were building as illustrated in Louella Parson's gossip column when she exclaimed, "that hot cha from Pittsburgh, Dick Powell, is being brought West again to be developed into another George Brent. In Pittsburgh, where he was master of ceremonies in one of the leading theaters, he had the femmes of the town standing in line. It's that appeal that induced Rufus Le Maire, Warners' casting director...to bring him to the Golden West."²⁸⁰ What Parson's notes about Powell that makes him an interesting commodity for the studio is the combination of his youth and boyish sex appeal that women found attractive.

By 1933 Dick Powell had become a fixture on the lot, especially after his success in the Warner's prestige musical *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933). The film was a financial gamble for Warner Bros. because the public had grown tired of the musical format that had been developed with the introduction of sound in 1927, and the film was budgeted at a cost of \$400,000 dollars which was the most expensive film made to that point by the company. While Powell's part as Billy Lawler is a minor one, it was the chemistry between he and young Ruby Keeler that represented the image of young love in Depression America. The two were the ideal image of youth: young, vibrant, cheerful, innocent and wholesome. Powell's song "Young and Healthy" with lyrics like "I'm young and healthy, and you've got charms, to would really be a sin, not to have you in my arms" encapsulates the mood of America's youth and his ability to sing the song with youthful optimism in connection with the way he was photographed in a white dinner

jacket with soft focus light showed the executives that he was developing into a marketable star.

Modern Masculinities: *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *College Coach*

In *Gold Diggers of 1933* Powell received fifth billing in the credits, but his character of Robert Treat Bradford, a Bostonian Blueblood writing popular music under the name of Brad Roberts, serves as the center of the film. Powell is first introduced in the film when a young show girl, Polly Parker (Ruby Keeler), longingly gazes at him as he plays his piano in the apartment across the courtyard from the one she shares with two other showgirls, Carol (Joan Blondell) and Trixie (Aline McMahon). The three girls are out of work as the film illustrates that the Depression affected show business as well as big business and the American industrial base. As Brad plays the piano he is framed in a medium close-up so that the emphasis of the shot is on his youthful, cherubic face as he smiles back at Polly when he realizes that she is staring at him. The two bashfully look away in hopes of not alerting the other as to their feelings and then quickly glance back at one another and broadly smile. He is shown wearing a dress shirt without a tie crooning a simple melody and it is his looks and voice that are emphasized as the reason for Polly's infatuation with the young man as she is shown dreamily staring at him in reaction shots. Powell thus becomes an object of the female gaze in the scene.

To coincide with the film and Powell's image of youthful masculinity and urbanity Warner Bros. in cooperation with a national shirt manufacturer designed a style of dress shirt that capitalized on his image. The ad for this campaign located in the press book for *Gold Diggers of 1933* advises theater managers and exhibitors that, "all you

need do is to send your playdate as soon as set to the manufacturer...he will immediately get in touch with the dealers in your city and arrange for the display."²⁸¹ Powell's image as the dapper spokesperson for masculinity as consumer oriented connects him and the studios policies to the wider developments in marketing images of fashion to middle class men in 1930s America. In the Autumn of 1933 the first men's fashion magazine *Esquire* had been launched with great success. The magazine with its glossy images and articles on foreign travel and cuisine and interior decorating highlighted the magazine's appeal to middle class men who sought a degree of sophistication. However, in an effort to ensure that the magazine was viewed as masculine it encouraged its readers to think of themselves as tough nonconformists through a mix of sexuality with its racy cartoons and violence as exhibited in the short fiction included from authors like Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, and John Dos. Passos.²⁸² The magazine thus combined an image of masculinity that was urbane and fashionable with one that celebrated the idea of male authority and sexuality at a time when much of the nation was in disarray.

Dick Powell's image is used by Warner Bros. to sell him as the picture of a type of urban elite masculinity that is youthful and filled with promise in the film *Gold Diggers of 1933*. It is Brad's abilities as a songwriter that solidify his relationship to Polly and the three women when one of the girls rushes into the apartment and explains that producer Barney Hopkins (Ned Sparks) is trying to put on a new show. Brad is an example of the new type of young man in America. He is spunky, self-determined, capable, and considerate of other people's plight and often is characterized in a way that makes him seem a bit naïve. This image of youthful screen masculinity connects Powell

to other young male leads who appear later in the decade like Jimmy Stewart. However unlike many other young men who are struggling to survive because of the Depression Brad's wealth and status allow him the time and opportunity to write music and in the case of the film, fall in love.

The girls invite Barney to their apartment hoping that he is going to be able to offer them work. As he talks excitedly about his idea for a new show with the girls he overhears Brad playing the piano across the courtyard and asks Polly if she knows anything about him. Polly, who up to this point has been shy about her feelings for the young man with the sweet voice and good looks, tells Barney that he is a young composer whose music is really good. Barney tells her to invite Brad over and sing something for them.

Brad comes into the apartment and sits down at the girl's piano and sings the only solo number which Powell has in the whole film, "I've Got to Sing a Torch Song." The song is a number designed to showcase Powell's talents and to highlight the image of masculinity as vigorous, romantic, and sexual. As he sings all the girls simply fall over themselves for him, sitting in deep rapture as he sings. In effect Brad becomes the object of the girls' gaze for the second time as is illustrated with the use of medium close-ups and extreme close-ups of his face followed by cuts back to the girls looking on dreamily. The use of these shots indicates that Warner Bros. recognize the value in emphasizing Powell's image as young, innocent, and sexy.

However, this song is not what Barney is looking for. He explains that he wants to create a show about the Depression and its effects. He asks Brad, "Have you got

something with a march effect to it?” all while chomping down on his cigar. Brad eagerly nods yes and says, “Yes...Remember My Forgotten Man.” Brad begins to play the piano and talks about the inspiration for the tune. “I haven’t any words to this yet...I just got the idea for it last night—watching the men on that bread line on Times Square—in the rain, standing in line for doughnuts and coffee—men out of a job...the soup kitchen.” Brad may not understand the intimate effects of the Depression but it is his sensitivity to the situation that affects his ability to empathize with the men, and in the process craft a song that depicts the horrors and frustrations felt by millions of American men.

Barney paces across the room listening intently and then exclaims, “That’s it. That’s what this show is about. The Depression—men marching—marching in the rain—marching—marching—marching—doughnuts and crullers—jobs—jobs—marching—marching—marching—marching in the rain—and in the background will be Carol—spirit of the Depression—a blue song—no, not a blue song—but a wailing—a wailing and this woman—this gorgeous woman—singing this number that tears your heart out—the big parade—the big parade of tears.” Barney’s speech is designed to represent the fears of the people and connects the sacrifices of the men in World War One with the drastic inability for men to find a sense of self-worth and purpose at this time. For those young men who do not possess the financial safety which Brad does, the Depression represents a looming presence that is sapping out of the nation all sense of hope and opportunity along with a sense that the government can work for the betterment of the people.

In his book *Showstoppers* Martin Rubin argues that the song and the elaborate stage number that closes the film “stands as one of Hollywood’s most hard-hitting political statements of the 1930s, surpassed only by *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*.”²⁸³ While the film clearly makes political statements with this number and the opening musical number “We’re in the Money” it is also a film that explores the effects of the Depression on young people and their prospects of future happiness in connection with romance and economics.

Brad agrees to write music for the new show but in exchange for an important role in the show for Polly, whom Brad has a crush on. He intends to use their time together working on the show to develop his romance with her. Barney agrees and then asks Brad to sing in the show pointing out that, “you’ve got a swell voice and personality... you’re different, you’ve got class.” Brad refuses even as Barney continues to try to sell him on the idea explaining that, “you and Polly would make a smart team—like the Astaires. You’d be a knockout for the mush interest.” Brad is shown to be the best candidate for the show but because he is shown to be ‘slumming’ in the world of show business, a business that his Blueblood family does not approve of because of their perception of it as common and low. Yet, Brad’s economic status allows him the freedom to pursue his dreams and help the girls and Barney put together the show when he gives them the necessary ten thousand dollars to stage it. Brad gets the money together and takes it to Barney’s office the next day, but he misses the 10:30 appointment, which causes the group to mistrust him and his word. Yet, Brad shows up with the money and explains that he is late because he had come up with another number for the show and

had been working it out on his piano. He gives Barney the money and everyone nearly faints from excitement.

The song “Pettin in the Park” is first introduced as the cast is rehearsing for the new show. This song and its implicit references to sexual behaviors such as “pettin” illustrate how gender relations between men and women were changing as a result of the more open and frank sexual discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. Kevin White points out that, “not only did the path to marriage become more sexualized and eroticized...but Americans engaged in a greater variety of sexual behaviors.”²⁸⁴ Many of these behaviors, he argues, young people learned and copied from films. He continues, “just as they altered and defined what constituted an attractive man in the culture of personality, the movies also set the pace for the new emphasis on performance. They helped to eroticize leisure by expanding boundaries for the social relations between the sexes.”²⁸⁵ In the case of *4nd Street* sex and love are used to expand and explore the boundaries between the economic classes as represented by Brad and Polly.

Polly and her partner Gordon are singing the song ‘Pettin in the Park’ when Brad interrupts them to give the male singer some instruction. He tells him, “Listen Gordon you’ve got to put some life into that song. You got to sing it with some pep and feeling.” Brad then sings a few bars of the song when Gordon responds indignantly “I know my business. I’ve been a juvenile for eighteen years.” This line, while played for laughs, indicates that the actor playing the young romantic lead is in effect actually no longer the spirit of youth and optimism that Brad’s song and Barney’s direction require to capture the feeling of the time. He is no longer filled with the necessary young lust to perform the

song, as Brad is with his desire for Polly. Brad's desire for Polly is different in that it is based on his trust, respect and love for her, as is shown when he agrees to help the show but only if Polly is given a good part in it, rather than simple sexual urges. He is a man who can love, desire, and respect a woman without feeling as if he is less of a man because of his economic security as a member of the upper class.

Barney tells Brad, "You ought to play the juvenile part. You've got it over Gordon like a tent. Why don't you reconsider kid? Give your numbers a break." Brad tells Barney he can't and the two continue to discuss the possibility until Brad adamantly tells him, "let it go...once and for all, no public appearance."

Brad's unwillingness to star in the show leads Trixie to question his character when she asks Polly if she loves him, to which Polly sheepishly admits she does. Trixie shows her a newspaper article about a bank robbery in Toronto and the implication is that perhaps Brad and his income are the result of criminal activity.

The night of the show Gordon injures his back and it looks as if the show is in jeopardy because he can't go on because they don't have someone to replace him. That is until after Trixie tells Brad that, "do you know what this means—if the show doesn't go on? It means all those girls in this show—all those poor kids who threw up jobs—and who'll never get jobs in these times—all those kids been living on nothing—starving themselves these five weeks we've been rehearsing—hoping for this show to go on—and be a success they are depending on you! You can't let them down down—you can't—if you do—God knows what will happen to those girls—They'll have to do things I wouldn't want on my conscience. And it'll be on yours." The speech is used as a

motivating device to convince him to sing, but it also can be read as one that illustrates the necessity of putting aside one's own self-interests for the betterment of all those involved; the girls in the show who are struggling and the American people who must challenge the capitalistic beliefs of self-reliance and determination. It also illustrates the importance for American men to accept the idea of cooperation, and compassion as characteristics that are more important for the survival of the nation, rather than masculine self pride.

Brad realizes that there is more at stake than his reputation and money because these girls and their hopes for economic security are linked to his performing in the show, and he heartily agrees. Trixie impressed by his determination and his decision, tells Polly that, "there's more to that kid than I thought there was. He has nerve. He's regular. He belongs in the show business." The use of the word *nerve* indicates Trixie's belief that the young man is fearless and, more importantly, it demonstrates a new facet of Powell's screen persona as both youthful and determined.

Brad and Polly are a hit in the show that ends with the "My Forgotten Man" number. Rubin argues that the "number is based on an equation between economics and sex, a confluence of the social and psychological levels. For working men in the Depression the loss of their jobs or the decrease in their earning power represented a loss of masculine pride—a form of impotence."²⁸⁶ For Brad, the song represents his understanding of the Depression and, unlike the men in the bread lines on Times Square, he is emboldened by the effects of the Depression. He declares his love for Polly, follows his dream, and in the end challenges the authority of his brother and the expectations of

upper class society by writing and performing popular songs. Powell's characterization in the film hinges on a depiction of youthful masculinity that is virile, compassionate, sexual, and most important, economically capable of providing opportunities for himself and others. On the surface the film appears to be escapist fare that celebrates young love. However, if we examine it more closely as an example of how Warner Bros. attempted to develop an image of youthful masculinity, then we can see that the film was important for the studio as well as Powell. Many film historians have also argued that film was important because of its positive view of the Roosevelt administration and its policies.²⁸⁷ then the film can be viewed as another example of how Warner Bros. was attempting to make films that spoke to the day-to-day realities for American audiences and, in the process, observe how American youth were being impacted by the Depression in the workplace whether it be in show business or in an everyday occupation.

The film cost \$300,000 and was designed as a follow up to the studios successful film *42nd Street*. It was positively received by critics and audiences alike. Louella Parsons called the film "a spectacular hit" and praised Dick Powell's performance noting that, "the boy from Pittsburgh Dick Powell is nothing short of a sensation. Usually we rave about some beautiful girl who sings well and looks beautiful. There are any number of pretty headliners and the chorus in *Gold Diggers of 1933* but it is Powell who carries off the major share of honors."²⁸⁸ *Variety* called the film "another b.o. winner in the renewed screen musical cycle...[that] will top 42nd Street."²⁸⁹

For his first film with top billing Warner Bros. cast Powell in *College Coach* a film about football, life on college campuses and exposing corruption (Wellman, 1933).

The film began shooting on August 29, 1933 and wrapped on September 25, 1933 at a cost of \$245,000 thousand dollars.²⁹⁰ Life on America's college campuses became of interest to film producers and Americans in the 1920s and 30s as the number of middle class men who attended college increased. Nearly 20 percent of the college age population attended some form of higher educational institution.²⁹¹ This new generation fascinated with fashion, jazz, and consumerism is the subject of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *This Side of Paradise*. In the novel Fitzgerald captures the energetic spirit of collegiate America while illustrating the anxieties young American men were experiencing as they attempted to deal with the shifting status of masculinity.

Sport has functioned within America as a safety valve for middle class men to deal with crises of masculinity that have emerged. In the 1890s when Teddy Roosevelt urged American men to head west and find themselves through physical activities such as swimming, hiking, or hunting sport was believed to be the ideal way of saving American masculinity from feminine influences.²⁹² Yet as this film about college football, an activity that had become extremely popular in the 1920s and 30s shows sport once free from corrupting influences is no longer pure because the forces of American capitalism too have affected it. The importance of sport on the formation of American masculinity and its impact on this film cannot be overlooked. Michael Messner argues that, "with no frontier to conquer, with physical strength becoming less relevant in work and with urban boys being raised and taught by women, it was feared that males were becoming soft, that society itself was being feminized."²⁹³ Yet, in casting Powell, who had previously been sold as the epitome of sexual youth in America and the influences of consumer culture,

Warner Bros. reveals the intricacies involved in depicting collegiate masculinities onscreen.

The film was designed to be an expose of the shady business ethics of college football during the 1930s and examine how the corruption was affecting America's male collegiate population, especially the athletes. Powell plays Phil Sargent, the captain of the football team and an exceptional student of chemistry. However, his academic excellence and integrity interferes with the motives of the new football coach Gore (Pat O'Brien) who sees coaching on college campuses as a way to make a quick buck for himself and his partners. Gore is hired by the board of trustees of the fictional Calvert College to help them win games and draw fans with the hope that the revenue earned from athletics can help save the school from bankruptcy. Gore accepts the position and brings with him a group of players who are much too old for college and who are clearly not on campus for an education, but rather there only to play football and earn a paycheck. One of these players is the cocky, overly aggressive Buck Weaver (Lyle Talbot) who clashes with Sargent and his clean cut ideals. Sargent quits the team when an opposing player dies from a deliberate foul carried out by his teammates. He devotes himself to his studies and returns to playing football when he learns that his chemistry professor is to be fired due to a lack of resources. Sargent helps the team win a championship and Gore leaves for another position with better pay and opportunities.

Weaver and Sargent and their styles of masculinity first come into conflict when, after a long hard afternoon of practice the team enters the locker room. Buck grabs a pack of cigarettes out of his locker and lights one. Sargent angrily tells him, "put that out

Weaver. You are in training.” The two argue about the cigarette and then Sargent knocks it out of his hand. They continue to argue and Sargent punches Weaver knocking him to the floor. Sargent stands over him explaining that, “I am not fighting with you Weaver. After the season is over you can pick a scrap with me everyday and Sunday, but for now I am the captain of this football team.” The incident illustrates Sargent’s seriousness to the team and to their endeavors whereas Weaver is shown to be a man who simply gives only half his effort and attention to the team, because he is more concerned with his own well being and attracting women. Weaver’s masculinity is representative of an American masculinity based on the idea of the self-made man rather than that of “New Deal masculinities” where the image of cooperation, loyalty, and teamwork are depicted as positive. More importantly Sargent represents the face of a youthful American masculinity that can be aggressive, tender, and educated. When questioned about his commitment to his studies and the game by the new chemistry professor Trask (Donald Meek) he tells him that, “I will try and prove I can do them both [football and chemistry] with justice.” Yet, as Sargent learns from the coach and Weaver he must choose chemistry or football to devote his time and energies to on campus.

The film allowed Powell to demonstrate his abilities to perform in a dramatic picture but Warner Bros. also wished to ensure that audiences who loved Powell for his boyish charm, good looks and voice would find something of interest in the film. Therefore, even as the film was in preproduction, there was a discussion of how to incorporate a musical number in the film. A memo to Hal Wallis dated August 23, 1933 dictated the means by which the song was to be structured in the picture:

I just talked to New York on the phone and told them we were putting Dick Powell in the “College Coach” and they were highly in favor of this. However, they insist that he sings one song, so I told them he would. Go to pages 36, 37, and 38 of the temporary script where the scene depicts Powell studying before Buck Weaver comes in. All we have to do is get a verse and a chorus that we can use for the love theme and have the song for scoring throughout the picture...get Fain and Kahal to write him a very good song. It can be something about college spirit or a romantic song...I see no reason why this can't be done, in fact I am under instructions to New York that it must be done this way.²⁹⁴

This musical interlude on the surface seems forced and out of place. Yet, within the context of the film it acts as a marker of how problematic it was to sensitive men onscreen. In the scene Powell is shown sitting at a piano in his dorm room singing a love song “Lonely Lane” to a picture of a beautiful woman when his teammate and rival Buck barges into the room. Buck has been assigned to be roommates with Phil but Phil is not aware of the plan put in place by their coach. Weaver tries to take over the room putting up portraits of half naked women and boasting of his prowess on the field and the ladies. Sargent tells him “I don't have to stand for egotism in my own room.” The men argue and again get into a fight and again Sargent wins when he punches Weaver and pushes him out of the room and into the hallway. He picks up the photos of the scantily clad women and throws them out the door when Gore shows up to see how the two are getting along and sees Sargent again standing over Weaver. “This had to happen. Either here or on the field”, he explains after seeing them fight.

The two men with the coach's assistance agree to set aside their differences but Sargent's consistent desire to study chemistry and do well are hampered by Gore's demands on the team. During a mid term exam in chemistry Sargent struggles to come up with an answer and in disgust turns in his blue book blank, only to discover that he has received a C on the test. He discovers that all the players have been passed along so that they can continue playing football. However, his sense of justice and integrity prohibit him from going along with the crooked methods of Gore and his staff.

Sargent confronts Gore in his office and tells him that, "Sure I passed. Without even handing in an exam. I couldn't even crack a question. That mark was a joke but it wasn't funny because there are a lot of other guys around here who know something and studied real hard and still failed." Gore tries to explain to him how things work for athletes but Sargent isn't buying the explanation and angrily proclaims "I didn't come to school to play football. I cam to learn something. I am washed up with football." In the end both Sargent and Weaver are forced to realize that while they might not like or respect one another but it is important for the team and for the college for them to cooperate and help the team win the state championship.

Powell's efforts and new screen persona are addressed in the press book for the film. In an article generated by the studio publicity machine they advise exhibitors to sell the picture using the following story

Perhaps a leopard can't change his spots, but a crooner can. And Dick Powell proves this conclusively in "College Coach" ...For Dick until this picture, has been regarded primarily as a crooner. One of the best to be sure, but a crooner,

nevertheless. In *College Coach Dick* is a clever halfback who cracks through opposing lines for long gains. He's traded in his dinner jacket for a mud caked jersey and when he gets hot feet its from scoring touchdowns and not from keeping time to a new fox trot tune...Dick was especially pleased when he was assigned this role, for much as he likes singing and playing on his nine musical instruments, he does not wish to be typed.²⁹⁵

This press item was designed to sell the film and Powell 's possible new screen persona as a dramatic actor rather than a crooner dressed in a dinner jacket but this image of Powell as youthful, good looking, and able to throw a punch for a serious role was not to last because the studio recognized that audiences preferred to see Powell as the optimistic singing spirit of America's youth.

Happiness Ahead and Broadway Gondolier

By 1934 Powell had satisfied Warner Bros. executives that he was capable of carrying a film on his own, thus signaling that he had in fact become a star. To exhibit this new status they cast him in *Happiness Ahead* (LeRoy, 1934) a film whose original title "Gentlemen are Born" reflects the belief that honest, hard-working young men are born that way, not created by circumstances.²⁹⁶ Powell replaced Jimmy Cagney as Bob Lane and while it would have been interesting to see what the film would have been like with Cagney in the lead, Powell as Bob Lane captures the exuberant, boyish spirit of a young man who struggles to find love and respectability.

Powell's picture singing the title song "Happiness Ahead" superimposed over an image of clouds appears immediately after the Warner Bros. shield and before the credits.

This image connects him to the view of his persona as the All American boy next door with a cherubic face and an angelic voice suggesting that he is in effect an angel rather than a simple man. He becomes an example of the type of “heavenly body” that Dyer discusses as a true marker of stardom in the classical Hollywood model.²⁹⁷

The film opens on New Years Eve at a society party in the home of the Bradford's a wealthy urban family. The lovely and available heiress Miss Joan Bradford (Josephine Hutchinson) is shown in her room lounging about as she tries to find an excuse to avoid going downstairs to the party. Her maid Anna (Ruth Donnelly) listens to her complaints and then tells her that, “money don't always bring happiness but love does or so I've heard.” Joan tells Anna and her father who tries to coax her to dress and come down for the party that, “I'm fed up with having my life planned for me.” She continues to complain about her mother's constant drive for status and money to her father noting that “I am free white and 21.” Joan's reference to her status as “white” and free demonstrate how classical Hollywood handled race, either by relying on stereotypes or crafting characters who displayed a “possessive investment in whiteness.” He patiently listens to his daughter and explains to her that once his grandfather had been called the tyrant of Wall Street before the first crash. He states that he had to earn his money, selling newspapers on the corners and eventually amassed a nice fortune. Yet, Mr. Bradford (John Halliday) represents the upper class mentality of masculinity as “self-made” and free of the negative influences of a life of luxury such as laziness, immorality, and indolence. His need to separate himself from the constraints of wealth are embodied in his daughter who suggests that instead of attending their own party they should go out

and “walk up and down Broadway. We will get lost in the crowd, and blow tin horns.” Mr. Bradford cannot bring himself to do that but in effect endorses his daughter’s idea when he says to her, “Joan, I am shocked, simply shocked...I expressly forbid you to leave this house by the servant’s entrance because you know your mother would not like it.”

Joan changes into a plain dress and an overcoat and leaves the house. She enjoys the hustle and bustle of the night and the noises of Broadway as Americans celebrate the night. She goes to a party at a Chinese restaurant where she pretends to be a young woman who is both out of work and stood up by her date. While at the party she meets Bob Lane, a good looking, energetic man and his friends and their dates. They invite Joan to join their party and when the lights go out for the countdown for the New Year Bob accidentally kisses Joan. Bob blushes and says, “Funny I thought I was wishing a New Year to her,” he says pointing towards his friend Tom’s (Frank McHugh) date Josie (Dorothy Dare). I don’t want you to think I was fresh.” It is clear that from the moment these two meet and share an innocent kiss that a romance is developing between them. Josie pokes fun at Bob and his actions asking him if he is “a woman hater.” He simply grins and then begins singing the song “Pop Goes Your Heart” to Joan first and then eventually to everyone in the restaurant.

Powell’s image as the romantic young crooner is already created for audiences using medium and medium close-up shots of him as he sings, with hands outstretched and looking up as if towards the heavens. Reaction shots of Joan and random young women staring dreamily are interspersed with the shots of him singing which adds to the

feeling that here is a healthy young man who accepts the fact that these young women like him for his looks and tenor voice.

The party ends with the men trying to figure out to how to pay for the night. Bob then offers to drive everyone home in his car that on the back tire advertises his employer the Peerless Window Cleaning Company. After dropping everyone else off, Bob offers to take Joan home as well. Afraid that he might be embarrassed to find out that she is rich she spots a run down apartment and asks him to drop her off there. Bob tells Joan that if possible he would like to see her again sometime and she agrees with a smile. Bob drives off and she decides to rent a room in the building before heading back to her luxurious lifestyle. Joan's actions shows her to be a confident strong woman who is proactive in renting the apartment in order to facilitate her being able to go out with Bob.

The next day Bob is shown at work in the Peerless Window cleaning company where he is the office manager and his friend Tom is a window washer. Bob is representative of young middle class men in America at the time that were wearing a suit to work and laboring with their minds rather than their hands as Tom does when he washes windowpanes. Clark Davis in his book *White-Collar Life and Corporate Cultures in Los Angeles, 1892-1941* examines how corporate culture impacted the restructuring of the American work place and gender. He notes that, "by 1930, more than fourteen million Americans, greater than 30 percent of the civilian labor force, were employed in office, sales, or professional jobs."²⁹⁸ The shift from a life on farms and in small towns he argues illustrated the changing dynamics of gender relations, especially between men and women.²⁹⁹ Within the film it is Bob's relation to the other men that is explored.

On their first official date Bob takes Joan roller-skating where they bump into his friend Tom and his girlfriend Josie along with Joan's maid Anna and her boyfriend, the chauffeur Chuck (Allen Jenkins). Anna and Chuck try to avoid Joan but Joan smiles and waves them over. Chuck to be polite asks Bob what he does for a living. Bob smiles and says "I am in the window cleaning business. I am the office manager, but someday I going into business for myself. You know there is a lot of money to be made in it." Bob desires to own his own business despite his middle-class status as an officer manager. This model of masculinity taps into the entrepreneurial spirit of America and shows him to be a young man with dreams and ambition.

After Bob drops Joan off at her apartment the two of them sit in on the staircase and talk about his future plans. He explains to her how much a window cleaning business makes using the Empire State building as an example. She listens with great interest charmed by his enthusiasm and dedication to the idea. He then tells her that there is a politician Meehan (Russell Hicks) who can help him get his own window cleaning business and routes. He smiles and kisses her goodnight.

Bob sets up a meeting with Meehan in the hopes of getting a contract and eventually marrying Joan. Meehan tells him that for \$2,000 dollars he can secure him a good route, but like so many others Bob is struggling to make enough to pay his bills. He tells Meehan that he has about \$700 dollars saved and that it took him two years to get that. Meehan tells him to come back when he has the money and he is sure they will then be able to do business. Bob leaves the office downhearted realizing that his dream may have to wait for a long time, and so too might his chance of marrying Joan.

Meehan is not the only obstacle to Bob's happiness in the film. Bob's employer and his men consider getting out of the window washing business entirely when they discover that a gangster Flanders is using muscle to move into the window washing business. All of the workers including Tom are prepared to quit when Bob challenges them to keep working in the locker room. The men deride his comments until with passion he asks, "anybody else want to quit. What's going to happen to this job if Flanders and his crowd get into the business?" His desire to keep the company going and willingness to suit up in overalls and go out on the ledges inspires the men to keep working.

After a long day of washing windows Bob goes to pick Joan up for a date when he sees her get into a limousine driven by Chuck. Bob mistakes their relationship and becomes jealous not realizing that Joan is wealthy and Chuck is her driver. He waits outside of her apartment, smoking cigarettes until she returns. The two get into a fight and Bob tells her, "You don't have to explain anything to me. You are your own boss. If you want to go out with that big chauffeur, it's sure alright with me." She tries to explain but he continues venting stating that, "when a fella's got a girl, he likes to feel that she is his own and he doesn't like to share her with anybody else. Course if it's the big car that made a hit with you. Well then I guess I am out of luck cause it'll be a long time before I can afford a big car, especially if I am going to depend on Meehan." The two of them make up and he accepts her explanation, which still hides the fact that Joan is an heiress. He then tells her how much money he needs to get the route from Meehan. Bob's fit of jealousy and belief that Joan is his connects him to more traditional views of masculinity.

With Joan he attempts to assert himself because in the rest of his world there are no real opportunities for such action.

The next morning Joan is shown in her luxurious bedroom reading the newspaper. The headline catches her eye. It reads “Three Hurt in Window Cleaning War.” This headline and Joan’s love and desire to see Bob make a success of himself cause her to go and check on him. She goes down to the window washing company where he explains that it is all over because Flanders and his men have been arrested. Recognizing that Joan was concerned about him, he tells her, “Right now I want to be my own boss more than ever.” His statement and demonstration of his love for her show him to a man of character and compassion.

Joan decides to ask her father for the money. While she is in her father’s office building Bob sees her wearing a mink coat as he is washing the windows. He watches as she is given a check by an older man and then walks out of the office. Bob suspects the worst of her because she claims to have no job but is able to pay rent.

Meehan phones Bob and tells him to come over after he is finished working. Bob shows up hoping that perhaps Meehan has found a way to help him, but then he discovers that Meehan has received a check for \$2000 dollars from Bradford. Meehan tells him, “You are a fast worker son. Nice story telling me you need to save your pennies. Well that won’t do when you have Bradford backing you—come back with \$2000 more in bills not checks. Bob embarrassed takes the check from Meehan, not understanding what has really transpired.

He visits Joan at her apartment where he confronts her about seeing her in a mink coat and asking for a check from the old man that morning when he was washing the window's of her father's office building. Bob believes that Joan is a kept woman or worse still a crook. He tells her that, "the marrying thing is just a gag. I had you figured right from beginning. You dames think you can buy your husbands. Well I played you too baby." The implication is that Bob's affection for her was a way to get the money and his business. When Joan hears this it breaks her heart and ends their happy relationship.

Bob quits his job and Joan returns to her society life. Realizing that perhaps her mother was right that money does matter, Joan decides to marry a wealthy young man, whom her mother has been pressuring her to marry. However, Joan's father does not like the man, nor does he understand his daughter's complete reversal on her feelings about money and society. As she is packing for her trip, she explains to her father with her tears in her eyes. "Dad he was such a beast. All he wanted was \$2000 dollars and then he laughed right at me." Bob's actions for Joan are cruel because she believed him to be above petty greed.

Bob takes the check and returns it to Mr. Bradford. Impressed by the young man's honesty and drive, he listens as Bob tells him, "You have been taken by a dame. Well that is we both have. A girl was going to use this to me with a marriage license." Bob explains that he had deeply loved the girl but her actions were unforgivable. As Bob tries to pretend that he is not deeply wounded by the loss of Joan, Mr. Bradford recognizes that this young man has determination and he is love with his daughter. He convinces Bob to let him take him to meet the girl.

On the way to the airport, Bob explains the window washing business to Mr. Bradford. As he talks Bradford sees that here is a young man with spunk, vision, and ingenuity. He then explains that the check was his and that the woman Bob thought had conned him is his daughter. They arrive at the airport where Bob refuses to see Joan and instead goes and checks on the possibility of renting a parachute to kill himself with.

Joan's father in an effort to stop her from marrying the wealthy man Travers shows her the check and says, "your young window washing friend brought this back to me." In that instant Joan's faith is restored in Bob's character and she realizes that she could never marry Travers. She gets out of the plane and walks over to where Bob is and apologizes for not telling him that she was rich and for her actions. Bob, sheepishly accepts her apology and then says, "well that's taken care of." He then grabs Joan and kisses her. This ending ensures that the couple will find "happiness ahead" and that Bob will be able to stand on his own two feet because he has shown himself to a man of integrity, compassion, spunk, and capable of taking care of Joan, a family and his future business that Joan's father agrees to be a partner in. The film celebrates the combination of middle class values with upper class capital in an endorsement of middle class values and a class based system.

The film received modest praise from the critics. *The New York Times* called the film "winning" and "agreeable" noting that "*Happiness Ahead* has a continuously warming effect and it produces a mood of benevolence and good cheer."³⁰⁰ They further noted that, "Mr. Powell who can sing and smile in the same breath, executes both accomplishments in his customary exuberant style."³⁰¹ Mae Tinee writing for the

Chicago Tribune called the film “a joyously human little affair concerned with the romance of a rich girl who falls in love with a poor boy. Cinderella theme reversed.”³⁰² Of Powell she wrote that, “Dick Powell, who usually goes with Miss Ruby Keeler in pictures, performs in his usual, amiable fashion, caroling melodiously when script demands. As usual you don’t care a lot for him at first but end by liking him much.”³⁰³ Louella Parsons in her review echoes Tinee’s point about the film being a modern day Cinderella tale. She notes that the film “has the same homely charm that made ‘It Happened One Night’ one of the most talked of pictures last year... confidentially those who like realness and down to earth drama will get their moneys worth.”³⁰⁴ In connecting the film to Capra’s big hit *It Happened One Night* Parsons is selling the film as an example of mid 1930s comedies were using romance to address conflicts of class. However where Clark Gable’s character Peter Warne is the model of an aggressive, sullen masculinity, Powell’s is that of the All American boy as Parsons points out in her discussion of his performance stating that he “beautifully plays a nice wholesome boy and does it in a convincing manner. The part sort of belongs to him.”³⁰⁵ The image of an attractive, innocent young man who gets by through sheer will and determination as characterized by the critics of Powell’s performance in this film is the very image, which Warner Bros. used to build his star potential. Yet, in doing so Powell becomes more than a star he becomes an example of the new types of masculinities that were emerging in America.

In *Happiness Ahead* Powell is emblematic of middle class masculinities in *Broadway Gondolier* (Bacon, 1935) he represents the hopes and dreams of working class

men who long for an opportunity to create a life for themselves and control their own labors and earn respect. The film was made for \$350,000 thousand dollars and was designed to showcase Powell's singing talents. He sings six songs written by Harry Warren and Al Dubin including "The Rose in Her Hair," and the film's theme "The Lonely Gondolier."³⁰⁶ The film provides insight into how radio as a popular medium functioned. Powell was the host of the weekly radio program *Hollywood Hotel* where he and Louella Parsons would chat with other movie people about their lives, and upcoming films. The film is a spoof of radio in the mid 1930s and its effects on the nation. The film opens with a performance of *Rigoletto* in an opera house in a big city. Two drunken men dressed in tuxedos show up for the show and try to check their hats and coats but the coat check girl tells them that the performance is nearly over. The men duck inside to see the performance just as it is concluding. They turn around and discuss the opera without having seen this performance of it as they exit the theater. It is revealed that they are theater critics as the men discuss how they are going to write it up while complaining that *Rigoletto* is always the same no matter who performs it or how many times they have seen it. The men hail a taxi and get inside. As they are riding along, arguing about *Rigoletto* and how to write up the event they overhear the cab driver Richard Purcell (Dick Powell) singing. Powell wears the uniform of a cab driver that consists of a cap, a simple tie and jacket and dark pants. As they continue to debate the opera he begins to sing one of the key songs. The men are greatly impressed by his vocal skills, which Purcell demonstrates for them as they sit in traffic. Purcell is framed in a medium close-up when he turns as if to speak to the critics and looks directly at the camera and says, "I

have been taking voice lessons.” His singing causes a traffic jam when he fails to see the cop waving him to continue on. The cop tries to ticket Purcell for not paying attention but he explains to him that he was singing the “quartet from Rigoletto” which the critics had forgotten. The cop starts arguing about the song with Purcell after telling them that they in fact do not know the structure of the quartet in the opera. The cop smiles and then begins to sing the number with intense concentration, and then Purcell joins him as the men accompany him. The men sing and perform together for a few minutes enjoying the music until they are interrupted by the sound of honking car horns as they have stopped the flow of traffic. This interaction between the gate keepers of culture, the critics, the laborers of America, the cabbie, and the institution of law, the cop, is used to illustrate how elements of high culture in America have been embraced by elements of the low culture in an attempt to show that the differences between the two worlds is not as clear cut, especially in representations of masculinity.

When Purcell drops the two critics off at their apartment he discovers they don't have the money for cab fare. One of the critics tells Purcell that they are going to give him something better than money: an opportunity to share his voice with the world. He steals a vacancy sign and writes a note to the owner of UBC radio studios advising him to give the cabbie an audition. Purcell delightedly accepts the sign rushes to tell his voice coach Prof. de Vinci (Adolphe Menjou) an Italian impresario of his good fortune. He explains that he has a chance to sing on the radio, but the professor dismisses it because for him the radio represents a lower form of art because of its ties to commercials and popular music.

The next morning Purcell shows up at the UBC studios with the Professor and the sign. He tells the Professor that perhaps he will get lucky and they will make him a crooner. In disgust the Professor spits on the floor and proclaims that “there is no word in Italian for crooner.” Purcell replies with a smile that, “its okay Professor. There is no word in English for spaghetti.” The indication is that because of the difference in their age and cultural background that perhaps these two men do not quite understand one another’s dreams and actions. Still, the nature of the relationship established between these two men is that of teacher and pupil and father and son.

Alice, the secretary of the station manager decides to reward Purcell’s persistence and tells him she will give him a shot when he shows up at the radio station. She takes him into an audition room and tells him “Okay Mr. Caruso we’ll hear you sing.” Powell begins singing “Outside of You,” a song that celebrates a young man’s ability to control his romantic urges until he meets the ideal woman. As he sings the song, Alice looks on with amazement and delight at his sweet tenor voice. After hearing him sing she convinces her boss, Mr. Richards, to give him an audition telling him that, “he can really sing and he’s quite good looking.” Purcell’s abilities as well as his sex appeal are what sell him. These traits appear to benefit Mr. Richards who is looking for a new face and talent to pair with his chief sponsor Flagenheim cheese. Mrs. Flagenheim (Louise Fazenda), a dowager, who wants to use romance to sell her cheese.

The next day Purcell shows up late for the audition and discovers that the Professor has gone on in his place. The Professor convinces Alice to let him go on in Purcell’s place but Mrs. Flagenheim is not impressed with his voice because his voice

sounds like a car horn. Purcell finally shows up but the damage has been done. He tells Alice, “well it looks like I had the shortest radio career in history.” He smiles at her and thanks her for the chance. He offers her a taxi ride during which a romance begins to develop between them. After they drive around for a few hours he finally takes her home. When he drops her off he asks her, “Do you suppose there are singers who want to be cab drivers?” She smiles lovingly at him and tells him, “You haven’t got anything to worry about. You’ve got a good voice and a lot of ambition and you’re young.” Before they part, she offers him another chance to come in and help her on the radio with the children’s hour. Purcell’s acceptance of Alice’s offer shows him to be a compassionate man who respects and understands a strong woman like Alice, whose witty comebacks and strong will are on display from the first moment they meet at the radio station.

Purcell agrees to show up the next morning only to discover that he is not going to be singing but making animal noises and sound effects. Unfortunately, he told all of his co-workers, friends, and the Professor that he is going to be on the radio. They all listen anxiously waiting to hear him sing, but Purcell becomes a laughing stock when they realize he is simply making noises. During the broadcast he and the program’s host Uncle Andy get into a fight because Andy tries to humiliate him on air. In a fit of anger Purcell call the show a program for “for brats.” Angry parents’ phone calls, telegrams and letters flood the station complaining about his language and behavior.

Purcell’s inability to see the risk that Alice took on him and respect her decision shows him to inconsiderate. Moreover, his performance during a kid’s program leads him to have trouble with his fellow cabbies because he has lost their respect. The men tuned

into the program because they believed that their coworker Purcell was finally going to get a shot at fame and fortune with his voice. The fact that Purcell is unhappy with his lot in life as a member of the working class shows how Warner Bros. sympathetic image of the urban experience presented in their early 1930s films like *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Five Star Final* (1931) shifted to films where the focus was on entertainment and fantasy rather than political issues and realism. What is sold in *Broadway Gondolier* isn't a solution to a problem but an ideal image of the "American Dream."

Purcell's fortunes are illustrative of the tension between striving for success and accepting one's position in life. It is his dissatisfaction with his job as a cabbie and his smaller body size that separates Purcell from his other coworkers who are shown to be more masculine with their bulging muscles, and hard craggy looking faces. Purcell's actions and feelings illustrate the complex nature of masculine behaviors at the time and connect him to the tensions between a need for independence and self-control and that of dependence and cooperation.

The Professor convinces Purcell that if he were to go to Italy then Purcell would be respected and admired for his voice. He gives the Professor all the money he has saved thus illustrating his consideration for his friend and vocal coach who longs to return to Italy when he buys a ticket on a steamship for the Professor. The Professor then tells him that when he has everything settled he will send for him to join him in Italy.

Desperate to find a new image and voice for her radio program Mrs. Flagenheim decides to travel to Italy with Alice. Purcell picks them and Richards up in his cab to take them to the docks where they will catch a ship. When Purcell realizes that Richards and

company are in his cab he decides to get back at them and drives recklessly until reaching their destination. Once on the docks, Alice and Mrs. Flagenheim board the ship. Purcell stows away aboard the ship and leaves a note on his cab.

When he arrives in Italy Purcell finds his friend the Professor working and struggling to survive in Venice. The Professor explains to him that he was not able to get Purcell a position singing, but that he could get him a job as a gondolier. Purcell laughs when the Professor explains to him what a gondolier is, and says. “Can’t I ever get away from taxicabs? Everywhere I go there is a cab.” It is clear that no matter how hard Purcell tries to escape his working class background and find success on his own terms that the opportunities are limited.

Purcell and the Professor work as gondoliers during a festival when Mrs. Flagenheim hears him singing “Lonely Gondolier” in Italian. For this performance Warner Bros. claimed that Powell learned to sing opera from Alberto Conti.³⁰⁷ Purcell’s voice and youthful demeanor enchant her. She tells Alice that, “You would never find a voice like that in America” not realizing that this young man is the same New York cab driver who tried to sing for her before. She offers him a contract to sing on her radio show for \$500 a week in anticipation of selling more cheese and perhaps developing a romance with him as well. For Mrs. Flagenheim it is the appeal of Purcell as a Venetian gondolier that is more important because for her Italian masculinity represents something exotic and sexy that will be useful to sell her cheese to American women who listen to the program. Purcell’s masquerade as the gondolier shows how easily it was for Hollywood to appropriate ethnicity and race. The film reveals how Purcell’s “whiteness”

and working-class identity can be easily transformed thereby providing him with access to the “American Dream” but only if he acts as if he is foreign. The film exhibits how both gender and identity can be thought of as a performance as Butler claims. In this case, Purcell’s performance as the gondolier acts to poke fun at radio and at the idea of Italian masculinity as something exotic, and mysterious for silly American women. In effect, Purcell’s masculine image becomes a commodity along with his voice. He is now a product that can be bought and sold. Even though he has a contract for \$500 a week, the contract limits his real sense of agency, and prohibits him from his real desire that of declaring his love for Alice.

Alice recognizes Purcell, who is now calling himself Ricardo Purcelli, and decides to go along with the hoax. Purcell tells Alice that, “I’ll be all the gondolier she thinks I am,” as he smiles at her after signing the contract. For the young cabbie from New York it has taken him a trip to Italy to get his chance to sing on radio. When Purcelli arrives in America is mobbed by a group of young women who simply wish to get a look at him. The fanfare and hoopla surrounding the arrival of the “Venetian Gondolier” are used to promote the radio show. Purcell then becomes both a commodity and a site of desire for young women, as well as for Mrs. Flagenheim. However, the hoax is soon revealed when Purcell sings for a live audience. As young girls sigh over his syrupy voice the two critics he met in the beginning listen intently arguing over where they have heard his voice.

The first show is a massive success but Purcell is unhappy because he cannot be himself nor can he show any real affection for Alice. Yet, the critics and newspaper

reporters learn the truth, jeopardizing the show and Purcell's reputation. Purcell asks Richards "why do we have to deny I am a cab driver? Would they not like my voice just the same?" Richards convinces Purcell that he must keep up the charade, but finally Purcell's need to be honest with himself and his love for Alice take over.

As he is on the air singing "Lonely Gondolier" he reveals his true identity and then walks off the stage. Purcell's actions and willingness to walk away from fame and fortune is used to indicate the high price of celebrity. He wishes to sing, but on his own terms where his identity as a simple cab driver can be embraced rather than that of his faux persona. For Purcell honesty and a clean conscience are worth more than money. His sense of pride and honesty are rewarded when letters and telegrams are sent to the radio station from fans who love his voice despite the reality that he is not a foreign singer. Mr. Richards, Alice, and the Professor look all over the city for Purcell on the night of his next broadcast. The Professor finds Purcell singing with a traffic cop during an accident and smiles. He gets out of his taxi, walks up to Purcell's and tells him, "haven't you heard, you are now the taxi tenor." Purcell returns to the airwaves and sings "Outside of You" all while staring at Alice. He pulls her close to him, hugs her and they kiss. Purcell is now able to sing on radio and be with the woman whom he loves.

The film was not the standard Warner Bros. musical fare but it was fairly well received by the critics who concentrated how the film represented a shift in Warner Bros. production style for musicals. *The New York Times* noted that, "the Brothers Warner have turned over a few new leaves and decided to omit the scenes of extravagant spectacle, the overhead shots, and the whirling choruses that had become traditional elements of their

earlier songfest fantasies.” *Variety* called the film “a marquee studded musical, not as elaborate as the former WB musicals, but sufficient for the box office purpose thereof.”³⁰⁸ *The Chicago Tribune* labeled the film a “combination of cuckoo plot, pretty, and gaily burlesqued acting by an able cast.”³⁰⁹

Powell received fairly positive notices for his performance as well. Mae Tinee writing for the *Tribune* stated that, “Dick Powell for part of the time” captures the attention of female viewers because he is shown “in earrings and a sweet wee mustachie! Plays his role with pep and humor, singing pleasingly when the script says sing.”³¹⁰ The *New York Times* critic noted that, “Dick Powell is an amiable young man, both on and off the screen but there can be too much amiability.”³¹¹ *Variety* pointed out that, “Powell is in fine voice throughout evidencing some intensive vocal culturing. His finished manner of warbling the semi classical title song... completes the illusion of a trained Venetian vocal import.”³¹²

The film celebrates an image of American young men as ambitious, compassionate and considerate. It also points out how the effects of commercial capitalism through such institutions as ‘radio’ have effected a change in masculine behaviors and perceptions. These changes are illustrated in the way in which the film critiques the notion of European masculinity as exotic and sexually more desirable than American masculinity. The film also points toward how larger questions about the nature of masculinities at a time of uncertainty were framed by the competing forces of social norms of American masculinity and the needs of commercial capitalism to sell more goods and create more consumers, even during a period of record unemployment.

The Singing Marine

The value of male camaraderie in combat and in service to the US has been celebrated as one of the preeminent examples of American masculinity. Whether it was the heroism of Teddy Roosevelt and his “Rough Riders” or the horrific experiences of the men who would come to comprise the Bonus Army, in each case it was believed that their actions and experiences would serve to re-masculinize the nation in film and in popular culture. In his book *Armed Forces: Masculinity and Sexuality in the American War Film* Robert Eberwein examines how American war films speak to fears of American masculinity, sexuality, and loss of authority.³¹³ I would argue military service comedies as a sub-genre of the war film, are similarly involved in forming images and definitions of American masculinities. In the case of Powell, these service comedies are instrumental in illustrating the multi-faceted nature of how young American men were encouraged to set aside their own needs in favor of the needs of the nation.

In 1937 Powell was cast in *The Singing Marine* (Enright). Powell had been previously cast in the military service comedies *Flirtation Walk* (Borzage, 1934) and *Shipmates Forever* (Borzage, 1935) both of which had paired Powell with the wide-eyed innocent image of Ruby Keeler. In both of these films Powell plays a young man struggling with his duty as a military cadet and his love for a beautiful young woman. However, what separates *The Singing Marine* from these prior films, besides the absence of Ruby Keeler as the love interest, is the focus on the relationship between service to one’s country, fellow soldiers, and the desire to achieve fame and fortune. Unlike the previous two where the emphasis was on the tension between self-interest and national

interest, *The Singing Marine* complicates things by creating a narrative that explores the ways that national interest and self-interest are being impacted by the developing forms of commercial capitalism, like radio.

Production on *The Singing Marine* began on January 25, 1937 and was completed on April 6, 1937. The film cost \$522,000 dollars to produce and Powell earned \$26,000 for his efforts.³¹⁴ Delmer Daves, who had written the previous screenplays for the other service comedies, also wrote the screenplay for this one, which combines a look at life in the military for a shy, young man with the glamour of radio entertainment.

The Singing Marine would be the last of the service comedies that Powell would make. It is the characterization of Private First Class “Arkansas” Bob Brent and the ways in which Warner Bros. sought to depict the character separates this film from the previous two. In a memo from Hal Wallis to the director Ray Enright, Wallis urges Enright to pay attention to Powell’s performance and how he is forming the character of Bob Brent. “I want both you and Dick to see that it is not forgotten that he is supposed to be a bashful marine—a fellow who is even afraid of holding a girl’s hand, let alone get up on a platform and sing a song... This is a very important thing and unless you watch him closely, you’re not going to believe the character for one minute... We are starting him off in the picture as a nice boy and we are giving him a good character, one that audiences will like so for the love of Pete keep him that way.”³¹⁵ The memo illustrates that for Warner Bros. it was Powell’s image as a “nice boy” that was important for this film.

The film opens with Powell as Bob Brent sitting marching in a dress uniform with the other men toting a rifle on the parade grounds. He is shown in a close-up with a determined look on his face. Here he is the image of a reserved soldier, which is in stark contrast to when he is shown with his coat sloppily unbuttoned on his bunk singing and playing his guitar in the barracks. He is shown in a medium close-up so that the camera captures the image of his youthful, rounded face as he softly croons a song with one arm lazily draped over the guitar that is placed in his lap. He is shown lazily picking on the instrument when his sergeant and other company mates enter. The sergeant and the men have planned a weenie roast on the beach for themselves and their girl friends but they need the services of Bob and his guitar to seduce the women. Yet, Bob tells the sergeant that he would like to help them out, but every time it is just him and his guitar and that it is not really fun for him.

The men debate the merits of dating but Bob explains that, “I don’t seem to know about how to go about getting one [a girl]. I just don’t know what to do”, he says sheepishly as he shrugs his shoulders.

The sergeant (Allen Jenkins) who represents the more worldly wise image of the American military with his advice tells him that, “it is as simple as shooting a quail. All you have to do is pick out the quail you want and get set. Ready, aim, fire and she’s yours.”

“Well, I guess I am a little gun shy. I aim all right but when I get a gal all aimed at, I haven’t enough nerve to pull the trigger” Bob tells the sergeant as he is framed in a

medium close-up capturing a look of anxiety and nervousness as he confesses his problem with talking to women to his pals and the sergeant.

The sergeant convinces the young cashier at the Marine Grill to go out with Bob so that he does not have to cancel his party and also because he wants to help out his buddy in arms. The sergeant explains the situation and then tells her about Bob's merits. He asks her, "Can you spare some time...with a young lad from Arkansas who sings and plays the guitar? You like guitars?"

She responds cynically explaining that, "I like guitars but I don't like hillbillies." The sergeant defends Bob's character telling the cashier that, "this is no hill billy. Why if you just held his hand you'd make him happy. He's a lonesome nice living kid." The cashier retorts sarcastically, "I am not opening a training school for nice clean living kids." The cashier's comments indicate that she is a woman with some experience in matters of love, but when she discovers that the 'kid' the sergeant is referring to is the same one who comes by her store, peeks in the window and keeps walking everyday then she agrees to the date. The sergeant tells her to make it look like the kid asked for himself but she seizes the opportunity.

As she walks out of the grill after finishing her shift she pretends to bump into him forcing him to speak to her. He stares awkwardly at her and then says, "Hello" in a soft voice. He introduces himself to her and with a little coaxing from her agrees to a date. She takes his arm in hers and they walk off together to attend the weenie roast.

While at the weenie roast, the girl, Peggy (Doris Weston) explains to Bob that she is going to New York to try out for a radio talent show. Then at the request of the other

Marines Bob begins to play his guitar and sing by the fire while the other men go off with their girl friends to dark, private places. As Bob sings, Peggy's image of him as an awkward young farm boy is changed by the sweet tenor of his voice and angelic good looks. She tells him that she likes his singing and when he asks, "do you mind if I hold your hand," she nearly laughs at him and replies, "if you think it is safe." In this setting it is clear that Peggy's knows more about sex and dating than Bob who is afraid to just hold her hand as they sit by the fire. However, it is Bob's bashful nature and innocence, which endear him to her and will be challenged throughout the rest of the film.

The men return to the barracks and discuss their conquests. The sergeant tells them that, "with that kid singing a female iceberg will turn into a four alarm fire before the end of the song." The men continue to kid one another before asking Bob how his date went. Bob explains that once again he felt as if it was his guitar and himself alone together on the beach while everyone else was with their girls.

The sergeant recognizes that Bob's problem is a lack of confidence in himself and his abilities. He tells him, "What you lack my boy is oomph." Bob then tells them about Peggy's plans to leave for New York. "Why don't you go to New York and try out on that amateur radio hour?" the sergeant asks. Bob at first resists the idea but when the men of Company C pool their money together to send him to New York while he is on furlough he accepts their generosity and agrees to represent all the Marines as 'The Singing Marine.' The collective wish of the men to see their friend succeed and overcome his sense of social awkwardness acts as an endorsement of male support. Moreover, it is an indication of how Powell is further used by Warner Bros. to craft a

new youthful image of American masculinities at a time when it is so desperately needed to reaffirm American values like hard work, compassion, cooperation, and sensitivity to the needs of others.

On the bus to New York Bob finds Peggy on her way to the city. While on the bus he recounts his personal history for her telling her “I was born in Mount View Arkansas.” This brief moment connects the fictional world of the film to that of Powell’s real life/studio biography and also illustrates how Warner Bros. was always trying to build screen personas that combined elements of a performers real life with their screen image.

Peggy flops when she tries to sing for the radio in New York, but Bob is an instant sensation when he sings ‘Cause My Baby Says It’s So.’ Bob is shown in a medium close-up confidently singing with his chest slightly puffed out and as he sings he rolls his eyes and softly croons. The camera shows doe-eyed young women in the audience as they sit staring at him as he sings intercut with images of the telephone switchboard swamped with calls begging for more of ‘The Singing Marine.’

Bob signs a contract with an eccentric talent agent Aeneas Phinney (Hugh Herbert) with little concern for the fact that he is an enlisted man in the U.S. marines. Despite Peggy’s failure on the radio, Bob hires her as his personal assistant and secretary because of his admiration for her, and she accepts the job because she has begun to grow fond of him. Phinney not caring about the reality that Bob is only to be in New York for two weeks immediately sets to work to create an image of Bob as ‘The Singing Marine’ a clean cut example of America’s fighting men.

Phinney hires 500 young chorus girls and out of work actresses to mob Bob as he leaves the office and heads for a hotel. The women fight to get his attention while trying to grab any piece of his clothes that they can get. The publicity stunt serves to show how Bob's lack of self-confidence and simple ways are going to be challenged, especially when he becomes the object of so many women's sexual fantasies. However, Bob also loses the opportunity to decide for himself on matters of love and business, as he becomes the newest commodity on radio and in America. Initially Bob will view this shift in fortunes as a positive effect of his singing, but as he soon discovers his fame will negatively impact his relationships with the men of Company C and Peggy.

Bob becomes involved with a film star Helen Young (Marcia Ralston) who is also a client of Phinney's when she breaks into his hotel room on the first night after he has signed with Phinney. Phinney tries to protect Bob from her explaining to her that, "You can't spoil that kid." The actress seductively replies, "I won't spoil him, just ripen him a bit." She then bursts into the bathroom where Bob is hiding without his pants on.

The two engage in a whirlwind affair of parties, night club appearances, and consumption of goods and in the process he is seduced by the life of fame, fortune, and sex. Bob forgets to report to the local Marine base after the two weeks elapse and is arrested for dereliction of duty. Bob meets up with his old friends, only now he is self-confident and arrogant. He tells the men, that "looks like my rifle toting days are over," much to the dismay and disbelief of the men. One of the men says of Bob that he has "turned out to a worlds prize snob." Bob's swollen sense of self-worth and importance

are put into perspective when he is reduced to swabbing decks by the sergeant who had first tried to help him gain confidence.

Phinney tries to bribe the Marine commanders to let Bob out of his enlistment, but the officer explains that Bob has signed a more important form of contract: with the United States government and his fellow soldiers. He is ordered to be on a troop ship bound for Shanghai after he completes his final radio broadcast in New York. The sergeant and another Marine are sent to make sure that Bob is put on the transport but all three men miss the transport and he books passage on an ocean liner for all of them.

While on board the ship Bob and Peggy are introduced to Ma Marine (Jane Darwell) by his sergeant. Ma Marine is the widow of a former Marine who owns and operates a bar frequented by Marines stationed in Shanghai. Bob's continued commitment to celebrity and money disillusioned Peggy, who has been in love with him the whole time. The musical number that they perform together on the ship "The Lady Who Couldn't Be Kissed" shows how Bob's narcissism is negatively impacting her feelings towards him and those of his fellow marines.

Bob arrives in Shanghai, where Phinney has been hard at work to build him into a celebrity there as well as America. He is greeted with a large parade, parties, and fanfare, which makes Ma Marine, Peggy, the Sergeant and Slim (Lee Dixon) lose all faith that Bob can be made to see the error of his ways. Bob is again arrested for violating orders and taken from his luxurious apartment to live in the Spartan marine quarters.

Bob continues to thwart the authority of his commanders and places himself before the men and the uniform. However, it is when Bob turns down a request to help

Ma Marine who is in financial trouble that his fellow marines take out their frustrations by punching him out and then turning their backs on him. What the marines don't realize is that Phinney has spent all of Bob's money on publicity and the construction of a nightclub in Shanghai.

On the night of the grand opening of the club as Bob gets ready Peggy angrily tells him that, "you turned the Marines down and they did the same to you. I hoped like they did when it came to a showdown you'd come through. But you didn't do it. You might just as well get used to the fact that you are washed up with them. And it is too late to anything about it now." He tells her that, "it's a shame because I had a surprise for them." Peggy's comments and his own guilt about forgetting about the men who helped him achieve celebrity are what serve as Bob's release from his own ego and the pitfalls of celebrity.

Bob gives his nightclub to Ma Marine against Phinney's objections. He then attempts to end his service only to be denied a discharge and he is assigned to Ma Marine's nightclub to help her dedicate the new bar. He sings the Marine corps anthem with conviction and verve, illustrating that Private First Class Bob Brent has been restored. This feeling is emphasized when tells the other Marines that, "there is no singing Marine anymore, but if you would like to sing with a guy named Arkansas Bob I would be honored." Peggy kisses him after this statement realizing that the shy, innocent farm boy she had fallen for has not been lost to the lure of fame and fortune. This ending embraces a view of masculinity that endorses qualities such as compassion, cooperation, and a concern for the greater good.

The film received mixed reviews from critics. *Variety* called it, “just a fair musical romance[that] is the kind of a picture that should ease by for the summer and may succeed in doing average business.”³¹⁶ Frank Nugent, who began writing film criticism for the *New York Times* in 1934 replacing Andre Sennwald, noted that, “Dick Powell, whom this irascible old corner publicly gave up for Lent last season, returns to a certain measure of grace and therefore forgiveness.”³¹⁷ Mae Tinee the long-standing film critic for the *Chicago Tribune* noted that, “this is a gay, busy musical. It rings in a lot of pretty girls, songs, sets, and scenery and plenty of good looking young men who really look as if they could fight for their country were they called upon to do so.”³¹⁸ The idea of youth, grace, and duty are celebrated in this musical extravaganza as Tinee notes.

Powell would make six more films for Warner Bros: *Varsity Show* (Keighley, 1937), *Hollywood Hotel* (Berkeley, 1937), *Cowboy from Brooklyn* (Bacon, 1938), *Hard to Get* (Enright, 1938), *Going Places* (Enright, 1938) and *Naughty but Nice* (Enright, 1939). Powell and Warner Bros. ended their relationship in December of 1938 when they allowed his option to expire on the contract they had agreed to the previous year. Powell had grown tired of making films without a break. He had made twenty-nine films for Warner Bros. from 1932-1938 along with three others in loan outs to Fox.

Yet with Powell Warner Bros. had been able to capitalize on the image of youthful American masculinities that represented the changing dynamics in the relationships between men and women, men and their government, and men and the emerging consumer economy. As the youthful, cherubic face of “New Deal” optimism and the melodic, sweet voice of the crooner, Powell was the embodiment of “New Deal

masculinities” as active and passive, producer and consumer, and self-made and group oriented. These are the very qualities and characteristics that he will redefine in the 1940s when he becomes the image of American masculinity as cynical, rough, and tough in a series of murder and crime dramas.

Chapter Four

Glamorous Male Bodies: Errol Flynn and a Return to Aggressive Vibrancy

Battles, fights, and duels of all kinds are concerned with struggles of will and strength, victory and defeat, between individual men and/or groups of men.³¹⁹

“Masculinity as Spectacle” Steve Neale

Most of the stunts that people saw in my action pictures I can truthfully say were done by me. I have fought sword fights on parapets, ridden horses over high barriers and deep gullies...I said to myself I am not going to be phony. The reason in back of it was that I had fear and I had to go out and meet my own fear. If I am afraid to do something I move in on it and try to tangle with it and lick it.³²⁰

My Wicked, Wicked Ways Errol Flynn

By 1935 the studios were in a frantic search for new masculine faces to put in pictures. Jerry Hoffman noted that “Hollywood is going man crazy” in his article “Studios Searching Byways for more Masculine Idols” that appeared in the *Los Angeles Examiner* special Sunday section on films in March of 1935.³²¹ In the article Hoffman emphasizes that Hollywood which had once been desperately searching for the next Garbo, Mae West, or Janet Gaynor now were in the process of signing up as many good looking young men as they could find in an effort to build new masculine stars that could sell tickets. With the return of costume dramas and swashbucklers Hollywood needed to find men who were capable of playing devil-may-care parts rather than the violent, aggressive figure of the gangster or the romantic man about town or the youthful singer, character types that had been popular with audiences in the early 1930s. In many cases Hollywood looked to England or abroad for these new male faces because the current crop of stars, especially at Warner Bros. were not capable of playing this new “style” of masculinity.

One such star that developed as a result of this drive for new male faces was Errol Flynn. The young Tasmanian actor was brought to Hollywood in 1935 after he had appeared in two small budget films. The first, an Australian version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1933) had Flynn playing Fletcher Christian in an ill-fitting and cheap looking blonde wig and tight fitting sailor's jacket. The second was *Murder at Monte Carlo* (1935) a quota quickie made at the Warner Bros. Teddington studio near London. In the film Flynn is given second billing and plays a newspaper reporter investigating a new roulette system. The film while second rate was an important step for Irving Asher who cast Flynn, a newcomer in the role without the permission of the Burbank office.

Irving Asher who was running the Warner Bros. London office signed Flynn in 1934 because of Flynn's personality, physicality, and intelligence impressed him. According to Tony Thomas, Asher signed him without seeing a screen test. Asher then sent a cable to the Warner's lot in Burbank informing the company that he had "signed today seven year's optional contract best picture bet we have ever seen. He is twenty five, Irish looks, cross between Charles Farrell and George Brent same type and build excellent actor champion boxer swimmer guarantee he is a real find."³²² It is clear from Asher's cable that Flynn was signed in the hopes that he could be made into a new type of studio leading man with his combination of physicality, boyish charm, and intelligence onscreen. It was the combination of these qualities that brought Flynn to Hollywood in the summer of 1935.

Flynn possessed a strong, clean jaw line, a classically contoured nose and deep penetrating eyes that looked as if they could bore into women's hearts and men's souls.

Basinger notes that “unlike the majority of the male movie stars of his era, Flynn was actually a big man: six feet two inches tall, just under two hundred pounds. Yet he was never awkward and seemed to be completely comfortable inside himself.”³²³ Flynn represents an image of masculinity onscreen that is confident, athletic, playful, and good looking. His “style” of masculinity illustrates how various types of masculinity ebb and flow because by 1935 his “style” of ‘Fairbanksian’ masculinity returned to American screens just as the nation’s economic fortunes seemed to be on the rise.

In the summer of 1935 Flynn sailed for New York where he hoped to start a new life working as a film actor. That voyage to America was crucial for the young man in two ways. First, it transformed him from an unknown actor who had worked in the Northampton repertory company and at Teddington studios into an international star. Second, it was on the SS Paris where Flynn would meet Lila Damita, a French actress who would immediately charm him with her exoticism, sex appeal, and independent streak. Flynn writes, “I couldn’t escape watching the beautifully dressed Damita arrogantly walking the deck. Everything about her was arrogant; and the more arrogant the more beautiful.”³²⁴ Damita ignored Flynn’s overtures while onboard the ship much to his dismay. Yet, it was this first meeting between Flynn and Damita that would shape Errol Flynn’s early fortunes at Warner Bros. and his frustrations throughout the rest of his life because he married Damita and as a result Flynn’s professional and private life were always in turmoil.

According to Flynn it was Sam Clarke, a Warner Bros. publicity man who was responsible for selling Flynn as an Irishman from Ireland. “He had me photographed as a

motorcycle cop. That fitted into the American conception of what an Irishman fresh from Ireland should look like and be...I had to pose for another picture. In this I had to kiss a female cousin from the old sod."³²⁵ By selling Flynn as Irish and connecting him to the image of a cop Warner Bros. were fashioning him into an image of a working class man, who also was quite popular with women, thus the need for the photo of him kissing a young woman. After his studio publicity tour and identity were fashioned in Chicago, he was sent on to Hollywood where he arrived in August of 1935. Flynn made \$150 dollars a week as a contract player.

He was first cast as a corpse in *The Case of the Curious Bride* (Curtiz, 1935) where he would first meet and work with Warner Bros. most important director Michael Curtiz (they were often paired together throughout Flynn's tenure at the studio) and Flynn came to despise him. In his book Flynn criticizes Curtiz's directorial style noting that, "in each he tried to make all scenes so realistic that my skin didn't matter to him. Nothing delighted him more than real bloodshed."³²⁶ He was then cast as a society playboy in *Don't Bet on Blondes* (Florey, 1935). In this film he only has two scenes: the first takes place on a golf course where he is shown walking towards the camera arm in arm with Claire Dodd. In the scene Flynn's easy going and flirtatious nature come across and in many respects he steals the scene from Dodd who looks unnatural playing opposite him, especially when Flynn removes a silver cigarette case from his pocket and offers her a cigarette. The second scene allows Flynn to be displayed as a beautiful vision of urbane masculinity wearing a tuxedo. Jeanine Basinger in her book *The Star System* notes that, "he's too beautiful to look unattractive and too keen eyed to look stupid...it's a perfect

little screen moment. The onscreen grace, ease, and humor were clearly part of Flynn himself.”³²⁷ These two scenes, which provide Flynn with around seven minutes screen time, were instrumental in the developing of his masculine persona and his stardom.

Jeanine Basinger argues that, “what happened to Flynn is one of those lucky accidents that the star machine was already to capitalize on in reference to his being cast as Peter Blood by the studio.”³²⁸ Basinger’s assessment of Flynn’s luck is partially true but in arguing that it was a matter of luck rather than talent or drive that propelled Flynn to the top of the choices for this role overlooks the other factor that led to Warner Bros. decision to make the film at all such as the growing audience interest in big budget adventure films and the studios shift to make more “A” class features when Hal Wallis replaced Daryl Zanuck in 1934 after Zanuck left to oversee Fox.³²⁹

Captain Blood

In 1934 two films were released that according to Tony Thomas “set the stage for a revival of the swashbuckling costume romance” that had once been extremely popular during the silent era but disappeared with the adoption of sound.³³⁰ The films *Treasure Island* (Fleming, 1934) and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Lee, 1934) success at the box office led M-G-M to develop a lavish version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) with Clark Gable in the lead and not to be outdone Warner Bros. decided to make a film version of Rafael Sabatini’s novel *Captain Blood* which had previously been filmed in the silent era. Warner Bros. in 1934 had finalized a deal with William Randolph Hearst to set up his production company Cosmopolitan Pictures on the lot along with his mistress Marion Davies, who was also signed as an actress. Warner Bros. agreed to finance, produce, and

distribute Hearst's films and then split the profits with him. The real reason that Hearst was brought onto the lot was his publishing empire that included newspapers and magazines, which the Warner Bros. hoped to access in an effort to acquire story material and market their films.

The fascination and demand for swashbuckler men onscreen for the studios was the subject of an article that appeared in William Randolph Hearst's *Los Angeles Examiner* May 24, 1935. The article stated that, "swashbucklers with a devil-may-care air, adventurous rascals who can kiss a wench, court a fair lady of noble blood, and a run a rival through the heart all in one breath, more-or-less are in demand" in Hollywood.³³¹ The new "devil-may care" image of screen masculinity that captivated audiences in 1935 was one that Warner Bros. too, hoped to capitalize on in their search for the ideal man to play Peter Blood.

Warner Bros. had hoped to land Robert Donat for the role of Peter Blood drawing upon his success in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. However, they were unable to secure Donat's services because he was afraid of being typecast in costume dramas and more importantly Donat was not physically able to perform the role because he suffered from asthma.³³² The studio also considered male stars Fredric March and Ronald Coleman for the lead role. In a memo to Hal Wallis Harry Joe Brown, Warner's executive advises that they should consider Leslie Howard for the part or Clark Gable because "I still feel that no man in the business is too big to go after for Captain Blood."³³³ Even the company's leading man in contemporary films George Brent was tested for the part along with Errol

Flynn³³⁴ Yet, it was Flynn, an untested actor who won the role after a more extensive screen test was conducted on June 20, 1935.³³⁵

The film began production in August with Flynn as Peter Blood and another newcomer Olivia de Havilland as Arabella Bishop. Hearst papers began selling the couple as Warner Bros. latest finds noting that “this same company [Warner Bros] announces with conviction the discovery of two new stars. They are Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland...”³³⁶ What is striking about Flynn’s stardom and indeed his screen masculinity is that he is defined by his relationship to his female co-star de Havilland similar to George Brent and like Powell he is sold for his image of youth, desirability, and appeal to female viewers.

During production it was clear to Warner Bros. executives that with Flynn they had discovered a raw talent who only needed a little coaching to be effective on screen. It was not unusual for executives to provide guidance to directors on how to set up scenes or direct actors. Producer Hal Wallis suggests to Michael Curtiz who was directing the film to help Flynn along and also suggested ways to craft Flynn’s masculine image onscreen. Wallis notes that, “I think Flynn is doing very well, except that in the courtroom I thought you played him down a little too much...particularly those speeches where he talks about having been in prison for three months...it seems to me you could have gotten a little more fire in his eyes in scenes of this kind. He plays a little too much monotone. Those repressed scenes are good, but they should be varied a little...let him put more guts in the stuff.”³³⁷ The memo illustrates that in fact Warner Bros. had developed a distinct vision of Flynn’s overall masculine image in connection with the

film and the persona they were shaping around him. In another memo from Wallis to Curtiz on August 21, 1935 Wallis tells Curtiz that, “the last dailies look nice. The scene with Errol Flynn and the group around him looks good. Flynn was very good in this stuff. He is sincere and convincing. Get him to smile once in awhile, when the opportunity presents itself—especially in those scenes with the girl—let him smile whenever possible...because he has a nice personality and it will relieve that seriousness and that monotone we are worried about.”³³⁸ Here Wallis directs Curtiz to get Flynn the actor to smile more and also to play scenes in the script so that the character of Peter Blood can be seen this way. Flynn seemed to be a blank slate for the studio on which they could impose their vision of Flynn as an ideal screen hero, but the focus was not only on his performance.

Flynn’s costumes and the way in which he wore them were also of the subject of several memos from Wallis to Curtiz. Even though the film was a costume picture for the producers it was important that Flynn not be costumed in such a way that it depicted his masculine qualities in a negative manner. Wallis tells Curtiz in a memo from September of 1935 that, “I have talked to you about four thousand times, until I am blue in the face, about the wardrobe in this picture. I distinctly remember telling you, I don’t know how many times that I did not want to use lace collars or cuffs on Errol Flynn... I want the man to look like a pirate not a molly coddle. You have him standing up here dealing with a lot of hard boiled characters and you’ve got him dressed up like a god damned faggot...let him look a little swashbuckling for Christ sakes! Don’t always have him dressed up like a pansy... from now on I want to okay Flynn in every costume he wears,

in every sequence that he goes into from now on!”³³⁹ Wallis was less concerned with historical accuracy in the costuming than Flynn appearing feminine. Wallis’s fear of Flynn’s character being viewed as a “faggot” illustrates Hollywood’s long-standing fear of homosexuality. Vito Russo argues in *The Celluloid Closet* that Hollywood used its fears of homosexuality as a method to define American masculinity as rough and no-nonsense.³⁴⁰

The film was finished in mid December at a cost of one million dollars. It was the most expensive film the company had ever produced but as Schatz points out, “in Errol Flynn Warners seemed to have found a possible successor to Douglas Fairbanks at a time when no one else in Hollywood seemed to be able to take up Fairbanks’ cutlass.”³⁴¹ Like Fairbanks Flynn’s masculinity in *Captain Blood* shows a more conservative view of American masculinity where American masculinity and patriarchy must be rescued from the instabilities of gender dynamics in America that are the result of modernism, and capitalism.³⁴²

From the moment Flynn enters the film in *Captain Blood* from frame right carrying a lighted candle and dressed in a brocaded nightgown (the costuming marks Peter Blood as a man of wealth), it is clear that Warner Bros. have the confidence that he will be a star. He is framed in a medium close-up and quickly says, “that’ll we know better when you’ve opened the door” in response to his frightened housekeeper’s query about who is knocking on the door in the middle of the night. Flynn’s hair appears blondish and serves to frame his face as he stands holding the candle before opening the

door. He is lit from below to emphasize his youthful face, strong cheekbones, and impish smile.

He lets in Jeremy Pitt (Ross Alexander) who has come to ask Blood to help a rebel and a fellow friend. He tells Pitt who is shown in a frantic state to “Come in and regain yours [his head] while I get my things” in a calm and graceful manner. He then turns and heartily commands his housekeeper to help him dress as he strides from the front door back to his bed chamber.

Flynn’s silhouette is shown on the large wall as he dresses behind a large screen. This scene is one of “screen time well spent” according to Basinger because the viewer is allowed to watch Flynn dress.³⁴³ While this scene may allow viewers the opportunity to gaze at Flynn’s good looks, I would also argue it is crucial in that it constructs the image of Flynn as Blood as playboy type figure, albeit in a 17th century context whose profession as a physician mark him as a member of the middle-class. His housekeeper questions Blood’s masculinity and purpose when she tells him, “geraniums. Won’t you ever grow up? One would think you were still at medical school. Geraniums! You would think of geraniums when every able bodied man is out fighting” after he reminds her to water his plants. Her comments indirectly infer per the stereotype of the “playboy” the distinct difference between men being defined as all brains or brawn.

He then ties his cravat and adjusts his puffy sleeves before slipping on his coat. Blood can be shown as a man more concerned with his looks in this scene without appearing feminine because he is a man of wealth and education. He jokes with the housekeeper and playfully touches her chin noting that, “it’s out of favor I seem to be with you my

vinegary virgin.” Basinger points out that right from the beginning the image of Errol Flynn is established. “He’s comfortable in the richest of costumes, photographs well, tosses off zingers with ease, looks sexy, handles women, and establishes his priorities: geraniums over danger.”³⁴⁴

Blood then explains to her that she and all the people of the town may question his motives but “I’ve been most anywhere that fighting was in evidence. I fought for the French against the Spanish and the Spanish against the French and I learned my seamanship in the Dutch navy.” Ina Rae Hark argues that this moment can be interpreted as “a consistent part of the film’s depiction of a man whose freedom from any sort of factional loyalty is a positive, not a negative.”³⁴⁵ Hark connects the film and its themes to questions of the fear of oppression and tyranny in 1935 arguing that this film and other “A” class features dealt with these themes at a time when fear of worker revolt and fascism was on the rise.³⁴⁶

These themes are clearly present in the film what is even more striking is the way in which the film seems to be an analysis of the role of masculinity within American society and an examination of what it means to be a man in 1930s America. Warner Bros. construct an image of Peter Blood that is in keeping with the ideal of the self-made man of the 1920s by depicting him as a man with a sense of rugged individualism. Thus it is his devil-may-care and self-centered attitude that the film problematizes.

The first example of Blood’s self-centered attitude is shown when he is revealed to be a man who cares only for self-preservation in the courtroom scene. Each of the men who are put on trial for treason proudly proclaim their guilt to the court but Blood refuses

to accept his place within the proceedings and to be grouped as a traitor with the other men. He tells the judge Lord Jeffreys (Leonard Mudie), "It's entirely innocent I am."

Flynn is shown in a medium close-up in this moment so that he stands out from amidst the other men. This is emphasized in the differences in lighting, costuming, and framing so that he appears more handsome, even though he is supposed to have been locked away in prison for three months. Flynn's hair is slightly mussed but he still looks presentable compared to the other actors who are shown with dirty faces, torn clothes, and bad teeth. This stylistic choice is another opportunity to demonstrate Flynn/Blood's sartorial concerns. Moreover it shows that men like Blood believe themselves to be better than these other men, because of his wealth, education, and skill as a surgeon.

Blood's denial of his guilt shocks the court and he is immediately ordered to take the stand before the judge and give evidence. Again he is asked to plead guilty or not guilty by the bailiff who tells him, "you must use the right words. In a medium shot Flynn is shown on the stand as he looks up at the Judge who towers above the room from his bench. He playfully says, "words is it? Not guilty. And speaking of words I'd like to say a few about the injustice of keeping an innocent man locked up for 3 months in such filth and heat and ill-feeding that my chief regret is I didn't try to pull down the filthy fellow that sits on the throne." Blood's bravado shows him to be a man who believes himself capable of toppling a king but in openly speaking his mind against the king it makes the audience believe that perhaps he can remove the king. This is the first instance where Blood expresses a definite political statement but his political actions are not the

result of true engagement but instead anger over his harsh treatment and the King's inability to recognize his innocence.

Blood tries to defend himself not realizing that the court and the Crown have predetermined his fate. He continues to proclaim his innocence telling the Judge that, "I am guilty of nothing my Lord unless it be adjudged a crime that a man try to live peaceably...I was not with Monmouth's army my Lord. I was arrested while engaging in my profession as a physician." The Judge questions his statement saying that, "you tell us you're a doctor you rogue." Blood pleads his case with more passion but the Judge tires of his arguments and tells him, "We've no time for all this. If the other traitors are as stubborn as you I may sit here till the next assizes." The Judge's statement reveals that this is in fact no fair trial it is little more than a show to display the King's power as an example to those who might in future question his authority.

In a last ditch effort to save his life Blood diagnoses the Judge and tells him that he is in fact dying which causes the Judge to be shaken for a moment. The Judge then with anger in his eyes leans forward to towards the camera in a straight angle medium shot and tells Blood, "Now fellow we will be done with witnesses and I will convict you out of your own rascally mouth. When this Pitt came to summon you as you claim, did you know you were called to attend a rebel?"

Flynn is shown in a close-up so that his eyes catch the lights and he is shown to be a man in transition from his days of worry over 'geraniums' to a man who has begun to grasp that he has become involved in something far larger and more important. He bitterly tells the Judge, "My business was with his wounds not his politics." The Judge

then asks, “did you know the law that any person who does knowingly receive, harbor, comfort or succor a rebel is as guilty as if he himself bore arms?” Blood with resolve tells the Judge, “I only knew my sacred duty as a physician.” The Judge reminds him that his “sacred duty” is to his King” and then sentences him along with the other men to be hanged.

King James is convinced to stop the hangings thus sparing Blood and the other men when his Secretary of State informs him that the colonies in the West Indies require more slaves. Blood and the men are shipped to Jamaica to be sold as slaves. As they wait in the harbor to go ashore Blood is shown in a medium close-up as he looks through the iron grate of the ship’s hull and notes that, “it’s a truly royal clemency we’re granted my friends one well worthy of King James. He spares us the mercifully quick extinction of the hangman’s rope and gives us the slow death of slavery. He grants us our lives in exchange for a living death.” The use of the word exchange is important because in the following scene the men are shown being examined and bought and sold like live stock or commercial goods. The men are reduced to commodities that can be bargained for by Colonel Bishop (Lionel Atwill), a large plantation owner and Dixon, the owner of the sulfur mines on the island.

Blood again resists authority when Colonel Bishop tries to examine his teeth and he refuses to open his mouth. Bishop then slaps him hard in the face for defying his order to “open your mouth.” Frustrated by Blood’s unwillingness to cooperate Bishop decides not to purchase him noting that, “his pride has bought him a ticket to Dixon’s mines.” Blood’s status as a slave and his experiences in the slave auction mirror the discussions

and images of slave auctions that were held in America. However, unlike those auctions where the property that was bought and sold was raced male and female bodies whose status as raced preclude them from being viewed as normal or human, here we see how “whiteness” plays a factor in the treatment of Blood. Blood’s resistance of authority is met with a slap rather than the lash of a whip and he is able to be bought by a woman who then takes pity on him, a situation that raced bodies would most often not experience.

The colonel’s niece Arabella (Olivia de Havilland) is quickly taken with Blood’s thwarting of her uncle’s power. She steps down from her place of safety and into the slave market disregarding the governor’s advice to “consider your social position.” She begs her uncle to buy Blood but no matter how hard she argues for the purchase Bishop will not change his mind. Arabella then bids for him with her own money against Dixon as he “a skilled physician, gentleman and a scholar” the auctioneer points out. With a bid of ten pounds Arabella purchases Blood. This scene is interesting in that it acts as a sort of role reversal in that it provides the woman with the power and capital to make claim to a role within a patriarchal system. Arabella believes her actions to be noble and kind, but Blood is now a man who has finally come to grips with the harsh reality that to be self-centered and luxurious is harmful. From this moment on, Blood is shown as a man who begins to recognize and empathize with the plight of the other men, especially as he sees them beaten, tortured, branded and nearly worked to death on the colonel’s plantation.

Arabella once more tries to help Blood by convincing the governor to allow him to treat his foot. The governor is plagued by gout and Blood uses his excellent skills as a

healer to help the governor's condition but also to help himself. One afternoon Blood now dressed in simple cotton clothes meets Arabella as she is coming to tea at the governor's home. It is clear that she is developing some feelings for him. She speaks to him softly and with compassion as she looks at how changed he has become by what she perceives as kind action. He reminds her that, "a lady should know her own property. Let me refresh your memory. My name is Peter Blood and I'm worth precisely ten pounds.", As a result of his slavery, Blood learns to respect the plight of other men, like his fellow prisoners, and their convictions. He tells Arabella, "do you think I'd be grateful for an easy life when my friends are treated like animals? It's they that deserve your favors not I. They're all honest rebels. I was snoring in my bed while they were trying to free England from an unclean tyrant."

Blood uses his freedom as the governor's doctor to devise an escape plan for himself and the other men. He secures financial help from the island's two doctors who agree to purchase a small boat for him after he convinces them to help him so that they can resume their practice on the island, which Blood has impacted with his successful treatment of the governor. As he is a slave and cannot purchase the boat directly Blood convinces a local drunk Nuttal (Forrester Harvey) to act as his go between and buy the boat for the men in preparation for the escape. Blood and the men escape as the town of Port Royal comes under siege by Spanish ships. They hijack the flagship of the Spanish and then use it to protect the city before sailing away after the men humiliate Colonel Bishop when he comes aboard to discover his slaves manning the vessel.

Blood is shown in a medium long shot as the Colonel boards the ship with Blood tossing off the gallant greeting of “welcome aboard the Cinco Lagas Colonel Darling.” Here Blood is transformed from the image of the brainy, playboy into that of the self-confident, playfully arrogant pirate dressed in a tight fitting doublet, and wearing a large floppy hat with an ostrich plume. He looks like a man of fashion and a man of purpose in this moment, as he becomes the leader of these men when he tells them that rather than hang Bishop they should toss him over the side and watch him swim back to shore. Blood metes out a justice that is more humane and comical compared to the harsh treatment he has previously received both from the English courts and Bishop who had beaten him with a whip. Then with great joy Blood commands the men to get “up that rigging, you monkey’s aloft. There’s no chains to hold you now.” As he delivers these lines Flynn is shown in a close-up so that the shot captures the intensity of his delivery and the fire in his eyes. Thomas McNulty argues in his book on Flynn that it was when Flynn shouts these words to his men with exhilaration that Errol Flynn became an instant superstar.³⁴⁷

Blood and his men then draw up articles of agreement by which they will sail as pirates. Blood is shown to no longer be a self-centered man. Instead he and the men form a system of government where all men are treated equally and all men possess the ability to have a say in their future endeavors. The articles, which Hark likens to “specific workman’s compensation payments”, also reveal Blood’s shift in thinking about his place within the world as an individual to that of a larger collective.³⁴⁸ When he tells the crew that, “first we pledge ourselves to be bound together as brothers in a life and death friendship sharing alike in fortune and trouble he takes on characteristics of “New Deal

masculinities.” Second, all moneys and valuables which may come into our possession shall be lumped together into a common fund and from this fund shall first be taken the money to fit, rig, and provision the ship.” Their oath to each other demonstrates an ideal image of masculinity that is defined by cooperation, compassion, and intellect rather than a type of masculinity based on the notion of the self-made man, free enterprise and violence. As pirates they are violent men, but their violence will be tempered by their loyalty and respect for one another.

The men are successful as pirates and work together to make a life for themselves that honorably models their values as drawn up under the articles. However, these values are tested when Blood partners with Levasseur (Basil Rathbone) a French pirate who tells him after a night of drunken revelry in Tortuga a paradise for pirates and easy women, “with your brain and my strength there is nothing we cannot do” The men in both crews are wary of the agreement as is Blood when he tells Levasseur that “women will be the death of you” foreshadowing the fact that their partnership will be tested and ultimately destroyed by a woman when Levasseur captures Arabella on an English ship.

Blood and his crew meet Levasseur and his men at the rendezvous point where they discover that Levasseur has looted an English ship and taken two hostages: Arabella and Lord Willoughby (Henry Stephenson). Levasseur intends to ransom them both for money from Colonel Bishop. Blood offers to buy them from Levasseur at his asking price. Now Arabella experiences what it was like for Blood and his men to be belittled by the process of economic exchange. Like Blood, Arabella resists proclaiming that, “I don’t wish to be bought by you.” Blood with long, purposefully strides and hand on the hilt of

his saber tells her smiling coyly that, "As a lady once said to a slave you are hardly in a position to have anything to say about it." Levassuer then asks if he wants the girl and with bravado Blood replies "Yes and I am willing to pay for what I want," as he throws a handful of large valuable pearls all over the beach that sends Levasseur's men scrambling to find them. Levasseur angered by Blood's impudence challenges him as Blood is walking away with his men. Levasseur draws his sword and tells him he will not take the woman from him "while I live." Blood heartily tells him, "then I'll take her when you're dead," as he draws his own sword and tosses off his hat.

The sequence of the two men fighting with swords on the beach is exhilarating to watch. Flynn's athleticism and skill with a sword are on display as are his villainous co-star's Basil Rathbone. The sword fight is choreographed like a ballet with each of the men shown in alternating medium-to-medium close-up to medium long shots so that the sweat on their brows, and anger is visible for audiences. They move with grace and ease in these scenes projecting an image of masculinity that is both handsome and deadly as is shown when Levasseur cuts Blood with his saber. With long purposefully strides and lunges the men battle all along the beach and on rocky outcroppings until finally in a moment of intensity, Levasseur is thwarted in a move to kill Blood, and instead is killed himself in the process when Blood stabs him. Bloodied and battered Blood stands over the body and pronounces "and that my friends ends a partnership that should never have begun." In killing Levasseur Blood's convictions to his men and his new found ethics are restored.

Blood and his men take Willoughby and Arabella aboard their ship and set sail. Arabella resists Blood's advances as he tells her "what matters is I now own you as you once owned me. You're mine do you understand? Mine to do with as I please! He storms out of her cabin and returns to the upper deck. Flynn is shown in medium close-ups as he portrays the image of the sullen, brooding Blood who has fallen for a woman who earlier in the film he had kissed, only to be rebuked and told, "When you forget you're a slave and go so far." Blood's lets his feelings for Arabella sway his judgment and he orders the men to set sail for Jamaica. However, the men resist pointing out that if they return it is the gallows for them all. Here again, an image of the self-centered, aggressive masculinity is painted in a negative light as Blood is willing to risk the men's lives without first consulting them because of his ongoing love-hate relationship with Arabella.

Blood recognizes that his fight and his ego are not those of the men and offers to step down as their captain. Yet, the men realize that were it not for Blood and his ambition they would still be slaves on the island, so they agree to help him. As they near the city of Port Royal they find that the city is under attack. Blood and the men learn from Willoughby that James has been removed and a new King William seeks their assistance to battle the French who are harboring James.

In a dynamic moment, Flynn is shown in a medium close-up as he delivers a speech to the men with passion and purpose. He tells the men, "We once more have a home and a country. For you who are English it means a chance to fight for your native land for I now propose to sail into Port Royal and take it from the French. Those of you who are not English [earlier in the film Blood reveals he is Irish which connects the part

to Flynn who was being billed as Warner Bros. new Irish male lead] will have to be content with fighting for Captain Blood and the loot you'll find on the French ships," he says with a hearty laugh and beaming smile. "Are you willing to fight?" The men all answer "Aye" illustrating that Blood has once more been accepted as a legitimate member of the group because he recognizes the folly in trying to satisfy his selfish desires after he has devoted so much of his time and energy in working with these men to help them regain a sense of self-worth despite their criminal actions. By embracing Willoughby's call to arms these men are restored on a political and moral level in society.

The men wage war with the first French ship and using cannons are able to destroy it. However when they engage the second war ship they find that it is not as easy a vessel to destroy. As the ship takes a tremendous pounding, Blood finally decides to take the fight to the French on their own ship. Flynn is shown in a close-up with his forehead glistening, black soot on his face as he delivers one of the iconic lines from the film, "All right my hearties follow me" that was used to sell the film. He then grabs a rope and swings onto the enemy ship. This moment connects Flynn to the images of Douglas Fairbanks in films the *Mark of Zorro* where Fairbanks scaled walls, walked along roofs, and climbed ropes all in an attempt to demonstrate his athletic prowess. Studlar argues that Fairbank's masculinity illustrated the ideal of the self-made man and Teddy Roosevelt's notion of 'strenuous' masculinity as the perfect model for young boys and men in the 1910s.³⁴⁹ Flynn's image is illustrative of how masculine 'styles' have changed in the 1930s because his performance in the film displays a combination of

appearance and action alongside cooperation. It was these values that Warner Bros. saw as more culturally valuable and marketable in mid 1930s America.

The men are successful against the French and are given their freedom for their valiant effort. Blood and Arabella are able to finally declare their love and Blood learns to set aside his need for revenge on Colonel Bishop when Blood is made the new governor after Bishop is removed for dereliction of duty and for his loyalty to James. The film ends with Flynn and de Havilland in a close-up as she reaches over chastely kisses him on the head as the two of them smile at the camera.

The film was released to critical and box office acclaim around Christmas time in December of 1935. *Variety* stated that, “the film could well be a smash” and noted that Errol Flynn “is impressive for future big marquee values.”³⁵⁰ *Film Daily* called it an “outstanding picture” with “splendid production [that] has every type of imaginable appeal to lure the femmes as well as the men and the boys.”³⁵¹ *Film Daily's* review of the film is aimed at the exhibitors and sees in the film an opportunity to attract male viewers because it was an example of a high seas adventure film, a genre that had been popular with men and young boys in the 1920s in film and in literature. The *Los Angeles Times* noted the film’s “swashbuckling thrills” and the fact that it “introduces a striking new personality in Errol Flynn.”³⁵² In her review of the film Mae Tinee raves about Flynn’s performance and good looks. She writes, “this Errol Flynn! The young Irishman Lily Damita married! Where, O where has he been keeping himself all our movie lives! One of the handsomest things you ever saw on two legs...he is positively electrical personality, charged among other things with a flashing humor. Loving or fighting, he

has what it takes.”³⁵³ The gamble the Warner Bros. had made in casting Flynn an unknown in a million dollar prestige picture had paid off. Flynn notes that, “overnight I found myself a star. The film made millions for Warner Brothers. Only Jack Warner’s faith in me set off my career.”³⁵⁴ The film not only established Flynn as an instant star it also served to cement his image on screen, an image, which Warner Bros. guarded closely. He and de Havilland and Curtiz would be re-teamed in 1936 for another lavish film *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. In the film Flynn plays an English military officer Geoffrey Vickers serving in the Imperial army in India who eventually sets aside his orders and sense of pride to defeat an Indian warlord Surat Khan (C. Henry Gordon). The film was extremely expensive to produce but again with Flynn and de Havilland the film was a financial and critical success for the company.

In 1937 in an effort to curb costs Flynn was cast in four films of varying quality: three of them were set in more contemporary times *Green Light* (Borzage, 1937), *Another Dawn* (Dieterle, 1937) and the comedy *The Perfect Specimen* (Curtiz, 1937) and another period piece *The Prince and the Pauper* (Keighley, 1937). Flynn convinced the Warner Bros. executives to let him try his hand at a comedy arguing in an interview that, “I want some acting to do, if I am to be called an actor, which seems to be the general idea around Hollywood. If you ask me whether I have any preferences—and I really have—I would pick on light comedy roles. Generally speaking, they seem to be my stuff. I feel light comedy is easier for me to do and being, by nature more than a trifle lazy, I like to take the easiest or at least most appealing route through the daily grind.”³⁵⁵ Eager to keep Flynn happy and desperate to keep down costs, Warner Bros. cast Flynn in a light

romantic comedy that critiques the notion of an ideal manhood through the lens of class privilege.

The Perfect Specimen

The film began production on May 14, 1937 and was completed on August 19, 1937 when final retakes were completed. The film was made for \$401,000 with Flynn now earning nearly \$20,000 dollars a picture an astronomical sum compared to the \$150 a week he had started at with his first contract in 1935.³⁵⁶ Flynn's name appears above the title on the title card indicating his importance to the picture and to the studio.

In the film Flynn plays Gerald Berford Wicks the grandson and heir to Mrs. Leona Wicks (May Robson) fortune and company Wicks utilities. He is a young man who has been educated to be mentally, morally, and physically superior "to everyone of his 10,000 thousand employees. The perfect specimen" Mrs. Wicks tells her niece Alicia (Beverly Roberts) who has been groomed to be the perfect wife to the perfect specimen.

Flynn is first shown as Gerald Wicks in a long shot. He is dressed in khaki pants and a sweater as he climbs and hangs from a tree behind the wrought iron fence that surrounds the estate. Flynn's grace, athletics, and good looks are highlighted in this opening connecting his image as a rakish man of culture to that of "strenuous masculinity." In many ways this film is a throw back to the style of masculinity that Fairbanks played early in his career.³⁵⁷ For in this film Flynn plays a young man of patrician upbringing from the East coast whose vigorous red-blooded masculinity must be protected and proven to his family, and other men. His image as a man of learning is

cultivated when Gerald dismounts from the tree and is shown reading from a nearby book on Newton's laws of gravity. As he is trying to test out Newton's theories by swinging on the tree a young woman Mona Carter (Joan Blondell) crashes through the wooden part of the fence after she gets a glimpse of the famous "perfect specimen" hanging from the tree.

The woman is intrigued by the secrecy surrounding the young man, which is revealed earlier in the film when Mona speaks to her brother Jink (Dick Foran) a college educated man who is working on the estate as a member of the grounds crew so that he can be nearer the woman he loves Alicia, who also happens to be Gerald's fiancée. Jink is an example of a middle-class man whose devotion to his love interest supersedes his own desires to be an engineer.

Gerald calmly inquires about her injuries and the car but it is clear that Mona is not really interested in the status of her car. She instead checks on her looks as she opens her compact and begins reapplying powder to her nose. Gerald confused by her actions he tells her with a wry smile, "That's very strange. You nearly killed yourself and all you're worried about is a smudge on the nose." He then accuses her of being either a reporter or a "designing woman" which offends Mona. She brusquely tells him "Well I've seen you now and I am going home."

Gerald leisurely walks towards the car where Mona is seated. He tells her, "you don't think much of me do you?" She quickly replies, "No I don't. I think you are dull and conceited." He then offers to fix her car because he is "a master mechanic" as a result of his grandmother's constant care and belief that in order for him to be effective as an

executive he must be excellent at everything. Gerald's masculinity is representative of that of the managerial class of the 1920s in that because he possesses the wealth, which he will inherit and time he is able to learn trades as well as culture and to develop a model physique through exercise and diet.

Mona challenges Gerald to toss aside his gilded cage lifestyle when she tells him to "get out in the world and mix with the common herd. You don't know what you are missing. Are you really so fragile you have to stay cooped up here all the time?" She suggests that he should run away from the pampered life inside the gates and "give the world a chance. Get out in it just like an ordinary man not an heir to 40 million dollars." While Gerald is exceptionally good looking in Mona's eyes what he lacks is knowledge of life, fun, and perhaps romance.

However Gerald's masculinity is the product of his grandmother's constant pampering and expensive tutors in all disciplines, as is his view of the world. He asks Mona, "What's so terribly exciting or interesting outside? Nothing happens here or anywhere else that isn't dull and boring." In this speech Flynn is shown in a medium close-up with grease stains on his face as he smiles roguishly at the camera. Mona laughs and tells him that, "you need to kill a windmill or two [a reference to Don Quixote that becomes a theme throughout the rest of the film]...if you ever feel like hopping over the wall don't forget you have a friend on the outside."

Gerald's grandmother and her personal secretary Grattan (Edward Everett Horton) appear on the scene when they hear the car backfire and mistake it for gun shots. Mrs. Wick's tyrannical and excessive acts of protection of Gerald are displayed when she

frets over seeing him without his coat on and dirt on his face. For Mrs. Wicks Gerald is the “perfect specimen” but only as long as he adheres to her image of masculinity. An image which celebrates the values of an upper class existence with their servants, sleeping in late, and ability to pay for any form of education or activity that Gerald requires to be transformed into her ideal specimen of American manhood that is untainted by the forces of the outside world. She rudely throws Mona off the property after questioning her motives.

The next morning after reading Don Quixote the night before, Gerald decides to sneak off the estate with the loan of Jink’s car. Gerald now free from his grandmother’s influence tracks down Mona at her home. He decides to show her that he is man of action and decision and crashes the car into her father’s white picket fence. Just as she had invaded and altered his world, now Gerald has occupied her space in hopes that together he can learn more about the outside world, which he has been kept from by his grandmother. Ironically, Gerald is only able to free himself from the luxurious prison through the use of a workingman’s car and a developing relationship with that man’s sister thus illustrating that ‘the perfect specimen’ is incomplete without some knowledge of the world, knowledge which his relationship with Mona provides him.

Mrs. Wicks and the household alarmed by Gerald’s absence believe him to have been kidnapped. She contacts the police and demand that they begin a nationwide search for him, but the only picture of Gerald is of him as a naked baby and this hinders the search. The moment is played for comic effect but it also speaks to Mrs. Wicks overbearing attitude about Gerald in that she has not allowed any pictures of him to be

made since he was baby. Mrs. Wicks is able to utilize the full power of the law because of her status as a millionaire. Yet her inability to believe that Gerald is capable of going out into the world on his own or imagining that in fact her grandson may wish to go out into the world illustrate the limitations of her thinking about the connection between class and masculinity.

Gerald and Mona drive to pick up some imported flower bulbs for Mona's father an absent minded horticulturist (Henry Davenport) who impressed by Gerald's knowledge of flowers and plants tells Mona "he is a most worthy young man." As they are driving through the countryside they learn that Mrs. Wicks has called on the forces of law and order to help her find her "perfect specimen." Gerald tells Mona, "I am certain of one thing, I am not going to be dragged back like a runaway school boy" as they listen to the police broadcast over the radio. Flynn speaks the line with a combination of force and playfulness showing how in this brief moment Gerald is developing into his own man.

As they drive to the station to pick up the flowers, Gerald's leisurely driving style angers a truck driver who attempts to pass them. The driver of the truck angered by Gerald's hogging of the road forces them off the road and into a ditch. The man Pinkie, (Allen Jenkins) whose occupation (truck driver) speech patterns and clothing (wrinkled suit) mark him as working-class, tries to pick a fight with Gerald. Gerald tries to deal with the man rationally but when the man insults Mona, Gerald angrily tells him, "Really my good man you can't talk to a lady like that." The man grows angrier at Gerald's condescending attitude and tells him "don't you my good man me, you squirt." The man then grabs Gerald's shirt and tries to pull him out of the car. With great composure

Gerald tells the man, “You’re making a big mistake” and then with a quick punch knocks the man to the ground.

Embarrassed that a man of class and leisure knocks him down, the man tells him, “For that I am going to wipe the floor with you. Get out of that car and take off your coat.” Gerald continues to try and reason with the man telling him, “ I don’t want to spar with you.” The man even more annoyed by Gerald tells him “I’m only going to knock your block off...Come on.”

Gerald gets out of the car and slips off his coat. The two men begin to box as the women look on with great interest. Mona seems to worry that Gerald’s new found sense of masculinity has perhaps gotten him into trouble until she watches him quickly knock the man out cold. She then quips, “Grandma I think you’ve got something there,” referencing Grandma’s strategies in forming Gerald’s masculinity, which is shown to be both tough and attractive to Mona. It is clear that Gerald’s masculine prowess as a fighter and his good looks have captured Mona’s attention. His abilities also lead Pinkie’s girlfriend Clarabelle (Dennie Moore) to question her boyfriend’s masculinity. As she kneels over him, she urges him to get “get up and be a man will you...you great big sissy.” Pinkie’s status as a rough and tumble truck driver are quietly dispelled by Gerald’s quick feet and powerful left hook. When Pinkie wakes up the two couples formally introduce themselves to one another and Pinkie laments the fact that, “to think a guy named Gerald should give me this,” showing off his black eye to everyone. Pinkie then explains that he was on his way to a company picnic where he was going to compete in a boxing match with a grand prize of \$150 for the winner. Gerald agrees to take

Pinkie's place in the fight to try and make up for embarrassing Pinkie and also to help Pinkie get the money that he had intended to use to marry Clarabelle.

Perhaps of all the scenes in the film, the boxing match illustrates the complexity of Flynn's screen masculinity. He is shown entering the ring telling Pinkie, "Don't worry I won't hurt him." Flynn is shown in a close-up in high spirits with a large smile. Flynn's excellent physique is on display as he is shown without a shirt and in a pair of tight fitting boxing trunks. As a young man in Australia Flynn had learned to box and in this sequence his expertise with the gloves is readily displayed in a manner that is comedic and exciting and blurs the lines between Flynn's on and off screen persona.

As the crowd lustily screams for blood and action, Gerald disappoints them with his style of fluid boxing rather than the more rough and tumble bare knuckle type which was common in working class environments. As he dances around the ring dodging the challenger Chloroform Conley (Jack Roper) someone in the crowd begins playing a waltz on an accordion. A full band that is present at the picnic joins the accordion player in performing a waltz. The fight in effect becomes a dance between the two men until Conley in a later round fights dirty which angers Gerald and then provides him with the necessary fuel to unleash his abilities and knock the man out. Flynn's boxing in this scene and the prior one show an image of masculinity that is both urbane and capable of violence but only when necessary for defending the honor of a woman or trying to help out another man who is less fortunate in circumstances.

Pinkie and Clarabelle help Mona and Gerald avoid several roadblocks by transporting their car inside Pinkie's truck. Finally the couples separate and while they

are driving through the countryside Gerald and Mona meet an eccentric poet Killigrew Shaw (Hugh Herbert) who invites them to stay for a night in his kooky mansion. He assumes they are married and puts them in a single room. Gerald decides to sleep in an adjoining bedroom, which has been freshly painted. However during the night the fumes overwhelm him and Mona rushes in to save him. She puts him on the balcony to sleep and as he struggles to fight the effects of the paint, he whispers the name Alicia, alerting Mona that her “windmill” chaser perhaps is not a free agent.

The next day, Mona’s suspicions are confirmed when after stopping at a hotel to avoid a rain storm she learns that Gerald is in fact engaged but not before he declares his love for her telling her that, “yesterday and today are the two most marvelous days I’ve ever had in my life. I never knew that people, things, and life out here could be so exciting...Darling I love you. I think I’ve loved you since the day you crashed through the fence.” Flynn is shown in a series of medium shots and close-ups as he delivers this tender speech. It appears there is a tear in his eye as he speaks the lines, thus crafting an image of masculinity that is tender and sentimental. His declaration of love for her shows him to be a man capable of openly expressing his feelings thus connecting him to an image of masculinity that is more “soft” in nature.

Yet, Mona realizes that she cannot remain with Gerald despite her intense love for him and she flees the hotel. Gerald returns to her hometown where he helps her father repair the white picket fence and then he finds employment as a mechanic at the local service station.

Frantic to find Gerald Alicia, Gerald's fiancé agrees to marry Jinks, the gardener whom she has secretly been in love with if he will help her find him. Jinks takes her directly to the service station that frightens Gerald. He tells her that, "I suddenly remembered Wickstead. The bars, the gates and the regulations and always being guarded until I felt like a lily in a hothouse but since then I've been out in the world with people. People who can laugh, sing, and play and be silly if they want to be. Alicia this is the side of the fence for me I am not going back." Gerald has now found his freedom and in the process transformed himself from a patrician into a working-class man because he has escaped his grandmother and her rules and regulations as well as the luxurious life that accompanied living at Wickstead. When Gerald learns that his grandmother has had Mona arrested he agrees to go back and help sort out the mess he has created.

Gerald returns to Wickstead now a man of purpose and action, instead of the pampered "perfect specimen" that is shown when he confronts and challenges his grandmother's authority as she interrogates Mona. Gerald enters from frame left with a beaming smile, hugs his grandmother and tells her proudly "I am a 30 dollar a week garage man. How do you like the improvement?" She is clearly confused and angered to see Gerald in the clothes of a working man with grease on his face and dirt on his chest, which can be viewed because his shirt is open. The family debates his appearance and the nature of the complicated relationships until in a startling moment Gerald shows that he has learned how to be his own man while living outside the walls of the estate. He defies his grandmother's wishes telling her that he is going to marry Mona, but Mona refuses. Irritated by Mona's unwillingness to accept her grandson's marriage proposal Mrs. Wicks

then reveals that as a result of an arcane Pennsylvania law that when they had accidentally registered as Mr. and Mrs. Wickes that in fact they are legally married. Gerald delighted kisses Mona, and she then slaps him on the cheek and runs out of the house.

The film ends with Gerald explaining that he knew about the law and had used it because he was so in love with her. He kisses her passionately and then says, “I must take a course in this sometime.” The ending of the film represents an image of American masculinity where education, wealth, and class are combined in an effort to show the negative effects of a living only a life of leisure and excess.

Flynn believed he had turned in as good a performance as he had done for Warner Bros. up to that point. He claimed in an interview that, “I’d say that this definitely was more than merely light comedy; it was character stuff told in a light comedy vein and was, as I readily admit, my most difficult film...All the same I liked it fairly well and wouldn’t mind playing more like it.”³⁵⁸ Despite Flynn’s own assessment the film received mixed reviews. Frank Nugent writing for the *New York Times* called the film “less than that [referring back to the film’s title ‘Perfect Specimen’] it has most of the attributes of light and unaffected romantic comedy.”³⁵⁹ Nugent found the film lacking but he did celebrate its “cheery performances by Errol Flynn and Joan Blondell.”³⁶⁰ Mae Tinee called the film “a perfect circus” and lauded the performances of Blondell and Flynn noting that, “they give ace performances” while “having the time of their lives doing so.”³⁶¹ *Variety* noted that the film was “an excellent comedy which is right in the groove of popular family entertainment and a film which will please everywhere.”³⁶² The

reviewer for *Variety* also pointed out that the “picture will do a lot for Flynn who shows himself capable of playing light comedy with considerable skill.”³⁶³

By the end of 1937 Flynn proved himself capable of playing all manner of roles and of securing decent box office returns. As a result Warner Bros. drew up a new seven years option contract for Flynn that increased his weekly rate to 2250.00 dollars a week from his previous rate of \$800 a week.³⁶⁴ Errol Flynn was no longer a gamble but a sure fire box office draw and he would be rewarded with what many critics consider one of his greatest performances, that of Robin Hood.³⁶⁵

The Adventures of Robin Hood (Curtiz, 1938)

Warner Bros. had been interested in making a new version of Robin Hood since 1935 when it was first decided that James Cagney would play Robin Hood alongside “his gang” that included Warner contract players Allen Jenkins, Frank McHugh, etc. However when Cagney walked off the lot in 1935 Warner Bros. put the project on hold in hopes that perhaps Cagney would return and accept the role.³⁶⁶ However when Cagney did not return the company continued to fine-tune the script. Then in April of 1935 after his success in *Captain Blood* Warner Bros. decided to cast Errol Flynn as Robin Hood. Jeanine Basinger argues that this casting was a risk for the company because “Flynn was being asked to recreate the role that had been owned by Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in the silent era.”³⁶⁷ Flynn himself worried about the prospect of being seen as guilty of imitation as he revealed in an interview noting that, “must films go on forever imitating the ghosts of the past? I believe the public has a right not alone to expect, but to demand of me, my own interpretation of Robin Hood. If I had thought otherwise I would have

refused the chance in the first place.”³⁶⁸ Flynn recognized that this film was to be one of the most important ones for the studio. He stated that

I think Robin Hood opens up some highly interesting possibilities...the most I have hoped was that neither Warners nor Mr. Keighley would try too hard to preserve in the character the supposedly romantic value of Errol Flynn for although I have so recently been described in another film as ‘the perfect specimen’ I still cling to the belief...that people go to pictures to be entertained by a good yarn, well presented, and not to delve into a two hour search for loveliness of face or form.”³⁶⁹

For Warner Bros. and for Flynn it is in fact his form and good looks that serve to entertain throughout the film as he embodies the roguish spirit of Robin Hood.

The film began production in September of 1937 after problems with various versions of the script, which had been in production since 1935. What immediately sets the film’s production apart from other Warner Bros. films of the decade was its usage of location shooting rather than sound stages. The film was shot throughout areas of Northern California. William Keighley was attached as director because he had filmed the company’s first three strip Technicolor film *God’s Country and the Woman*. Keighley had been an actor and had previously worked with Flynn on *The Prince and the Pauper* so Warner Bros. believed he could help Flynn deliver an exceptional performance. However, Keighley was fired and replaced with Curtiz in November of 1937 as the production spiraled out of control and the cost of the film rose from 1.4 million to nearly 2 million dollars, making it the most expensive film produced by the studio up to that

time. It was completed in January of 1938 and was nearly 90 days behind schedule.³⁷⁰

Rudy Behlmer noted that, “in order to guarantee a profit, perfection was the objective and every scene was carefully studied to determine what improvements or embellishments were necessary. This was definitely not the usual *modus operandi* of the efficiently run, cost-conscious Warners studio.”³⁷¹

Nick Roddick in his study about Warner Bros. classifies *Adventures of Robin Hood* as an example of the company’s cycle of “merrie England pictures.” These films feature Errol Flynn whom Roddick argues, “becomes the more or less persecuted and isolated defender of a legitimate, benevolent authority which is threatened with usurpation or subversion.”³⁷² Flynn is the conscience of these “merrie England” films and embodies an image of masculinity that is action oriented even as it speaks to contemporary fears and concerns about American masculinity during the 1930s. In each of them Flynn is shown to be a man who uses his wits and physicality to help people challenge the powers of authoritarian governments, not for his own sake, but because it is important to help those who cannot help themselves.

In *Adventures of Robin Hood* Flynn plays Robin of Lockesley a Saxon nobleman who is made an outlaw for challenging the authority of the corrupt Norman, Prince John (Claude Rains) who along with the Sheriff of Nottingham (Melville Cooper) and Sir Guy Gisbourne (Basil Rathbone) seek to claim the throne. Robin loses his titles and his lands when he stands up for the interests of the peasants thus stripping him of his legitimacy and allowing him to become the leader of a group of “merrie men” who are assembled from the local populace. In many ways Flynn’s characterization of Robin Hood is similar

to Captain Blood in that he is a man of means, and title who must battle against corrupt forces of government in order to restore his own standing and in the process aid those who have lacked a real voice in political situations. What is different about Robin Hood though is that this character is drawn in such a way that he is politically motivated from the beginning and he is shown to be a man of principle and action rather than a man of leisure and luxury.

The opposition between the image of Robin Hood as a man of the people and that of the Norman knights is highlighted in the banquet sequence. The Norman knights are shown to be men who are more concerned with food, women, and song, as Prince John notes when he cheerfully tells the assembled guests, “This is what I like! Good food...good company and a beautiful woman to flatter me.” Prince John’s speech along with the way that Claude Rains plays the part characterize Prince John’s masculinity as negative and more involved with consumption and fashion rather than his duties as leader of the people. Rains is framed in a medium close-up and he is shown picking at his food, and fiddling with a large ring on his finger. He is shown to be a man of sartorial splendor in his luxurious tunic and unconcerned with the fact that even as he toys with his food, the people outside of the castle are struggling to survive. These are men who will use intimidation, torture, and corrupt methods to satisfy their own whims so that they can enjoy the fruits of the peasant’s labor, which in turn ensures that they will not have to work. In some sense it could be argued that Prince John and his fellow Normans are representative of the wealthier citizens and bankers who had simply looked on as everyone was harmed by a culture of excess rather than offering solutions.

Ina Rae Hark argues that, “Sir Robin of Locksley is Flynn’s signature role.”³⁷³ Flynn’s brazen entrance as Robin demonstrates his ability to perform parts where his masculinity is defined through physical as well as mental qualities. He swaggers into the banquet hall with long bow in hand and a dead deer slung over his shoulder that had been killed by a peasant in the previous scene. Robin helps to save the peasant who is nearly killed by Sir Guy for poaching the King’s deer even as Prince John and the Normans pillage every scrap of food or item of value. Robin uses the deer as a sort of key to invade the Norman’s sanctuary as they celebrate their use of cruelty to impose their will on the people. Robin strides across the mammoth space and then tosses the deer onto the table before Prince John. He tells Prince John as he smiles at him that, “you should really teach Sir Guy hospitality. I no sooner enter his castle with a bit of meat than his starving servants try to snatch it from me. You should feed them. They’ll work.” Flynn is framed in a medium shot highlighting his impish smile that connects him to the image of Robin as a rascal and a fighter.

Robin’s verbal sparring with Prince John and Sir Guy that occurs in this sequence depicts an image of Robin Hood as spunky, arrogant, resourceful, and respectful of legitimate authority. Robin tells the assembled Normans with vigor that, “we’re not going to put up with these oppressions much longer.” Prince John then explains to Robin and the guests that he is now in control of the nation not the regent whom he has removed. Robin is blindsided by Prince John’s news because Robin realizes that a man like John is only interested in power and wealth rather than serving the interests of the people. He forcefully tells them, “I’ll organize revolt...Exact a death for a death...and never stop till

every Saxon in our shire can stand up to you, free men, and strike a blow for Richard and England.” Robin’s convictions and threats alarm the Normans, especially Prince John who bellows, “Take him. Kill him.” Flynn plays this scene with a combination of mirth and irritation thus showing Robin Hood to a man capable of quick decisions, passion, and bravery in the face of great odds.

Flynn’s rugged good looks and athleticism serve him well in this scene and throughout the film as he is shown swinging from vines, climbing walls, and wielding a sword and a bow and arrow with great dexterity. Flynn’s performance and stardom in this film connect him to Fairbanks, whom Studlar argues exemplified the image of “strenuous masculinity” and the development of “boy culture” as a means of reforming masculinity in the 1920s.³⁷⁴ However where Fairbanks’s image on screen is based in a notion of the self-made man and heroism, Flynn’s in this film is located in his ability to move and pose in certain ways that connect him to an image of action and his masculinity is defined in opposition to the passive and consumptive representations of American masculinity as characterized by the Normans and Prince John in the film.

While Robin Hood is effective by himself in his efforts to annoy and challenge Prince John’s power, it is when he forms his band of “merry men” that he becomes a true force to be reckoned with. Flynn is shown in a long shot standing upon a boulder surrounded by men who have been beaten, robbed and degraded by the actions of the Normans. It is from these ranks that he assembles his men but only after first proclaiming his reasons for the fight. He tells them with resolve that, “I’ve called you here as freeborn Englishmen who are loyal to our King. While he reigned over us we

lived in peace. But since John seized the regency, Guy of Gisbourne, and the rest of the traitors have murdered and pillaged. We've all suffered from their cruelty...the ear loppings, the beatings, and the deliberate blindings with hot irons the tongue slicing... the burning of farms and mistreatment of our women. Now is the time we stop them. This forest is wide... it can shelter and clothe and feed a band of god swordsmen...good archers. If you're willing to fight for our people, I want you." Robin's call to arms against John and his supporters is indicative of the positive reasons for using force, especially for these men who have been emasculated when the Normans steal their lands, food, clothes and even their dignity. Robin after engaging the men's interests in his cause asks them to swear an oath. He solemnly tells them "do you, the freemen of the forest take oath to despoil the rich only to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the old and sick...to protect all women, Norman or Saxon, rich or poor? Do you solemnly swear to fight unto death the oppressors of the helpless...to remain firm in love of free England...and loyally to guard her until the return of our sovereign King...Richard the Lion-Heart?" Both the inciting speech and oath are reminiscent of moments in *Captain Blood* where men who lack economic security and protection under the law, find safety, security, and kinship with other men. This is not an image of a self-centered or self-made masculinity but one where compassion, cooperation, and respect for all people's suffering are celebrated as positive qualities of masculinity. It is these qualities that Robin Hood will rely on throughout the film in the battle against Prince John and Sir Guy's forces of oppression.

When Sir Guy, the Sheriff, and Lady Marian enter Sherwood forest accompanied by an army to protect the latest tax shipment, Robin uses his wits and his men's brawn to

capture them. After they are captured Flynn, as Robin is shown swinging on a vine across the frame before triumphantly landing on a rock. This moment is akin to Steve Neale's notion of masculinity as spectacle because in this scene it is Flynn's agile body and good looks that are featured. While Neale focuses his essay on looking at the idea of spectacle in male genre coded films in relation to violence, Flynn's performances in the swashbuckler illustrates how we might think of spectacle as greater than mere moments of action. For Neale these moments of action such as gunfights in Westerns are illustrative of moments where the narrative is interrupted before finally being resolved through a culmination of narrative purposes. Neale reads these moments as a type of eroticism.³⁷⁵ Flynn's actions in this film and others are also moments of intense eroticism where the camera allows the viewer to gaze at his good looks and his graceful ease. Flynn's athleticism is on display throughout the film, whether it is climbing staircases, leaping over tables, shooting his bow and arrow or swinging from vines.

After landing on the rock Flynn is shown in a long shot, to the left of the frame. His complete body is in full view in the frame so that he appears as a towering heroic male figure that is capable of using cooperation and his own prowess to combat the forces of evil in the film characterized by the Normans. As he stands on the rock with his chest puffed out and hands on his hips, he delivers one of the more familiar lines of dialogue from the film; "Welcome to Sherwood, my lady" with a wave of his hand and a devilish grin of satisfaction. Flynn's playful impudence in this moment along with his stunt work connects him to images of Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in his costume films like *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), *The Three Musketeers* (1921) and *Robin Hood* (1921).

Flynn's image of roguish well-meaning masculinity is contrasted throughout with that of the vain and cruel Sir Guy of Gisbourne played by Basil Rathbone who had also played the villain with Flynn in *Captain Blood*. Rathbone is the perfect foil for Flynn with his angular features, clipped diction, blazing eyes, and small body mass. Rathbone plays Sir Guy with a villainous rage so that he becomes a figure whose petty jealousies and inability to care for other people and their needs marks his style of masculinity as one that is in keeping with a more traditional notion of masculinity that in turn is portrayed in a negative light in the film.

Robin's image of a caring and concerned masculinity is best displayed when he explains to Lady Marian at his camp why he has become an outlaw. As they dine with the other "merry men" and their wives, children and friends Robin tells her, "To them this is a night in heaven. Silks for rags...kindness instead of whips...unlimited food instead of hunger. Why they're actually happy. If you could know them as I know them. Their infinite patience and goodness...their loyalty." Robin's words humanize his cause but also reveal to Lady Marian that these people whom the Normans call criminals for not bowing to their will are simple people who have been greatly abused. She then comes to see that Robin Hood is no criminal but a champion of these men and women who have been forced from their homes and into the forest.

Robin walks Lady Marian around the camp so that she may see first hand what her Norman compatriots are capable of in their quest for power, wealth, and leisure. He then tells her, "I can feel for helpless, beaten people...Saxon, Norman...we're all Englishmen! It's injustice I hate, not the Normans." Robin may serve as the leader of the

“merry men” but he does so not out of greed or self-interest but because he is able to see that he possess the necessary qualities and opportunities that can be marshaled to fight Sir Guy and Prince John. Lady Marian changes her opinion of Robin and his methods after understanding that these men and the good people of the land are left with no other choice except violence to achieve justice.

Together Robin and his men work to restore King Richard to the throne when he returns to England in disguise. On the day of Prince John’s coronation ceremony Robin and his merry men storm Nottingham castle and battle Sir Guy and his forces. Together the men are able to subdue and kill the traitors to King Richard and order is restored. Robin first asks the King to pardon all the men who have helped him fight Prince John, which the King heartily agrees to. King Richard returns Robin’s title and lands to him and then offers Lady Marian’s hand in marriage. The film ends with Robin bowing to the King saying, “May I obey all your majesty’s commands with equal pleasure.” He then wraps his arms around Lady Marian and they kiss. This ending is in keeping with the other films where Flynn and de Havilland had been paired: the couple’s union and future happiness are cemented with a kiss.

The film was a commercial and critical success when released in the spring of 1938. The *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed it the “the romantic champion of 1938” stating that “I can imagine no other early rivaling of this medieval fantasy.”³⁷⁶ Frank S. Nugent writing for the *New York Times* noted that “life and the movies have their compensations and such a film as ‘The Adventures of Robin Hood’ ...is payment in full for many dull hours of picture going. A richly produced, bravely bedecked, romantic colorful show it

leaps bravely to the forefront of this year's best."³⁷⁷ *Variety* called it "cinematic pageantry at its best" and that the film's profit potential was great because the film "makes a strong bid for family trade and an appeal to a public which takes its historical bedtime stories seriously."³⁷⁸

Mae Tinee in her review lauds Flynn's performance more so than the film noting that "Mr. Flynn is a Robin Hood who is sure to make a hit with the ladies, and I am certain do a pretty good job of pleasing all around. He is completely at home in the part for the real life of Errol Flynn has been an eventful one spiced with hazard."³⁷⁹ Nugent also echoes much of Tinees praise of Flynn in the film. In his review he effuses "In Errol Flynn, Sir Robin of Sherwood has found his man, a swashbuckler from peaked cap to pointed toe, defiant of his enemies and England, graciously impudent with his lady love, quick for a fight or a frolic."³⁸⁰

With the *Adventures of Robin Hood* Flynn reached the peak of his career as Basinger notes.³⁸¹ Flynn's image of the roguish, impudent, man of adventure and love in the swashbuckler films would be re-shaped in 1939 when he was cast in the Technicolor Western *Dodge City* (Curtiz, 1939).

Dodge City

The year 1939 marked the return of the big studio Western to American screens. A genre that had slipped into the status of B movies and programmers suddenly found itself rejuvenated as films such as *Union Pacific* (DeMille), *Jesse James* (Henry King) and Warner Bros. own *Dodge City* were put into production. Many of these films depict an image of progressive American liberalism that coincided with the "second New Deal"

and the passage of the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act, and the formation of the Works Progress Administration.³⁸² *Life* magazine declared that “Hollywood’s current preoccupation with American history springs partly from a nationwide resurgence in patriotism” in an article about the production of *Dodge City*.³⁸³ Charles Maland in his essay “Movies and American Culture in the Annus Mirabilis” points out that in 1939 “Americans found themselves in the midst of a resurgent nationalism” as the nation tried to defend its democratic ideals from the outside forces of Fascism and Nazism that were sweeping through Europe. It was this need to depict filmically an ideal vision of America that led to resurgence in the production and interest in Westerns.³⁸⁴

The film went into production on November 10, 1938 and was completed on January 14, 1939. Flynn was cast in the lead after Warner Bros. had been unable to secure either Fredric March or Gary Cooper for the part.³⁸⁵ Flynn sent a memo to Jack Warner in September 1938 expressing skepticism about his ability to play the part.³⁸⁶ However, Warner executive Robert Lord felt that Flynn’s ability to play swashbuckler roles could easily be adapted to have him play in Westerns. With the aid of Flynn’s agent, Noll Gurney, and Jack Warner’s faith in Flynn’s abilities he was convinced to play the part.³⁸⁷

Flynn noted his own fears and frustrations about playing a cowboy when he was cast in a Western. He writes in his autobiography, “putting me in cowboy pictures seemed to me the most ridiculous miscasting...I walked through my roles, jumped on that ole horse, swung my legs over that old corral fence My heart wasn’t in it, only my limbs.”³⁸⁸ Flynn’s heart may not have been in the role but Warner Bros. money was, as

again he was cast in a film with a budget of nearly a million dollars, of which \$41,300 was paid to Flynn making this one of his most expensive parts up to that point.³⁸⁹

The film charts the modernization of the frontier after the Civil War on the Kansas Prairie where the coming of the railroad and people from the East signifies the end of the lawless and rugged days of individualism. This theme is addressed when a race between a stagecoach and a locomotive is depicted as a group of businessmen on the train discuss the future and the changing nature of the west. One of the men, Colonel Dodge (Henry O'Neill) proudly tells the men, "That's a symbol of America. Progress! Iron men and iron horses you can't beat them," after the train defeats the stagecoach in the impromptu race. The combination of the image of American business, the railroad, and working class masculinity are illustrated as we see the men on the train sweating and working hard to keep the train functioning while the business men relax in comfort drinking liquor and plotting the future of America. Unlike earlier Warner Bros. films here businessmen and their plans are portrayed in a positive light. This change in dynamics of the nature of capitalism to the people is one example of how this film shows a transformation in the attitudes and fortunes of the studio. Richard Slotkin labels the film an example of "the progressive epic because it inherited the market niche previously occupied by the historical romance and the bio-pic."³⁹⁰

However in casting Flynn as a cowboy, which may have seemed strange to him, Warner Bros. displayed an understanding that the cowboy figure who had been essential to the formation of American masculinity in the silent-era and before was now an image that was useful to the studio and growing in popularity with audiences. Moreover the

return of big budget Westerns signaled the birth of John Wayne's stardom in *Stagecoach* and illustrates that the ideal image of American masculinity as the self-made man had returned supplanting the more progressive and complicated images that had developed as a result of the Roosevelt administration's policies in response to the Great Depression.

The return of the cowboy and self-made masculinity illustrate the growing awareness of American nationalism as well as a feeling in the country that the more traditional models of American society with men in the role of the breadwinner have been restored. Anthony Rotundo argues that with closing of the frontier the nation began to celebrate the ideal figure of American masculinity as embodied by the cowboy. "This hero was a man in his exploits but as heedless of civilized restraint as a boy in the nineteenth and early twentieth century."³⁹¹ It is this image, which Flynn projects throughout the film.

Flynn is first introduced in the film as the hero Wade Hatton, an Irish soldier of fortune who along with his partners Rusty (Alan Hale) and Tex (Guin 'Big Boy' Williams) work for the railroad killing buffalo to provide meat to the railroad workers. Flynn is framed in a medium close-up so that his rakish good looks and his smile are highlighted. He is dressed in a pearl gray cattleman style hat that is cocked to the left hand side signifying that he is a man of class and fun. He sports a pencil thin moustache and his face is tanned so that his smile and brilliant dark eyes stand out in contrast to the green shirt, red bandana and worn brown leather coat with fringes that he wears. He is a model of Western fashion that combines a sense of style and utility, which is emphasized when he is shown expertly riding a horse and herding buffalo and cattle. Wade tells his

friends as they watch the train go by, “we’ve killed our last buffalo boy. The railroad is finished and so is our contract.” The figure of Wade Hatton and his experiences in the West are shown to be at odds with the increasing commercialization and settlements that begin to pop up all over the territories.

The men then help the local Indian commissioner arrest a group of buffalo hide hunters led by the villain Jeff Surret (Bruce Cabot). Surret wears a dark hat and wears two guns in his gun belt when he and his men are captured. Surret’s arrest shows Wade and his friends to be protectors of Native American rights and the buffalo. More importantly this scene sets up the tension between these two men and their vision of the West that will play out in the rest of the film.

Wade and his partners attend the celebration of the completion of the railroad after Surret is arrested. During the event Colonel Dodge tries to enlist their help in pushing the railroad further west. Yet, Wade is not interested in assisting with the arrival of progress. He is only interested in carrying out activities that provide him with the opportunity to work for himself and for money. Here Flynn is shown to be an example of the self-made man rather than a man who will work for the greater good, as he had in previous roles. Rusty’s speech to the Colonel depicts the new image of Errol Flynn and his masculinity. He tells the Colonel, “you couldn’t keep Wade here. He’s the most moving on man you ever saw. First off he was in the English army in India [a reference to Flynn’s earlier portrayal of Geoffrey Vickers in ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’]. Then he got mixed up in some kind of hooray revolution down Cuba way [a reference to Flynn’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War]. Then he started punching cattle in Texas.

That was before he enlisted in the War. So you see he's either the greatest traveler ever lived or else he is the biggest liar," Rusty says as he slaps the Colonel on the back and laughs heartily.

Colonel Dodge then gives a speech to the crowd where he celebrates their achievements and points toward his future hopes for the town that will develop alongside the railroad. The town is named Dodge City after Wade suggests that the Colonel's vision be respected and rewarded by naming the town after him. The Colonel then asks Wade to assume the position of Sheriff for the new town, but he declines in favor of his freedom and trail driving cattle for profit. Robert Warshow in his influential essay *The Westerner* argues that, "the Western hero is a man of repose. Par excellence he is a man of leisure. Employment of some kind—usually unproductive is always open to him."³⁹² It is this image of the cowboy figure and masculinity that Flynn embodies through much of the rest of the film.

As a result of Wade's unwillingness to set aside his own self-interests violence, prostitution, gambling, and murder mar the new town that emerges. Using a series of titles we are shown and told that the city becomes the "wide open Babylon" of the frontier "rolling in wealth from the great Texas trail-herds...the town that knew no ethics but cash and killing." Warshow notes that because the West lacks the graces of civilization it is the place "where men are men."³⁹³ Dodge City becomes a paradise for men who seek easy pleasures like money, women, and status. It is for this reason that Jeff Surret finds himself in charge of the city, thus putting everyone else in jeopardy. Surret is only interested in acquiring wealth and power at any costs. His masculinity is one where

he stands by and gives orders as other men like his hired gun Yancey (Victor Jory) do his bidding, including murder.

The film addresses issues of generational masculinity when the fool hardy, rowdy young man Lee Irving (William Lundigan) is contrasted with Wade's adult self-control. Lee seeks the action and excitement of a life in the West without regard for his behavior. He is constantly drunk and his foolish actions like when he shoots his gun just to be shooting as if it were a toy rather than a weapon illustrate that Lee is little more than an overgrown boy. His youthful swagger and arrogance eventually lead to his death. Wade chastises Lee for his bad behavior telling him, "We've got a very special treatment for bad little boys like you. Now you behave yourself or you'll ride into Dodge City backwards on a mule. You'll look very silly." Wade's equating of Lee's shooting his gun and nearly stampeding the cattle as a type of schoolboy behavior embarrasses Lee. However, rather than accept his situation and try to abide by Wade and Rusty's rules, Lee decides to challenge their authority. He again begins to fire his gun recklessly when Rusty laughs at him. Lee takes aim and tries to kill Wade and Rusty but misses. Wade returns fire and hits Lee in the leg, but the shooting causes the cows to stampede and just as Wade tries to save Lee and his sister Abbie (Olivia de Havilland) Lee is trampled to death. Lee dies because of his unwieldy attitude and rash temper, thus portraying his image of youthful masculinity as dangerous.

Wade continues to resist the calls for help from the citizens of Dodge City in their fight against Surret. Abbie challenges his masculinity and his character when he refuses to become Sheriff stating that; "Dodge City needs a man with a sense of public pride and

the courage to back it up by shooting it with men of equal skill. But Mr. Hatton's bravery consists of shooting it out with impulsive boys." Despite all their pleas and Wade's own knowledge that Surret is murdering and cheating people in the town with impunity he looks away in favor of his own enterprise, that is until he sees for himself the horrors of Dodge City when a wagon load of children and Abbie are put in danger by a gunfight on the main street.

When one of the children is killed, Wade finally realizes that he must set aside his own selfish desires and help the people of Dodge City. He accepts the position of Sheriff and with Rusty as his deputy they begin to change the culture of the city by taking men's firearms away from them and arresting all troublemakers. Still, Flynn's masculinity is defined in the film based on a combination of self-interest and purpose, as the character Wade's motivation is his love for Abbie and feelings of guilt over her brother's death rather than serving the interests of the people of Dodge City.

The tension between Surret and Wade ends with a dramatic showdown on a train bound for Wichita. Wade and Rusty kill Surret and capture his men thus restoring a sense of law and order to Dodge City. The film ends with Wade and Abbie nestled together in the seat of a wagon heading further west as they move on to help clean up another lawless city, Virginia City, that Colonel Dodge and the railroad have also been involved in building. Slotkin argues that in this film and the other Westerns that Flynn made for Warner Bros. the films "provide secret histories which explain American crises as the product of force originating on the Frontier and offer historical modes for defining and confronting present crises."³⁹⁴ These Westerns also function to illustrate the shifting

nature of the portrayal and definition of American masculinity as feelings of nationalism increase alongside fears of war in Europe.

Again Errol Flynn scored a hit with critics and at the box office. He would find himself listed for the first and only time in his year as one of the ten most popular and bankable stars in America, as a result of this film.³⁹⁵ *Box Office Digest* stated that, “Errol Flynn probably the one genuine matinee idol [a reference to Flynn’s ability to tap into the desires of female audiences along with male ones who were interested in Flynn’s ability to play action roles] left in Hollywood romps home in the meaty part of an Irish born straight shooting devil may care frontiersman.”³⁹⁶ *Variety* called the film “a lusty western packed with action” that was sure to have box office potential because “it’s rough, tough meller socko.”³⁹⁷ Doris Arden in her review of the film for the *Chicago Times* stated that, “no one else in Hollywood plays these swaggering roles quite so well as Mr. Flynn—and a handsome dashing fellow he is as the reckless sheriff.”³⁹⁸ Frank Nugent pointed out that, “Errol Flynn skips through the debris as frontier marshal out to restore law and order.”³⁹⁹ Flynn may have felt that he was severely miscast for the part but film’s reviews and the acceptance of him as a cowboy showed Warner Bros. that Flynn could be cast in any manner of roles and generate box office and critical buzz.

Yet, as the decade came to a close Flynn became increasingly unhappy with the roles he was assigned and his status as a star in the Hollywood firmament. He writes, “I just wanted to act, to have a chance to play a character, to say good-bye to the swashbuckler roles, to get swords and horses out of my life. I itched to turn in a prize-winning job—but they held to making money: box office, box office! The ruin of creative

personalities.”⁴⁰⁰ Flynn’s creativity would be tested, as would be his masculine persona on screen as the country entered the war in December of 1941. Flynn would get his wish, only now he would be playing hard-bitten, aggressive masculine types who were more concerned with their own problems and survival than those of their fellow soldiers.

Yet, it was not only his masculine roles onscreen that would face changes and even greater scrutiny. Flynn would find himself in the headlines and in conversations all around America in 1942 when he was charged with the statutory rape of Miss Betty Hansen. Flynn would eventually be exonerated but not before his name and sexuality became the focus of the nation. The trial exposed the myth of Flynn’s screen image and revealed him to be a man of luxury, drink, women, and vice. It would forever damage his reputation with audiences. As he notes, “the word swordsman had a double edged meaning now.”⁴⁰¹ In fact Flynn came to recognize that he had been transformed into a phallic symbol universally as his name provided American culture with a new slang term for male sexuality ‘in like Flynn.’

Flynn’s dashing and heroic image of masculinity at Warner Bros. was undercut by the trial. He could no longer be sold as a romantic playboy capable of making young women swoon; for now he was viewed as a sordid seducer. McNulty notes that Flynn “had become a subject of derision. His reputation was seriously damaged by the revelations of his hedonistic lifestyle.”⁴⁰² In the end, Flynn would survive the scandal and continue to work at Warner Bros. until 1952, but his screen masculinity would never be viewed the same way again. Flynn’s persona on screen as the roguish rake who sought to help others for the betterment of society would be lost to the reality that he was a deeply

unhappy man who struggled with his own understanding of his status as a man and as an actor. This deep seeded anxiety and sadness manifests itself throughout the rest of his life in his private and professional life.

Conclusion

In this study I have foregrounded the discussion of how Warner Bros. worked to build images of screen masculinity that depicted the ever-changing nature of masculinity in Hollywood in the 1930s and in America as a result of the Great Depression. In looking at how the studio handled the development of various “styles” of masculinity in relation to issues of race, class, and gender I have demonstrated that Sklar’s notion that the “city boy” was the dominant type of masculinity featured at the studio offers a limited view of the types of masculinity that were in operation on the lot. What is evident from looking at how Warner Bros. dealt with the formation of the masculine images of Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell and Errol Flynn, the subjects of this study, is that masculinity was something that was constantly in flux, often contradictory, and more complex than previous scholars have acknowledged.

Part of this complexity I have shown came about when Warner Bros. adopted Roosevelt’s new vision of America that was more progressive after he defeated Herbert Hoover in 1932. The defeat of Hoover along with the implementation of Roosevelt’s “New Deal” legislation was instrumental in the shaping of screen masculinity at Warner Bros. and also impacted how the company depicted American experience onscreen. The company tried to recognize the difficulties of the nation and men as it was no longer possible for people to locate a sense of identity in their jobs, authority in the home, or through self-worth. Still, Warner Bros. strived to fashion characters that illustrated the intricate nature of American masculinity as it reacted to the transformations that occurred

as a result of the Great Depression which was marked by massive unemployment, fear of governmental authorities in the form of police, judges, and prisons, questions about race, anger over the role of wealthy Americans in destroying the country, fear of men becoming effeminate as a result of a lack of self-worth, growing concerns about the relationship between workers and employers, and the increasing fear that urbanization was harming the relationship between men and women through narrative films and the formation of new stars and screen personas that attempted to address these challenges that Warner Bros. and the nation experienced.

All the stars discussed herein—Paul Muni, George Brent, Dick Powell, and Errol Flynn illustrate the difficulties that Warner Bros. faced in an effort to craft screen masculinities that would resonate with 1930s audiences. In the case of Paul Muni, we see a type of screen masculinity initially linked to the notion of the self-made man and aggression, such as James Allen in *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. However when Muni attempted to play raced and ethnic masculinities in *Bordertown* and *Black Fury* we see how issues of class and “whiteness” impacted the formation of Muni’s characters in a way that sets him apart from other stars of the period. Muni’s efforts to define himself as an actor and not a star as well as his willingness to tackle roles that were unpopular with the studio as well as audiences shows him to be someone who resisted the system.

George Brent’s screen masculinity illustrates the tensions between depicting masculinity as aggressive, and self-made versus that of showing men to be dependent, compassionate, and relying upon their relationships to women. For example in Brent’s early roles like Jim Gilson in *The Purchase Price* we see an image of masculinity that is

prideful, aggressive, and lacking self-worth. Yet, in other roles such as Geoffrey Gault in *The Crash* and Alan Tanner in *Snowed Under*, Brent's masculinity is clearly defined by his relationship and dependence on strong women for success as well as his status as a member of the middle-class.

Dick Powell's image of the naïve, boyish "vim and vigor" figure is associated with roles where issues of appearance and class are crucial, such as the character of Brad Roberts in *42nd Street*. Powell's image is crafted to sell a form of American masculinity for the studio that is attractive, youthful, and non-threatening as a form of sexual desire. These images of Powell as a naïve object of the female gaze are also addressed in his characters of Dick Purcell in *Broadway Gondolier* and Pfc. Bob Brent in *The Singing Marine*.

Warner Bros. recreated an image of American masculinity with Errol Flynn that focused on sexual attractiveness to women and adventure and daring to young men. In the character of Peter Blood in *Captain Blood* Flynn's masculinity represents an image of the devil-may-care playboy attitude that had been associated with the characters created by Douglas Fairbanks. As Geoffrey Wicks in *The Perfect Specimen* he illustrates the way that American masculinity was defined via action, romance, and class. In each of the roles he created at the studio Flynn's masculinity is illustrative of the changing dynamics that men faced as the Great Depression wore on and the possibility that American masculinity would be altered by the prospect of war.

These men, their characters, and their films model an image of America in the 1930s that captures the anxieties, hopes, and frustrations felt by American men as they

struggled to understand just what being a man in America meant as a result of the Great Depression. Men are depicted in these films as reliant on one another and women to solve their problems and ensure that they can find both freedom and a purpose.

The result of the Great Depression was calamity but out of that calamity emerged a more progressive and complicated portrait of American masculinity that by the end of the decade would disappear as a result of American nationalism and the ever-increasing realities of a World War. World War II was not only the defining moment for American economic and foreign policy, it also acted an impetus for the return to a type of American manhood that endorsed the image of American masculinity as self-made, self-centered based in ideas of rugged individualism even as the country became more industrialized.

While this study has only focused on films made at Warner Bros. with stars that have been forgotten over time, many of the ideas and theories I have employed could be used to more closely examine further iterations of screen masculinity at other studios during the classical Hollywood period and beyond. It would be useful and indeed I intend to look at other male stars of the 1930s through the lens of masculinity to see how other studios such as Metro Goldwyn Mayer or Radio Keith Orpheum addressed the nature of masculinity in flux. It would be interesting to see if they struggled to define screen masculinity as Warner Bros. did and more importantly to determine if the other studios perhaps used some of the same approaches that Warner Bros. did. Thus it is important to ask whether masculinity's complicated and contradictory nature is addressed in film only during times of economic or national crisis. Also it is important to consider if film is capable of charting the changing nature of masculinity at any given historical moment

because as we begin to think more critically about what it means to be a man in America and how images of masculinity impact formations of masculinity within the culture and at the personal level.

It has been the goal of this study to show how an examination of the films of the 1930s may inform our understanding of the changing fortunes of American masculinity and point towards other avenues of research and questions. A more in depth analysis of stardom, the formation of American masculinity on screen and its impact on how we construct masculinity is necessary in order to begin to recognize that masculinity is a performance.

Filmography

All titles in bold are covered in this study.

Paul Muni

***I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932)**

The World Changes (1933)

Hi Nellie (1934)

***Bordertown* (1935)**

***Black Fury* (1935)**

Dr. Socrates (1935)

The Story of Louis Pasteur (1936)

The Life of Emile Zola (1937)

Juarez (1939)

We Are Not Alone (1939)

George Brent

So Big (1932)

***The Rich are Always with Us* (1932)**

Weekend Marriage (1932)

***The Purchase Price* (1932)**

Miss Pinkerton (1932)

***The Crash* (1932)**

They Call it Sin (1932)

42nd Street (1933)

The Keyhole (1933)

Lily Turner (1933)

Babyface (1933)

***Female* (1933)**

From Headquarters (1933)

Housewife (1934)

Desirable (1934)

The Right to Live (1935)

Living on Velvet (1935)

Stranded (1935)

Front Page Woman (1935)

Special Agent (1935)

The Goose and the Gander (1935)

***Snowed Under* (1936)**

The Golden Arrow (1936)

Give Me Your Heart (1936)

God's Country and the Woman (1937)
Mountain Justice (1937)
The Go-Getter (1937)
Submarine D-1 (1937)
Gold is Where You Find It (1938)
Jezebel (1938)
Racket Busters (1938)
Secrets of an Actress (1938)
Wings of the Navy (1939)
Dark Victory (1939)
The Old Maid (1939)

Dick Powell
Blessed Event (1932)
King's Vacation (1933)
***42nd Street* (1933)**
Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933)
Footlight Parade (1933)
***College Coach* (1933)**
Convention City (1933) lost
Wonder Bar (1934)
Twenty Million Sweethearts (1934)
Dames (1934)
***Happiness Ahead* (1934)**
Flirtation Walk (1934)
Gold Diggers of 1935 (1935)
***Broadway Gondolier* (1935)**
Page Miss Glory (1935)
A Mid Summer Night's Dream (1935)
Shipmates Forever (1935)
Colleen (1936)
Hearts Divided (1936)
Stage Struck (1936)
Gold Diggers of 1937
***The Singing Marine* (1937)**
Varsity Show (1937)
Hollywood Hotel (1937)
Cowboy from Brooklyn (1938)
Hard to Get (1938)
Going Places (1938)
Naughty but Nice (1939)

Errol Flynn

Case of the Curious Bride (1935)

Don't Bet on Blondes (1935)

***Captain Blood* (1935)**

The Charge of the Light Brigade (1936)

Green Light (1937)

The Prince and the Pauper (1937)

Another Dawn (1937)

***The Perfect Specimen* (1937)**

***Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938)**

Four's a Crowd (1938)

The Sisters (1938)

The Dawn Patrol (1938)

***Dodge City* (1939)**

Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex (1939)

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- ⁸³ Studlar, 200-201.
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- ¹⁶⁴ *Black Fury* production file 1732 USC Warner Bros. archives.
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- ¹⁸¹ For an in depth discussion of the historical rise of labor and its impact on the New Deal see chapter 10 and 13 in Robert McElvaine’s The great Depression.
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- ¹⁸⁴ George Custen, Biopics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History. Rutgers: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992, 3.
- ¹⁸⁵ Roddick, 177.
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¹⁸⁸ Lorine Pruette, "Should Men Be Protected" *The Nation* August 31, 1927.

¹⁸⁹ "George Brent Airs Views on Screen Heroes" *Los Angeles Examiner* April 2, 1935, section I, 10.

¹⁹⁰ "Hard Boiled Guys Get Easy Breaks whilst Heroes Do Fade-Outs." James Mitchell *Los Angeles Examiner* June 5, 1932, section V, 6.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁹³ See the chapters in Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade* where she analyzes John Barrymore's screen image in connection with the matinee girl and Rudolph Valentino's connection to screen exoticism and dance culture and the fear that men were being transformed into bodies that could be consumed sexually by women.

¹⁹⁴ See Studlar's chapters on John Barrymore and Valentino both of whom's stardom she reads as a reaction to the increasing eroticization of the male body especially costume dramas and melodramas.

¹⁹⁵ See George Brent's legal files 3101 B USC Warner Bros. archives.

¹⁹⁶ See Jeanine Basinger's *The Star Machine* where she analyzes how each of the studios used the strategy of "the star machine" that included first a screen test, a close physical examination of the actor's body and face, creation of a studio biography, possible change of actual name, production of glamour photos, studio sanctioned interviews, articles for the fan magazines, casting in a small part, then casting in a lead role in the chapter "The Star Machine Process"

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¹⁹⁸ "So Big" Louella Parsons *Los Angeles Examiner* April 16, 1932.

¹⁹⁹ "So Big" *Photoplay* May 1932, 51.

²⁰⁰ "New Screen Personalities: George Brent another Clark Gable? Don't you dare to say such a Thing" *Photoplay* June 1932, 67.

²⁰¹ *Photoplay*, 67.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 67.

²⁰³ See Sarah Berry's *Screen Style*.

²⁰⁴ *The Rich Are Always With Us* publicity file 680 B USC Warner Bros. archives.

²⁰⁵ "Chatterton Film Pleases" Muriel Babcock *Los Angeles Times* May 14, 1932, A7.

²⁰⁶ *Variety* May 17, 1932, 14.

²⁰⁷ "The Rich are Always with Us" *Harrison's Reports* May 21, 1932, 83.

²⁰⁸ "Fine Story, Cast, and Direction in this Talkie" Mae Tinee *Chicago Tribune* May 15, 1932, G 1.

²⁰⁹ "Miss Chatterton Charms in First Warner Picture" Louella Parsons *Los Angeles Examiner* May 13, 1932, section I, 17.

²¹⁰ Babcock, A7.

²¹¹ See press clippings for *The Rich Are Always with Us* *New York Sun* May 14, 1932 file 680 B USC Warner Bros. archives.

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²¹³ *The Purchase Price* story file 1448 USC Warner Bros. archives.

²¹⁴ *The Purchase Price* story file 1448 USC Warner Bros. archives

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- ²²¹ “The Purchase Price” *Motion Picture Herald* July 16, 1932, 52.
- ²²² “The Purchase Price” *Film Daily* July 16, 1932, 4.
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- ³⁷⁴ Studlar, 34-35.
- ³⁷⁵ Neale, 18-19.
- ³⁷⁶ "Robin Hood Noteworthy Film Play" Edwin Schallert *Los Angeles Times*
- ³⁷⁷ "Errol Flynn Leads His Merry Men" Frank S. Nugent *New York Times* May 13, 1938, 19.
- ³⁷⁸ *Variety* April 27, 1938, 22.
- ³⁷⁹ "Errol Flynn is Film Perfection in Robin Hood" Mae Tinee *Chicago Tribune* May 17, 1938, 17.
- ³⁸⁰ Nugent, 19.

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- ³⁸¹ Basinger, 236.
- ³⁸² Maland, 234-235.
- ³⁸³ “Dodge City” *Life*, April 17, 1939, 69.
- ³⁸⁴ Charles Maland, “Movies and Culture in the Annus Mirabilis” *American Cinema of the 1930s*. New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007, 229.
- ³⁸⁵ *Dodge City* production file 1854 Memo from Robert Lord to Hal Wallis July 6, 1938; Memo from Robert Lord to Hal Wallis July 7, 1938 USC Warner Bros. archives.
- ³⁸⁶ *Dodge City* production file 1854 Letter from Noll Gurney to Jack Warner September 1, 1938 USC Warner Bros. archives.
- ³⁸⁷ *Dodge City* production file 1854 Letter from Noll Gurney to Jack Warner September 1, 1938, USC Warner Bros. archives.
- ³⁸⁸ Flynn, 290.
- ³⁸⁹ *Dodge City* production file 1854 USC Warner Bros. archives.
- ³⁹⁰ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1998, 287.
- ³⁹¹ Rotundo, 259.
- ³⁹² Robert Warshow, *The Westerner* in *The Western Reader* ed. Jim Kitses and Greg Rickman. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998, 36-37.
- ³⁹³ Warshow, 37.
- ³⁹⁴ Slotkin, 292.
- ³⁹⁵ McNulty, 90.
- ³⁹⁶ *Box Office Digest* April 10, 1939, 10.
- ³⁹⁷ *Variety* April 12, 1939, 18.
- ³⁹⁸ “Rip-Roaring Western is Dodge City” Doris Arden *Chicago Daily Times* April 10, 1939, 24.
- ³⁹⁹ “Errol Flynn Restores Law and Order” Frank S. Nugent *New York Times* April 8, 1939, 19.
- ⁴⁰⁰ Flynn, 291.
- ⁴⁰¹ Flynn, 323.
- ⁴⁰² McNulty, 169.