

Women in mildred pierce and sunset boulevard

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Women in Mildred Pierce and Sunset Boulevard In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the entire world was recovering from the devastating effect of the Second World War. Although the victors were not suffering as badly as the Axis powers, over a million Americans had died in the conflict. It was in this situation that Mildred Pierce and Sunset Boulevard were filmed: Mildred Pierce during the falling action of the war itself, and Sunset Boulevard five years afterwards, while America was preparing for war in Korea. Socially, this was the uncomfortable period between women achieving suffrage in 1920 and the 1960s, when sexism began to be seen for the ridiculous institution it was, and women's freedoms and rights were extended. It is interesting to look at male-written and -directed films in this time to see how the attitude of traditional authority figures changed, and how their work may have influenced women viewers to seek a more even balance of power. This essay will compare Mildred Pierce and Sunset Boulevard to show the development, slight though it may have been, in the perception of women from 1945 to 1950, and suggest how films like these may have contributed to later feminist movements. In Mildred Pierce, director Michael Curtiz depicts Mildred as unhappy: the flashback scenes pile image upon image of Mildred as a twice-unhappy wife, inadequate and later grieving mother, and ashamed waitress. She marries her second husband (who ruins her financially) to impress her daughter rather than for love, and when she becomes a restaurant tycoon, the story still centres on her daughter's feelings of disappointment instead of her own successes. The implication is that Mildred's painful and heartfelt efforts can never be enough for the new generation of younger women, and this is played for maximum cruelty: the

trailer of the film (Youtube, accessed 02/22/11) judges Mildred as “ a woman who refused to live by the rules,” “ indiscreet,” a woman who “ tried to kiss off a crime!” The contemporary audience would have been well aware that they were supposed to accept the present-time, darker “ noir male discourse of a dangerous, nocturnal underworld” (Williams, 13) as reflective of Mildred's personality, not the evenly-lit, sympathetic scenes of her past. “ Mildred tries to tell her own story, but the film image conspires to turn her words against her” (Williams, 14). The later character of Norma Desmond also inspires a mix of pity and disgust, but has been allowed greater narrative control, as “ in spite of Gillis's painfully crass and 'authoritative' voiceover, Norma is almost always correct” (Bergman, 57). Compare this to Mildred, whose attempts at 'female discourse' are subverted by the film's here-and-there chronology, which juxtaposes her innocence against events which cast suspicion over her, and it is clear that directors began to see women's voices as more valid, even if they did not yet trust a woman with the entire business of storytelling. However, Norma is undeniably a very weak character, delusional and in need of being pandered to, but the mere fact that she is so often pandered to reveals her inner strength. She captivates Gillis to such an extent that he fakes her fanmail – like Mildred, the narrator's efforts to portray himself as a wise and powerful hero are corrupted by the events of the plot. The earlier character of Mildred is strong of herself but easily manipulated by others, compulsively seeking her daughter's approval in particular. A final point of consideration is the films' portrayals of reward and punishment in Mildred's and Norma's lives. Although Mildred is not the murderer, she is heavily punished by life: she is a

divorcee and a widow, with one daughter dead and another deeply angry with her, who has lost her thriving business thanks to the playboy nature of her unloved second husband. At the end of the film, her first husband Bert returns to her, in a ploy which is not quite believable: are we meant to believe that Mildred lives happily ever after with the man she had previously been unhappily married to? Is this really what the writers thought would make Mildred happy? Conversely, Norma suffers very little - on-screen, at least. Her career is admittedly declining, but that is a side-effect of aging rather than a punishment. When the police arrive to arrest Norma, they do so kindly, allowing her butler Max to persuade her that she is on the set of a new film rather than in front of news-hungry journalists and cameras. The story frames Norma as successful in avoiding everything she hates and getting everything she wants, except, of course, the revival of her career. This appears to be unintentional, as Norma has been compared to such evil characters as Dracula (Corliss); the effect is to suggest that powerful women are devoid of responsibility. Such an idea could have been terrifying or inspiring to its various audiences. Although we can see a clear evolution in the male concept of women between 1945 and 1950, this evolution is slight, and there are still many similarities between *Mildred Pierce* and *Sunset Boulevard*. The basic premise and narration of the films are complementary: in *Sunset Boulevard*, the film is about Norma, narrated by male Gillis; *Mildred Pierce* includes voice-over from the eponymous character and tells the story of her husband's death. The opening sequence of each film, which in both depicts the dead man, explicitly focuses the audience's attention on him. Even one of the most drastic acts a person can perform - murder - does not

endow these women with any significance independent of men. That said, the visual setting of each death is symbolic of the female murderer: we see Gillies' body from the bottom of the swimming pool, distorting the images of the policemen above. Norma is also stuck in an artificial void, stagnating in a world where everything is distorted. Similarly, the staircase in the opening murder scene of *Mildred Pierce* is representative of Veda's social climbing ambitions. Even though the content of the film does not draw our attention to the female protagonists, its images do. The major personality difference between Mildred and Norma is that Mildred is a strong character who is manipulated by those around her; Norma is a weak character but a powerful manipulator. This could chart the development in the late 1940s of the male fear that granting women more rights could lead to the extinction of men. In an era when, we like to think, traditionalists were opening their minds more to the idea of women as valid and important storytellers, we instead see films in which women, uncontrolled by husbands, are degenerate and delusional. Although there are moments of feminist brilliance in both films, the women in *Mildred Pierce* and *Sunset Boulevard*, one hopes, served mostly as counter-examples to the brave people and children of both genders who grew up to fight sexism in the following years.

Works Cited
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