

Hold Them Down: Oppression of Film Noir's Working Woman

The struggle for women's rights and roles in society has been an ongoing battle, since the beginning, with Adam and Eve. The subjugation that was presented upon Eve, because of her fault and easiness to be deceived, has trailed behind mankind, and film noir would not be excluded. The femme fatale seems to play the role of what Eve started, seducing men with her sexuality to carry out wicked schemes and being the downfall of all men. Thus, men began to identify women as a threat to their very essence but, yet, still cannot resist the temptation women can offer. However, when allurements are not heavily projected through a female's sensuality, and her independence becomes her greatest asset, the attraction becomes non-existent, but the danger still persists. Michael Curtiz affirms the fear of working women in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) through Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford) and Ida Corwin (Eve Arden); the oppression of working women in the household, work place and the dating realm traces back to early preconceptions placed on men—what it takes to be a man—and the effects of World War II during that era.

Much like women, men are imprinted with certain aspects and obligations for simply being born a man. Frank Krutnick uses Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Rex Theory as a way to acknowledge the beginning stage of sexual identification. He states, "Oedipus Rex is what is known as a tragedy of destiny. Its tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them. The lesson, which is submission to the divine will and realization of his own impotence" (Krutnik 76). Being born a man is a fate that cannot be changed. With his "call of fate" the "tragedy" that arises comes from the preconceived notions placed on them. The notions can revert back to Adam and his role in the Garden of Eden—for he was created first, a woman came from his rib—but numerous definitions of what makes up a man have come to exist. Such standards are,

but not limited to: strength, detachment, competence and pride. Between what sex they were born and the criterion given to men over time, struggle is inescapable; they can come to feel threatened on all sides if they are seen or feel as if they are not living up to the expectations placed on their shoulders. Rather than going against their “destiny,” submitting to society and his manhood are the options most recommended and viewed as right, and most men do succumb. However, the process of sexual identification does not rely on the man having a penis alone, nor what society pressures; the development begins in the home with the mother and father. Krutnik best explains, continuing to use Freud’s ideals, “[A boy’s] identification with his father takes on a hostile [coloring] and becomes identical with his wish to replace his father in regard to his mother as well” (Krutnik 77). A boy will notice his similarities to his father, rather than his mother, such as having a penis, and will find himself “geared toward filling his father’s shoes” and performing any task he witnesses him accomplishing; the task can be something as simple as the father fixing a tire, and the boy will not see his mother doing the same, so he “believes” it will be his duty as he becomes a man.

Once a boy grows into a man, he tries to recreate the dynamic relationship seen between his mother and father and create a household of patriarchal order that is heavily stressed in society. The first “footing” men feel the need to have is a career to support his family. Jesse Bernard claims, “There were both costs and rewards for those men attached to the good-provider role. The most serious cost was perhaps the identification of maleness not only with the worksite but especially with success in the role” (Bernard 152). In *Mildred Pierce*, Bert Pierce (Bruce Bennett) is the main provider in the home, working in real estate. The film’s first flashback opens with the loss of his “good-provider role.” The loss might as well be castration to Bert’s character—he is not making any money of his own to provide for three females or have a title to

his name, except unemployed. Bert's defenses go up and he feels threatened in his household stance once Mildred decides to subtly "take over." Pam Cook states,

Mildred's take-over of the place of the father has brought about the collapse of all social and moral order in her world... In the face of impending chaos and confusion the patriarchal order is called upon to reassert itself and take the Law back into its own hands, divesting women completely of any power they may have gained while the patriarchal order was temporarily impaired. (Cook 75)

With the unemployment of Bert, Mildred starts to sell baking goods out of the house, wanting to be able to support their daughters Veda Pierce (Ann Blyth) and Kay Pierce's (Jo Ann Marlowe) endeavors more than anything. One would believe the well-being of his daughters would be the top priority on his mind, but this is upsetting to the patriarchal order, and thus, Bert cannot allow Mildred to be the only one—let alone a woman—bringing in the money. With his pride in the way, he completely "sidesteps" his role of simply being present and decides to leave the family that has entered a "world of chaos." Mildred asserting herself as the main breadwinner has led to the loss of her husband—the consequence of being a working woman in the household. The "cloud of social and moral disorder" will follow Mildred throughout the film, as she becomes even more progressive in the workforce, until the end, when "she is knocked completely off of her high horse" and the "Law is reasserted."

When Mildred makes the decision to "further explore the length she can go" as a working, independent woman, she is continuously put down by her stance, but Veda serves as one of her main oppressions. Veda finds shame in Mildred being a waitress and nearly disowns her own mother; Veda becomes "the man" while one is not fully present. Following Kay's death, Mildred becomes a stronger force to reckon with in the labor market, but she can still not obtain

full power, and World War II stands as a cause. Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit claims, “[The principle of equal pay on the grounds that the value of women’s work would be the same of men’s work] resulted from the relatively strong position of the American working woman during wartime” (Janssen-Jurreit 178). The film is produced in the midst of World War II. With men gone and returning home during the year’s release of the film, jobs became an anxiety men started to have. Most the women came and took over the jobs men had left behind, and they had taken over well. Mildred is not allowed to be the complete owner of the chain of restaurants she decides to open. Wally Fay (Jack Carson), a man, must be of assistance to her purchasing property, allowing him leverage over her restaurants with her name on them. The business remaining under some sort of male authority alludes to the discomfort men felt with the possibility females could be “equal” to men in the workforce, deserving equal pay. In fact, Mildred is seen moving around, getting her hands dirtier, looking over paperwork, while Wally is typically depicted leaning on a doorway, just present, observing. Mildred serves as the slave and Wally is the slave-owner.

Being “a slave,” which Veda views Mildred as, no matter what her mother does or how much money she has coming in, pushes the seeming importance of Mildred having or needing a man. Mildred finds herself married to Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott), and, at first, their relationship seems appropriate—besides the fact Mildred only married Monte under the guidance of Veda, representing societal views—but with the underlying debts of Monte’s and his continuous choice to live lavishly, Mildred finds herself in the same position she once was with her first marriage. However, instead of Monte being outwardly disgusted about Mildred bringing in the household’s money, he willingly takes money from Mildred. Michael Kimmel states,

A state of independence always begets more or less of jealous rivalry and hostility. A man loves his children because they are weak, helpless, and dependent. He loves his wife for similar reasons. When his children grow up and assert their independence, he is apt to transfer his affection to his grandchildren. He ceases to love his wife when she becomes masculine or rebellious. (Kimmel 97)

Mildred serves as the “bank” for her family. Monte does not find her independence offensive, not only because she is supporting his expensive lifestyle, but because he is able to bypass any hostile feelings by spending the money Mildred gives him on Veda. Veda is the child that is “dependent” and Monte showers her with the love he should be giving to Mildred instead—such as buying Veda a lavish car—but will not because of her liberation. If Veda was to stop wanting luxurious desires and “grow up,” the odds of Monte sticking around would lower; he would have no one to feel “authoritative” over as a man.

Mildred’s friend and business partner, Ida, also serves as a representation of the oppression a working woman undergoes in a film noir. Her dating life is not much different from Mildred’s, except the fact that she is not married. Simone De Beauvoir states, “Women must forget their own personality when she is in love. It is a law of nature. A woman is nonexistent without a master. Without a master, she is a scattered bouquet” (De Beauvoir 192-193). Unlike Mildred, Ida has not “bent her personality” to please a man. Mildred chose to marry Monte because of the pressure of Veda, even though her desire was absent, and she even allowed him to take her money, though she was increasingly becoming bothered by him being dependent on her, ruining her own finances with her business. Ida makes it clear that she has no want to sacrifice her own individuality like she sees Mildred doing. Ida notices that Veda is the one “suffocating”

Mildred, and advises her to cut her daughter off, forget about her—making a comparison to an alligator being smart and eating their young. The “cruel” suggestion Ida makes alone allows viewers to understand that her personality is one that is nearly “unbreakable,” which would not mesh well with men who hardly wish for their women to have a strong voice. Frank Krutnick claims, “‘Being in love’ involves ‘a certain encroachment upon the ego,’ and by ‘pacting’ himself to a woman, the male will always risk some degree of destabilization of his post-Oedipal identity as a man. Where the male over-idealises the woman, the extensive ceding of ego may result in problematic sacrifice of his ‘licit’ masculine identity and motive power” (Krutnick 84). With Ida’s dominating voice—which is truly blunter and less drawn out compared to Mildred’s and in general—she “clashes” with the male ego, though viewers do not see her interacting with male characters—she cannot keep them around her, literally and figuratively. She mentions how when men get around her, they become “allergic to wedding rings,” seeing her as a “sister-type.” The men find themselves talking to her like they would talk to another man, and that is because Ida is her own man. If a man was to “fall in love” with Ida, their ego would be greater diminished than if they were to fall in love with a “softer spoken woman.” The man’s “masculine identity” would be nearly nonexistent, because Ida takes care of herself, works for herself—she does not need anyone, but still desires for a man to want her. She says how she is tired of a man talking with her “man to man,” however, still, she will not bow down to them the way they would like her to. If Ida was to change herself just to have a man around, she would end up as stressed as she witnesses Mildred. While Ida and Mildred are nearly in an identical boat, being working women, Ida serves as a contrast, taking note that, during their talk, Mildred never used to drink before. Mildred admits to her problem being men; she picks up drinking in order to cope with the oppression men place on her, only trying to survive and do well for herself and, mostly,

Veda. Ida knows she does not want to be the same as Mildred, so she does not force the love between her and men that would not be capable of handling her unconventionality; she continues on living her life as she pleases, but sadly, that equals loneliness.

Janey Place makes the statement, “The primary crime the ‘liberated’ woman is guilty of is refusing to be defined [by her sexuality], and this refusal can be perversely seen (in art, or in life) as an attack on men’s very existence” (Place 47). Place’s stance on independent women—ones that work to support themselves and family—sums up the fear men have against them. In film noir, women take great strides to “break the chains” and become their own individual, but are punished in some form that does not allow them to fully obtain freedom. Freedom, for a liberated woman, does not exist—it has no place in the world of *Mildred Pierce*.

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