

THE MANY FACES OF MILDRED: A DETAILED ANALYSIS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University–San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

Parish Conkling

San Marcos, Texas
May 2010

COPYRIGHT

by

Parish Conkling

2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
1. THE FOOL, THE MAID AND THE MISTRESS: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN <i>MILDRED PIERCE</i>	11
2. THE CINEMATIC NARRATIVE OF <i>MILDRED PIERCE</i>	33
3. MOTHER'S OWN: MISPLACED DESIRE.....	47
4. CONCLUSION.....	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	56

DEDICATION

For My Grandmother, Ethel Mae Beeman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of my thesis committee. To my thesis director, Dr. Victoria Smith, thank you for your countless hours of support, direction and encouragement throughout this process. You listened to my half formed ideas with extraordinary patience. To Dr. Susan Morrison, I am immensely grateful for the time you spent with my work. Your valuable insights allowed me to see portions of my thesis in a new light. To Dr. Audrey McKinney, thank you for spending more time than I could have reasonably expected helping me flesh out ideas and easing my panic.

I would like to thank my family, Donna and Sam Johnson, Bill Jagla, Kaci Berry, my sisters Chelsea and Remy and my brother Brandon, for their support and belief in my abilities during this process.

I would also like to thank my husband, Lucas Conkling for holding down the fort and keeping the family going throughout the writing process. Your encouragement, love and support made all of this possible.

Finally I would like to thank my beautiful daughters, Anna and Sequoia Conkling for providing laughter and love when I was feeling overwhelmed. You girls make every day a joy.

This manuscript was submitted on April 19, 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Mildred Pierce debuted at the Strand in New York on September 24th, 1945. It was an instant hit with audiences if not with critics. Albert J. LaValley mentions in the foreword to the *Mildred Pierce* screenplay that, while Joan Crawford was singled out for her stellar performance, the main issue with the film seemed to be, as *New York Times* reviewer Thomas M. Pryor wrote, “It does not seem reasonable that a level-headed person like Mildred Pierce who builds a fabulously successful chain of restaurants on practically nothing, could be so completely dominated by a selfish and grasping daughter who spells trouble in capital letters” (qtd. in LaValley 50). While this is debatable, his comment illustrates one of the key problems critics had with the film. Further, critics found the integration of the melodrama and the crime drama to be awkward. It was called accidentally “immensely funny,” a “laggard and somewhat ludicrous movie” and “cluttered with unnecessary detail” (LaValley 51). James Agee was able to get to a more current contemporary view of the film when he wrote, “Nasty, gratifying version of the Cain novel about suburban grass-widowhood and the power of the native passion for money and all that money can buy” (qtd. in La Valley 51).

For all that, *Mildred Pierce* was a successful film due, not in a small part, to Joan Crawford’s star power. This was a comeback role for her, after having turned down many scripts over a two year period. As she related to *The Saturday Evening Post* in November of 1946:

The role of Mildred in *Mildred Pierce* was a delight to me because it rescued me from what was known at Metro as the Joan Crawford formula; I had become so hidden in clothes and sets that nobody could tell whether I had talent or not. After I left Metro, Warners offered me three scripts, each of which I turned down. Producer Jerry Wald loyally agreed that it would be wrong for me to take another formula picture, and finally he suggested James Cain's novel, which I had read years before without realizing it was just what I needed. On rereading it, I was eager to accept this chance to portray a mother who has to fight against the temptation to spoil her child. As I have two adopted children, I felt I could understand Mildred and do the role justice (La Valley 47).

Despite what could be seen as a complete misreading of the script, Crawford saw in the role of Mildred exactly the image she had created for herself, "a strong career woman with lower-middle-class roots, one who was resourceful and strong, but still sexually appealing, and could hold her own in a man's world" (La Valley 49). *Mildred Pierce* did allow Crawford to escape from the formula of roles she was known for at Metro and won her an Oscar. This new image of the strong and controlled woman allowed her to stay at the top for a good many years, even when she had moved beyond the ability to play romantic leads.

Mildred Pierce was adapted by Michael Curtiz from a James M. Cain novel of the same name. Cain's novel, set between the years 1931- 1940, encompasses the Depression years, and this backdrop colors much of the action. While Cain is known as a writer of crime fiction and one of the originators of *roman noir*, his version of *Mildred*

Pierce is actually a much more sympathetic treatment of a grass widow (a term used to designate a divorced or separated woman) attempting to care for her children than the film is. For instance, Monte's murder and Mildred's subsequent "confession" to the detective which provides the frame for the film is absent in Cain's novel. Absent also is Veda's devotion to music, her training and her humility with her instructor. While Veda is still portrayed as headstrong and manipulative, her pain at the death of her instructor and her nervousness and humiliation as she auditions with a premier conductor who virtually laughs her out of the studio, gives her a dimension that is missing in the film. Though I wouldn't go so far as to suggest that the reader sympathizes with Veda, these experiences do have the effect of rounding out her character and showing her to be more, and perhaps worse (since the reader is given more detailed knowledge surrounding her manipulations), than simply the spoiled, money hungry brat we find in the film.

Finally, the cast of characters in the novel is significantly shrunk in the film. Bert's parents, who are a source of tension in their own right, are gone in the film, as is Mrs. Gessler, Mildred's most ardent supporter and confidant. Ida's husband is missing as well, and though he is never a large part of the action in the novel, his existence allows Ida to become a successful career woman *and* wife, an important dimension that is also absent in the film.

Perhaps the most notable difference between the film and novel is a temporal one. In Cain's novel, taking place as it does during the Depression, Bert is a victim of the stock market crash; his subsequent difficulties obtaining work are more understandable given the time. Of course, he still displays some of the fecklessness

given to him in the film and the reader gets the idea that he is not trying very hard to find work, but some sympathy for his situation is aroused nonetheless. We later find that Monte, too, has suffered from the crash, and while he is still a playboy with no scruples about taking money from Mildred, his financial woes are not placed solely on his inept shoulders.

The temporal change leads to a difference of interpretation between the novel and the film. While the reader may have some sympathy for the men in Mildred's life, in the film they are viewed with suspicion. We never know exactly when the film is taking place, though cultural props and comments, such as, "I'm glad stockings are out for the duration," and Ida's response to hearing that Bert has found work in a defense plant, "The manpower shortage must be worse than we think," coupled with the shot of two sailors in the audience of Veda's nightclub act seek to anchor it somewhere during World War II. Why is Bert not overseas? For that matter, why isn't Monte? The impression that these men are rejects or cowards would be strong for an audience which has seen most of their men enlisted or drafted into the armed services. That Bert and Monte would be lying around, cheating on their wives and taking money from their girlfriends while other men are fighting for their freedom would be repugnant to audiences.

One benefit of the direct absence of reference to the war is that it allows the film to reflect more "of the exhilaration of female independence, of being genuinely on one's own" (Williams 44). Furthermore, the absence allows the film to focus on gender disturbances caused by the war "as the story of Mildred's career, love interests,

and family life addresses women's newfound independence rather than their temporary patriotic duty" (Jurca 30).

Some of these changes can be explained by tracing *Mildred Pierce's* bumpy road to the screen. *Mildred's* script went through eight versions starting with Thames Williamson in January of 1944 and ending with Randall MacDougall in December of 1944, and revisions continued through February of 1945 when the movie finished shooting (La Valley 22). The bulk of the first major version of the screenplay was written by Catherine Turney. Turney set the film from 1939 to the mid forties and moved through the main incidents from the novel in chronological order. She retains Bert's parents and Mildred's friend, Mrs. Gessler, and highlights Mildred's financial plight after her separation from Bert. She takes Mildred through key moments, such as her acquisition of the job at the restaurant, her meeting with Monte and their trip to Lake Arrowhead. Ray's death from pneumonia following Mildred's trip is included, as is Mildred's push to start her own restaurant and make it a success, her affair with Monte, and Veda's manipulation of Ted Forrester. Her script ends with Mildred destroying Veda's check and throwing her out of the house. An outline shows Turney's intention to finish the film with Mildred's proposal to Monte as a way of winning Veda back. A party is thrown to celebrate the engagement, Mildred's restaurant is taken away from her by Ida and Wally, and Mildred goes downstairs to find Veda and Monte in an embrace. She leaves the party and the house and returns to Bert and the house in Glendale (La Valley 24-26).

Many of Turney's ideas made their way to the final film, but the film's producer, Jerry Wald wanted a more "masculine" film, somewhat in the vein of

Double Indemnity, which he loved (La Valley 20). He brought in Albert Maltz to give advice and steer Turney to a more gritty and realistic picture. Turney's second script navigates through Veda's nightclub stint and brings Mildred to the bridge, contemplating suicide, but she admits that she never felt comfortable with the inclusion of the murder scene or the flashback device. When she was called away from the project to work on a script for Bette Davis, her involvement ended. She eventually asked to have her name removed from the list of screenwriters in the credits (La Valley 30).

Next, *Mildred Pierce* was taken over by a slew of writers, including William Faulkner and Margaret Gruen. There is little of their endeavors in the final product; much more comes from Ranald MacDougall, who was responsible for the completion of the accepted script. MacDougall sets the film in the present and adds the flashback desired by Wald. This, combined with noir style lighting and framing, had the effect of placing the "woman's film in a strange new context, one of jealousy, treachery and sexual confusion mixed with shady business dealings" (La Valley 36). MacDougall was able to incorporate *film noir* and melodrama in a way that had eluded other writers. MacDougall's script built on Turney's and supplied new elements to solve some of the problems the other writers faced, such as, how to trim down a bulky novel and add in a second storyline which included a murder and a present day investigation. Wally's cantina was created to give Mildred a place to find Wally on the night of Monte's murder, and infused a seediness into the film from the beginning. Mildred and Monte's tryst occurs at his beach house rather than at Lake Arrowhead. This house is the site of Monte's murder and of the business deal which first introduced

Monte and Mildred, and links business, desire and murder together. The closet filled with “sisters” bathing suits provided a way to insert the suggestion of sex desired by audiences but denied by censors. Finally, MacDougall creates enough ambiguity around Monte’s murder to keep audiences interested. The chain of events surrounding the murder link up bit by bit, beginning with Monte falling to the floor and finally concluding with the missing scene of Veda firing the gun (La Valley 38). Revisions and rewrites continued throughout shooting, and some scenes do seem disjointed, such as Mildred telling Wally she is in love with Monte in one scene, then telling Monte she no longer loves him shortly after (La Valley 39), but audiences responded to the film, and *Mildred Pierce* received nominations for both best film and best screenplay that year.

Why was this story so difficult for screenwriters to tell? What exactly is Mildred’s story? On the surface it seems typical enough. Her husband leaves her for another woman and Mildred is forced to care for her children the only way she can, by commercializing her domestic abilities. She first sells pies and obtains a job waitressing. She then opens her own restaurant. The film quickly turns into a dramatic warning, however, as first her youngest daughter dies, then her eldest murders Mildred’s second husband and is taken to jail. “It’s your fault I’m the way I am,” her daughter tells her, and certainly the film has shown this to be true, as Mildred constantly spoils her daughter and trades her home for a position as head of a chain of restaurants. The end of the film leaves Mildred without her children, without her business and only the reunion of Mildred with her first husband can provide a hint of a

happy ending. If Mildred can only go back home and give up this business nonsense, all will turn out all right.

Embedded within this surface story however, is a rich mine of textual and subtextual meanings. While the novel brings out some of these, such as the economic turmoil of the Depression and gives a lurid quality to the relationship between Mildred and Veda that the film can only hint at, the film is able to use cinematic devices to probe deeper into meanings the novel cannot touch. For instance, the murder and Mildred's desire to divert the blame from Veda creates a psychological dimension to their relationship that is further illustrated with blocking and shots that contain reflections in mirrors. As well, the class difference between Mildred in her cotton dresses and apron in the beginning of the film and the opulence of the Berragon mansion after Mildred marries Monte, provides a visual illustration of her inability to fit in to the upper class world and fully achieve the social status Veda craves.

The novel, the screenplay and the film version of *Mildred Pierce* each provide part of a full understanding of Mildred. In this essay, a comparative analysis will show that by incorporating Cain's characterization of Mildred, along with what is found in the screenplay and adding this to the cinematic representation of Mildred which illuminates often overlooked aspects of her character, a more complete portrait of Mildred emerges. This allows for a greater understanding of Mildred's complex character than can be achieved by taking these texts alone.

I will begin my examination of Mildred by looking at the film through its historical context. I am interested in uncovering what the film is saying about women's roles during the war years, and what, if any options, were available to women who

wished to combine the roles of businesswoman and mother, and how this translates to Mildred's experiences. I am also interested in how differences between the novel and the film add or detract from any message that may come through. Mildred's attempt leaves her without children or a business, which could serve as a warning to other women. Yet Ida and Lottie remain relatively unchanged despite working outside the home. This ambivalence suggests that while the text is not sanctioning women working outside the home, neither is it issuing a condemnation. Mildred fails to combine mothering and business, but this seems to be linked more to her overindulgence of Veda than to her decision to open the restaurant.

Next I will look at the cinematic devices that place Mildred and her body at the forefront of the film. I draw on the work of Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey's work concerning the nature of the gaze, as well as Kaja Silverman's discussion of the voice, specifically as it is used in the voiceover and question whether Mildred actually speaks for herself, or whether her only avenue of expression is by appropriating a male voice. Mildred is inextricably linked with the body through close up shots of her legs, and point-of-view shots which signal to the audience that she is an object of desire for the men in the film. Yet Mildred is able to manipulate her object status and use it to achieve some power. This leads to an intricate set of viewing relationships which I explore. I also show how Veda functions as Mildred's *femme fatale* and how the placing of Mildred in the role of protagonist allows the two apparently split genres in the film, *film noir* and melodrama, to fuse together.

Finally, I will discuss the deeply problematic nature of the relationship between Mildred and Veda. Mildred's obsessive love for her daughter to the exclusion of

everything else influences all of Mildred's actions throughout the film. More than a need to provide for her family after separating from Bert, Mildred's entrepreneurial push is stimulated by an intense desire to provide for Veda's insatiable material appetite. Mildred's obsession is not only self-destructive given Veda's disdain for her mother and her class status, but it also positions Veda as the true *femme fatale* of the text, since she is all Mildred wants and cannot have.

CHAPTER 1
THE FOOL, THE MAID AND THE MISTRESS
REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN *MILDRED PIERCE*

In 1939, the heroines of women's magazine stories, were career women – happily proudly, adventurously, attractively career women – who loved and were loved by men. And the spirit, courage, independence, determination – the strength of character they showed in their work as nurses, teachers, artists, actresses, copywriters, saleswomen – were part of their charm. There was a definite aura that their individuality was something to be admired, not unattractive to men, that men were drawn to them as much for their spirit and character as for their looks (Friedan 38).

As this passage from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* shows, the woman of 1939 had much going for her. A career woman, she was praised for her abilities in the workforce. While she may have decided to stay home after marriage and children, this was by and large her decision. Let's hope she enjoyed it, because a short two years later, America entered WWII, and the landscape changed dramatically. Women were still encouraged to enter the workforce, but now it was a question of duty. With such a large percentage of men gone, women were needed to take their place in the refineries and factories, fighting the war on the production lines. While many women had been in the workplace for some time, for others,

especially those coming of age, this was their first foray into a world that appreciated and expected them to use their abilities and provided them with an income as well.

The war years were also a time of relative sexual freedom. Combined economic and personal freedom from family ties gave women a sense of independence. Dating became a less formal affair and more women became sexually active outside of marriage (Walsh 64). This was not necessarily met with approval. Abortions during this period were estimated between 8,000 and 9,000 per year (Kavinoky 26). As well, morals charges against women rose 95% compared to pre-war averages. The Victory Girl, or V-girl, became a symbol of unrestricted, uncontrolled sexual freedom. The V-girl was seen as a type of war time prostitute, travelling from city to city inspiring soldiers with her own brand of patriotic support. Not surprisingly, campaigns were mounted on both the federal and state levels aimed at the reform and rehabilitation of the V-girls, who were seen as maladjusted and love-starved. (Walsh 65-66). These campaigns also emphasized a reinstatement of traditional family values and indeed, for the majority of young women, marriage still represented the most legitimate means to sexual expression. Between 1940 and 1943, there were an estimated 1,118,000 more marriages than would have been predicted outside of war years (Walsh 66). For some this was due to increased economic stability following the Depression. Yet for many, these marriages reflected psychological fears. With the threat of death hanging over young couples, many felt the immediacy of time. The men may not return from war; the women may be too old when war finally ended. Marriage also represented adulthood and gave the soldiers “something to fight for” while overseas. For the wives there was a financial incentive; war brides received a monthly allowance of at least \$50 (Walsh 67). For both parties however, marriage

legitimized sex, and for a young couple facing separation of an indeterminate length, this was undoubtedly a large factor in the race to the altar. Not surprisingly, these hasty marriages did not always survive the war. Wartime divorce rates went from 8.8 percent to 14.4 percent per 1,000 women between 1940 and 1945 (Walsh 67). While this was partially due to the newfound economic freedom that released women from monetary dependence on men, the fact that many of these couples simply raced into marriage too soon cannot be overlooked. Some husbands returned to find their wives had become involved with other men, while many wives found that the men returning to them had changed greatly. They had grown harder and older through their experiences and their wives wondered how to handle the change. When the war ended the nation was far from stable, both economically and socially. Families had been separated and both wives and husbands worried that they would no longer be able to relate to their spouse. Children grown used to depending solely on their mothers were unsure about the role their fathers now played in the family dynamic. Men needed to return to their jobs both for the economic reboot and for the sense of normalcy that would aid their reintegration into society. This meant that the women who had been filling those positions were out of a job.

Although many women who originally answered the call and filled America's labor needs fully expected this work to be temporary, by the end of the war, many enjoyed the freedom and independence they gained by working outside the home and were loathe to give it up. Polls taken at this time showed that over 70% of employed women between the ages of 21 and 44 wanted to keep working (Walsh 74).

In light of this, an ideological war began to convince America's women that it really was in everyone's best interest for them to step aside, return home, raise the kids and create healthy and satisfying meals, leaving the workplace to its natural male inhabitants. Suddenly, the Office of War's images of women at work, wielding blow torches and wearing overalls, were gone. Gone too were the radio spots claiming, "With industrial advances, there's practically no limit to the types of jobs women can do" (Douglas 46). Now magazines featured light-hearted tales of women's adventures in domesticity, nearly always featuring a young girl who was just ecstatic about staying home and caring for her family (Freidan 44). Women were told to find contentment in "suburban housekeeping, sexual passivity, male domination and devotion to their children" (Chaudhuri 17). Some women agreed and moved back home. Some did not, and for them, the struggle to assert their independence and their femininity in a male-dominated work place was arduous.

Among the films that hit the screen at this time, *Mildred Pierce* carries a message of female independence that is not completely erased by the punishment the film's main character suffers at the end of the film. Mildred does suffer for her audacity in leaving the home and creating her own business, but other women, most notably Ida and Lottie, leave the film much as they entered it. This chapter will look at the plot narrative and characters of *Mildred Pierce*, both film and novel. I will examine what message the narrative may hold for post war women, focusing mainly on Mildred herself, but also looking at the interesting minor characters of Ida and Lottie, played by Eve Arden and Butterfly McQueen. These women provide a

counterpoint to Mildred. They also show a different face of the postwar woman that needs to be considered beyond that of the white, suburban, middle-class housewife.

Mildred Pierce came out in September of 1945. The distribution timing coincided with the end of the war, but the film's screenplay and the shooting both occurred while the war was still going on. Though the war is only hinted at in the film, the addition of the present day murder and investigation followed by the flashback creates a striking parallel for filmgoers who had seen their own lives darkened by tragedy in recent years. This may have resulted in unintentional sympathy for Mildred. In addition, the film's warning of what can happen when a woman ignores her home and family likely resonated with female audiences worried about their own homes, families, and marriages and confused over their status now that they were no longer needed to provide labor for a struggling American workforce.

We first meet Mildred positioned as the femme fatale. A man has been shot, his final word, "Mildred." We then see a woman cloaked in furs wandering along a rain soaked wharf. She stands overlooking the water. We think she may jump, and we are not the only ones, for shortly a policeman comes over to her; "What's on your mind, Lady?" he asks, "You know what I think? I think you had an idea to take a swim, that's what I think." Right away the policeman has established a pattern that will surround Mildred and her use of her voice throughout the film. The policeman doesn't give Mildred the chance to explain what is on her mind. He says what is on her mind for her. Before we have even gotten a clear look at Mildred, we have firmly placed her within the traditionally masculine noir crime narrative. Her voice has been appropriated by the policeman, just as it will be appropriated by the detective a few

scenes later. Mildred will tell her story, but only within the parameters set by the men in the film.

Mildred's role as femme fatal shifts as she begins to tell her story. The film that has begun as a noir crime drama becomes a melodrama, and the sharp, hard face of Mildred dissolves into a flashback in which she appears soft and girlish, baking pies in a suburban kitchen. Her husband, Bert, has been laid off, and he lies on the sofa reading the paper while Mildred fusses over a pair of his pants so he can go look for work. It shortly becomes known that Bert has been playing "gin rummy" with the neighbor, Mrs. Biederhoff, and as husband and wife argue over her indulgences with the kids she offers an ultimatum; "If you go down to that woman's house again, then you're never coming back here." While the film makes it seem as though Bert has been out of work only a day or two, in the novel Mildred has to carry the family with her baking for some time before she finally throws Bert out. With him gone, Mildred has to face the burden she has taken on and attempt to find work outside the home. It might have been possible for Mildred to carry on baking her pies for neighbors and the like, but she insists on providing ballet lessons for Kay, music lessons for Veda, and dresses for Veda that the child spurns. The kids will have the best, she tells Bert before he leaves, but she soon discovers pies alone won't make that happen.

Mildred's decision to enter the workplace provides an interesting contrast between the film portrayal of house work, and that espoused by the rhetoric of its day. Female film-goers had been shoved out of jobs in factories and plants and been told their most important work is to be found at home. Yet, as Mildred searches day after day for work, she is faced with the fact that her background as a housewife means very

little. In the novel, Mildred has her heart set on becoming a receptionist or secretary; these are jobs she imagines Veda will not be ashamed of. Yet she is offered only waitressing and domestic jobs. Insulted, Mildred trudges on, finally entering a staffing agency, where she is once again offered a position as a maid to a wealthy family. The agency owner tells her flatly, “You want to know why that lady offered you a job as a waitress, and why I recommended you for this. It’s because you’ve let half your life slip by without learning anything but sleeping, cooking and setting the table, and that’s all you’re good for. So get over there. It’s what you’ve got to do, so you may as well start doing it” (Cain 361). Apparently, while the skills of a housewife are to be prized within the home, outside they translate as very little. In the film, Mildred wanders in to a under staffed restaurant one day and leaves with a job waiting tables. Her aspirations have diminished, but she will feed her children and keep her home.

While Mildred is anxious to hide the truth of her job from the snobbish Veda, she soon excels at the restaurant and achieves a sense of pride and accomplishment. She is making life work without her husband. The female audience likely shared Mildred’s joy in the significant victory of caring for her children without a husband and it weakens somewhat any message of the film which seeks to dissuade women from taking Mildred’s path.

When Veda does discover her mother’s uniform, Mildred is spurred into making a decision that almost seems a revelation. “I figured it was the best way to learn the business,” she tells her daughter, announcing her plan to open a restaurant. “You mean, we’re going to be rich?” the child asks, squealing with pleasure. Mildred’s bluff is called; she will open the restaurant, and indeed, when we revisit the lines that begin

her flashback, “I was always in the kitchen. I felt like I’d been there all my life except the two hours it took to get married, I never knew any other kind of life,” it seems obvious that this is the course her professional life should take.

Catherine Jurca’s article, “*Mildred Pierce*, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family” mentions that there is an immediate connection in the film between domesticity and commerce that is created in our first interior shot of the Glendale kitchen. Mildred is baking pies, but not for family consumption. She is baking pies to sell. This “reveals from the first there is no domestic space in *Mildred Pierce* inhabited outside the realm of the commercial, no isolated home to which she could possibly return” (33). She becomes a waitress and must hire a helper (Butterfly McQueen) to keep up with her pie orders. This further commercializes her living space. When Mildred does open her restaurant, she does by converting a home rather than a space already designed for commercial use. This move “underscores the peculiarly domestic nature of a business that provides a crucial service of home with a fee” (Jurca 33). Her work experience within the home is devalued in the masculine workplace, but Mildred finds a way to work around this. She will take away the power of others to belittle her for being a housewife by forcing them into a position where they are paying her for precisely what she learned within the home. She will not be in a position of servitude, however; she will be the owner, and she will be the one who makes the decisions about when, how, and where she will serve.

Indeed, Mildred is allowed to succeed as a restaurateur *because* it is an extension of the home. In much the same way that Fanny Hurst’s B.Pullman’s succeeded in the original novel version of *Imitation of Life*, Mildred is not attempting

to appropriate a male position in the world of law, for example, or sales. She is staying within her gender parameters, keeping the apron on, as it were. She becomes more than simply a housewife by the film's end, but she never seems to leave the arena of the home.

This adheres to the shifting notions of gender which were at play after the war. Women wished to continue working, earning their own income. Men needed to return to the workplace not only for economic security, but also to show that order had been re-established in the world. If Mildred must enter the workplace, and for the sake of the story, she must, then let her do it within the framework of domesticity. Commercialized domesticity is still domesticity after all; it is simply transposed to the public sphere. The apron is an interesting symbol of this, and it circulates throughout the film. It is first worn by Lottie, the maid, after Veda discovers her mother's uniform. Here it is intended as a message: Veda is showing her mother that she has discovered her secret. It is also a catalyst - it is the discussion Mildred has with Veda when she comes home to find Lottie in the apron that culminates in the decision to open the restaurant. The apron makes another appearance at the restaurant when Wally Fay, Bert's previous business partner and now Mildred's, enters the kitchen at a busy time and Mildred puts it on him and puts him to work. This shows a gender role shift that mirrors actual social shifts in the 30's and 40's (Lloyd and Johnson 15). This contrasts with the apron's disappearance in later scenes where Mildred has appropriated a masculine role in her pursuit of her daughter.

The fact that Mildred is operating within the parameters of domesticity does not allow her to escape punishment however. She defies several social conventions that

must be atoned for. She has divorced her husband; she has opened her own business to support herself and her children rather than re-marry, and she enters into a sexual relationship with a man not her husband. It is this last transgression that is the most threatening. Given society's worries over women's sexual freedom and the idea that women's sexuality must be reined in, Mildred's trysts with Monte Berragon, the once-wealthy, playboy investor in her restaurant, cannot be sanctioned. When Mildred indulges in a day trip to Monte's beach house, her youngest daughter falls ill with pneumonia. Mildred is nowhere to be found and, by the time she returns and discovers her daughter is in danger, the child has time only to whisper, "Mommy," before she dies.

Kay's death obviously indicts Mildred's abdication of her maternal duties. Though the girls were spending the day with their father, if Mildred had been home, awaiting her children's return, things might have turned out differently. As it is, Mildred indulges carnal pleasures while her daughter is taken to Bert's girlfriend's home to be cared for. Mildred is the mother, but she is unavailable, so she is replaced by Mrs. Beiderhoff.

Kay's death also allows Mildred's obsession with Veda to have free rein. While Kay lives, Mildred must split her time and her devotion between the two children. This division tempers Mildred's obsession with Veda somewhat. Where Veda is cold and unfeeling, Kay is loving and generous. She provides Mildred with some of the filial warmth she desires and this keeps her desperation for Veda's love in balance, perilous though it is. With Kay gone, there is no distraction between the two. Mildred quickly places Veda in the center of her world, a maneuver that begins her own and

her daughter's downfall. Her driving motivation in life becomes the need to satisfy Veda's voracious material appetite. To this end she throws herself into her business and marries Monte, a man she does not love, but who has the social standing Veda craves.

Monte is an ambiguous character. His name, Berragon, creates the illusion that he is foreign, though this is never dealt with in the film, and in the novel he describes himself as a mix of several cultures. He is certainly a playboy, as Mildred discovers when she searches for a bathing suit in his beach house. "You have a lot of sisters," she remarks after unearthing a seemingly unending supply of women's bathing suits in a closet. Lloyd and Johnson make the argument that the portrayal of Bert focuses more on the failed man than on failed masculinity in general. The failed man has suffered through no fault of his own (such as the inability to find work during the Depression, or returning soldiers experiencing a psychic breakdown as a result of war trauma). Failed masculinity, on the other hand, is represented by shiftless, over-consuming and un-productive men (14). If Bert is a failed man, Monte certainly represents failed masculinity. His status as a member of the idle rich removes him from association with conventional ideas of masculinity, such as strength of character and a strong work ethic. He may be upper class, but he is completely broke, unwilling to work, and is not above living off a woman. Since the novel attributes his reversal of fortune to the Depression, this relieves him of any direct fault in the loss of his income. The film is not so kind. The implication is that he has squandered his fortune by playing polo and entertaining women. His position in his relationship with Mildred is one of dependence. She has the money; he has the name and the family mansion. If

he comes across as sexually ambiguous in the film, this can be attributed to the fact that as a member of the idle rich he is antithetical to the prevailing 40's idea of masculinity which included working to support a family and adhering to some sense of morality: "I could never get excited about the idea of work" he says. Monte is quite content to live off Mildred, and even begins a quasi-incestuous relationship with Veda, his step-daughter. While many of his actions, especially those concerning Veda, are repugnant, perhaps the most difficult to stomach is his disdain for Mildred's line of work. "I don't like kitchens...or cooks...they smell like grease," Monte tells Mildred. She replies, "You don't mind the money though, do you? I don't notice you shrinking away from a fifty-dollar bill because it smells of grease" (MacDougall 186).

Compared especially with Monte, Mildred's masculinity is hard to ignore. Though she begins the film in soft light and flowing hair, by the end of the film she has traded her cotton dresses for shoulder padded suits, and wears her hair pinned up severely. Where she begins by making pies, she ends by swilling whiskey straight and framing Wally for murder. These traits serve to align her with the masculine hero of *film noir* and take away the hint of fragility that accompanied her housewife image. It is within the context of Mildred's masculinity that the character of Ida can be most effectively explored. The novel has Ida married and successful, managing one restaurant when she initially meets and hires Mildred, then smoothly moving into managing Mildred's first restaurant, then effectively taking over the second. She eventually usurps Mildred's position as owner, yet her marriage stays intact. This creates the feeling that it is not so much Mildred's entry into the workplace that must be punished, but her sexuality and her object choice.

The film, on the other hand, masculinizes Ida to an extreme extent. Here she is pointedly single, and is obviously eradicated as a possible love choice by the men in the film. Wally looks at Ida and says matter of factly, “I hate all women, thank goodness you’re not one.” Ida replies disparagingly to Mildred’s inquires about marriage, “When men get around me they suddenly get allergic to wedding rings” (MacDougall 204). Yet, for all this, Ida is intelligent, competent and witty, and seems to be fairly comfortable with herself. She ends the film much as she begins it. Though she does sometimes speak ruefully about her relationships with men and deprecate her own powers of attraction (Walsh 130), she is apparently successful navigating the masculine world of work.

Judith Roof’s work on minor characters, *All About Thelma and Eve*, provides insight into Eve Arden’s portrayal of Ida, one which adds needed depth to the character. Eve Arden’s role in the film, Roof writes, joins other minor character roles in performing the film equivalent of Shakespeare’s Fool, “They embody class and gender differences in the middle’s bubbling confusions, they represent safety, security, and reliability as an alternative to the imperatives of mainstream ideologies, and they embody the knowledge gained from occupying an ambivalent, inside-outside position” (14). The comparison of Ida to that of Shakespeare’s Fool is intriguing, and deserves some consideration. The Fool typically provides comic relief in Shakespeare’s plays, while also acting as a voice of reason, able to cross class lines and speak frankly, as does the Fool in *King Lear*. Ida does much the same thing in *Mildred Pierce*. She is the only one who is not dependant on Mildred for money or sexual gratification. Although she works in Mildred’s restaurant, she left her job in Glendale and came to

help Mildred out of friendship. The audience never doubts that she could leave Mildred's and find an equal job elsewhere. Since she is not dependent on Mildred, Ida can speak to her frankly. She is the only one who criticizes Veda openly, warning Mildred that Veda has been taking money from the waitresses, and comments on her manipulations: "Veda has me convinced that alligators have the right idea. They eat their young" (MacDougall 205). Roof explains that the Fool figures are privy to "the main character's introspection, perform a metacommentary on the film's action, double the female protagonist and the audience, and mediate between the film and viewer in various ways" (15). This seems like heavy duty for a character that often appears as part of the backdrop of Mildred's; however if we follow Ida (tracking, as Roof puts it) through the action we can see how she manages this.

Ida is significant in the film for being with Mildred during most of her key scenes. She enters the police station shortly after Mildred arrives, infusing humor into a tense scene with her comment about "old home week." In the flashback segment she plays a pivotal role in Mildred's future by giving her her first waitressing job and leading Mildred through her first few days. Even at this early stage, Ida is aware of what Mildred needs in a way that Mildred herself is not. MacDougall's script reads on page 123:

Ida brings out some uniforms. Mildred stands undecided.

Ida (noticing this): What size do you wear?

Mildred: Fourteen.

A few lines later it reads:

Ida helps Mildred complete the finishing touches in the uniform.

As this exchange shows, Mildred is undecided, most likely about the job as well as the uniform. Cain's novel has Mildred clearly upset about the prospect of working in a restaurant, and terrified that Veda will find out. Some of that worry is coming through here. Ida knows Mildred needs a job however, and she helps end Mildred's ambivalence by forcing her into a practical decision.

Ida joins Mildred at the new restaurant, running the cash register and keeping an eye on the circling sharks, Monte, Wally and Veda. She anticipates the potential downfall Mildred will experience, and tries, in her way, to shield Mildred from too much damage. She is Mildred's friend, but she is also her confidant and the only one she has in the film. Ida acts as Mildred's conscience and serves as a link to Mildred's working class origins. Where Mildred is desperate to rise above her middle class station for the sake of Veda, Ida understands the need for work, and is disparaging of those like Monte and Veda who live off Mildred and then condescend to her. "If there's one thing I can't stand it's watching people work," says Monte. Ida quips, "Your mother must have been frightened by a callous" (MacDougall 182). This has the effect of calling Monte's masculinity into question, identifying him with his mother and making him seem ridiculous. Veda calls Ida provincial, and Ida responds sweetly, "I like you too..." (MacDougall 182). She refuses to accept Veda's bait and moves smoothly away from it. The effect of her deft ability to defeat Veda's venom allows the audience to suddenly view Veda as a young child, trying on an affectation as though it were a new dress. She gives voice to feelings that by rights should be those of Mildred, but are too threatening for Mildred to face outright. These feelings are expressed in comments such as the one about alligators that directly challenge the themes of maternal devotion that run through

the film. Ida doesn't stop there though, but warns Mildred of what to expect from her rise to fortune: "That's the way it is Mildred. It's a man's world. If you succeed, if you show signs of getting up in the world, then the knives come out. I never yet met a man who didn't have the instincts of a heel" (MacDougall 203). She is speaking to Mildred, but she could also be speaking to the females in the audience who were experiencing this very same thing with their own workplace dramas.

Ida also acts as an intercessor between the audience and the film. She provides insight into the other characters, as we see from the comments above, and she also gives the audience information we might not be privy to otherwise. She is inside the action, but because her position is so often peripheral, she seems outside of it as well. She voices the impropriety insinuated by Monte and Veda's behavior toward each other, telling Mildred that Veda shouldn't be blamed in full for taking money from the waitresses, "a couple of times Monte was with her, and," (MacDougall 181). Mildred cuts her off here, but the audience has heard enough to imagine what would follow that "and."

Ida also alerts the audience to Mildred's financial downfall the night of Veda's party. Mildred calls Ida to let her know she'll be delayed arriving to the party. Ida hangs up and says, "Something's going on and I don't like it. I think Mildred is having business trouble." Monte smiles and says, "That can happen in the best of families." Ida looks at him puzzled and says, "Don't look now but you've got canary feathers all over you," to which Monte just smiles (MacDougall 225). From this exchange the audience knows that Mildred's fortune is toppling, and we are fairly certain Monte has a significant role to play in that (a fact that will become certain shortly after this scene).

Finally, as Roof points out, the careful tracking of Ida though the film gives the audience knowledge about the characters that leads us to decipher the true identity of Monte's murderer. Roof writes:

Given the personalities of various characters – Veda, Monte, Mildred – as seen from Ida's more distanced vantage, certain narrative dispositions are likely, especially because we know at least one outcome to the story. And even though more than one character had a motive to murder Monte, and even though Mildred has been offered as the most likely candidate, careful attention to Ida throughout already points to the more psychologically plausible solution (93-94).

This solution is, of course, that Veda was the actual murderer and that Mildred is trying to take the blame for her daughter. Ida allows us to recognize Monte and Veda's actions for what they are, and we know someone else recognizes them as well. She gives us clues by her relations with the other characters that let us share her position of inside/outside. However, Ida's most important contribution to the film may be in the secondary narrative of female experience which provides a contrast to Mildred's.

Mildred is dangerous in the film for succeeding without a man. Ida is dangerous (and potentially more so), because she presents the possibility of living with very little male interference (Roof 86). Not only is Ida childless, but her comment about alligators shows an undertone of anti-maternal feeling. Though at times she appears dissatisfied with being alone, we aren't convinced she would give up her apparent freedom to be with a man; "I'm getting very tired of men talking man to man with me," she says, "I sometimes wish I could get along without them" (MacDougall 204). Yet it is men in general that seems to fatigue Ida, not necessarily being alone.

While Ida appears sexless in the film, this doesn't appear to have been MacDougall's first intention. The script actually has Ida and Wally get together at the end of the film. As Mildred and Bert walk out of the station, page 236 has the following scene:

Wally (looking Ida over carefully): Say, how about you cooking some breakfast for me?

Ida (as they start away): Okay. I'll give you some scrambled eggs but that's all. I hate to wrestle in the morning.

Allowing Ida to engage in sex of any kind would validate her male-free lifestyle more than the film has already. To allow that a woman may have economic and sexual freedom would doubtlessly be asking too much. It may also be that Ida is complete in herself and doesn't need a man, especially not the feckless men that surround Mildred. Roof mentions that Ida acts as "man" and helpmeet for Mildred providing strength and support and drawing attention "to her own more comic breach of gender propriety, thus deflecting possible anxieties about Mildred's inappropriate gender behavior" (83). While I'm not convinced that Ida's behavior keeps the audience from noticing Mildred's gender transgressions, it is true that her hardness makes Mildred seem softer, even when Mildred is trying to be stoic, such as the scene between the two when Mildred returns from Mexico.

Mildred enters the restaurant and goes to her office where she finds Ida. Ida makes a move to relinquish Mildred's chair but Mildred stops her, "On you it looks good" she tells her. The two women recline in leather chairs opposite each other and light cigarettes and drink whiskey. "See anybody I know lately?" Mildred asks with

forced casualness. Ida answers, “You mean Veda. I wondered how long it’d take you to get around to that” (MacDougall 204). At this point it would not take much of a stretch of the imagination to re-envision this scene with two men speaking about a lover. Ida assists with Mildred’s masculinization here, playing the role of Mildred’s foil. Yet, against Ida’s more practical edge, Mildred falters, saying “You don’t know how it is, Ida. Being a mother. She’s part of me, I want my daughter back” (MacDougall 205). What before was masculine camaraderie has disintegrated into maternal anguish, and while Mildred is still perceived as transgressing gender roles, Ida is seen as completely circumventing them.

Ida’s is not the only character which provides an alternative narrative for females. If Ida mediates between the film and the audience, Lottie, Mildred’s maid, played by Butterfly McQueen, mediates between the two versions of femininity as displayed by Ida and Mildred, and between classes and class as expressed by race through Veda and Mildred. Her presence in the film reminds us of Mildred’s beginnings as a waitress, and later, functions as signifier (though an inappropriate one) of the family’s wealth (Roof 131). She enters the film in answer to Mildred’s increased demands for pies and less available hours to make them due to her work at the restaurant. At this point there is not much difference between the two women except in terms of race, but the film goes to lengths to suggest difference. After making the night’s pies, Lottie comments on Mildred’s fast pace, making pies at night and working all day. “I don’t know how you keep it up, Mrs. Pierce.” Mildred replies, “It keeps me thin.” To which Lottie replies, “Don’t do nothing for me” while examining her body (Roof 132). The film calls attention to is the physical differences between the two, black/white, plump/thin,

short/tall. Additionally, the scene shows Mildred's dedication to hard work, a trait that will make her successful and echo democratic values.

Lottie moves in between Ida and Mildred as a mediating force of femininity because, like Mildred, she makes a living by commercializing her domestic talents, and like Ida, she apparently operates with a relative amount of freedom. We never know much about Lottie's life when she leaves Mildred for the day; presumably we are to think of her as part of the *mise en scene*, like a piece of furniture, without a life of her own. Mildred seems to be the only one she answers to. Like Ida, Lottie's existence in the film suggests an underlying narrative involving the experiences of minority women in post war society that is not expressed in the film save as a passing nod. For instance, while Lottie appears to have freedom, the opportunities available to her as a black woman would have been much narrower than those offered to Mildred, even with Mildred's lack of experience with anything besides domestic work. This brings attention to the class difference associated with race as well. Lottie and Mildred may both be making pies, but Lottie (standing for black women) will continue making pies (or chicken, or waffles) long after Mildred has opened her restaurant.

Lottie mainly serves as an intercessor between Veda and Mildred, taking the symbolic place of each in different scenes as mother and daughter play out their drama. She first stands in for Mildred when the latter comes home to find that Veda has dressed the former in Mildred's restaurant uniform. "Where did you get that uniform?" Mildred asks her. Lottie answers, "Miss Veda gave it to me. She makes me wear it, in case I have to answer the doorbell." "Miss Veda" Mildred repeats. "She makes me call her that," replies Lottie (MacDougall 138). Veda not only imposes a class distinction on Lottie that

was not apparent in the scene where she and Mildred worked side by side, but Veda is also sending her mother a message. Mildred goes to her daughter and demands, “Where did you find that uniform you gave to Lottie?” To which Veda responds with a half truth about searching for a handkerchief in Mildred’s drawers. “You know that’s my uniform” insists Mildred. “I’m waiting tables in a Glendale restaurant. And you know it, now” (MacDougall 130). Just as it was Ida who ended Mildred’s indecision about taking the job, it is Lottie who now serves as the catalyst for the realization of Mildred’s worst fear. Veda has found out that her mother is a waitress, and this causes the subsequent decision to open her own restaurant.

Later, Lottie changes her role when Mildred returns from Mexico. Standing on the front porch of Mildred’s, Lottie happily exclaims greetings when she spies Mildred, “Why, Miz Pierce! Oh my – this is a day for rejoicing, it certainly is. You’ve been away *so* long.” Mildred smiles and says, “I’ve been to Mexico,” “Is that a fact” says Lottie, “It’s sure nice to have you back” (MacDougall 202). As Roof points out, in this scene Lottie is a substitute Veda, welcoming Mildred back when it should have been Veda there to welcome her mother home (132).

Lottie joins Ida in serving as an alternative to Mildred’s choices in the film. While the film clearly issues a warning about the dangers of leaving the sanctity of home and family and embarking on the masculine business world, these women navigate this world without the same issues Mildred has. Neither of the women are painted in a particularly appealing light: Lottie appears uneducated and nearly invisible, while Ida appears highly masculinized. There *is* a contrast between their respective narratives. Though not addressed in the film, they speak to the countless women in postwar America who were experiencing life and family differently than Mildred. Therefore, while the movie is definitely not supportive of women’s roles outside the

home, neither does it completely reject them. Both Ida and Lottie end the film relatively unchanged, suggesting an underlying ambivalence about women's independence. Mildred's transgressions, such as they are, must be rooted in something other than her desire for economic freedom.

CHAPTER 2

THE CINEMATIC NARRATIVE OF *MILDRED PIERCE*

Julia Kristeva believes that the signifying process is made up of the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic refers to the way in which a subject's modes of expression originating in the unconscious make their way into language. The symbolic on the other hand refers to the conscious way a subject uses language as a sign system to express meaning. Dance, music and poetry would express the semiotic. Expressions of scientists and logicians represent the symbolic (McAfee 17). By accompanying storytelling with visual devices, a set of signifying codes can be represented which allows the audience to infer certain sets of meanings. The use of top lighting, for instance, creates a sense that a figure is looming above, which in turn creates a sense of menace. *Mildred Pierce* relates the story of a woman attempting to make a living for herself and her daughters. Yet by combining this storyline with a cinematic narrative which allows viewers to understand and perceive meanings on another level, the film becomes a commentary on the correct social role for women. This chapter will look at the cinematic devices which explore the representation of woman as image, the loss of female voice, and apparent female freedom only insofar as it is allowed within the paradigms set out by male authority.

The mixed genres in *Mildred Pierce* are perhaps the first thing one notices. The film begins as a *film noir*, shifts into a maternal melodrama, has traces of the "talking

cure” movies, then morphs back into *film noir*. This causes considerable tension in an audience taught to expect certain things from certain types of films. Cinema can be seen as a form of communication made up of language, images and sound. Each of these carries with it a type of sign system whose rules have been “assimilated, consciously or otherwise, through cultural consensus” (Schatz 565). If we think of genre as a specific set of rules of expression, we can view genre films as manifestations of these rules (Schatz 566). Therefore, just as we expect certain things to follow from a certain construction of words in a sentence, we expect certain things to follow from the opening shots and nondiegetic sound in a film.

Take, for example, a classic detective film, perhaps inspired by Raymond Chandler or Mickey Spillane. Our detective is a private eye with a checkered past. He may have once been a policeman, but now, for reasons too complicated to tell, usually involving a woman, he is a private detective occupying an office in a shady part of town. His wise-cracking and voluptuous secretary with whom he occasionally has dalliances, opens the door to tell him he has a visitor. In walks a woman in high heels with a good deal of leg showing. Her face is half hidden by a hat with a veil, but we see her moist lips as she lights a cigarette. “I’m in some trouble,” she begins, “I need some help.” She begins to explain her problem; she has been set up; there are men following her; she doesn’t dare go to the police; she doesn’t know where to turn. Our detective is suspicious, but he agrees to take the case anyway. Shortly after he begins his investigation he is attacked and comes face to face with the men following his client. They inform him that his client has been less than honest with him and they invite him to change sides and help them recover money or jewels, or whatever it is the woman has

taken. The detective prefers to go it alone, now not trusting anyone, although he is still attracted to his client. Through a complex set of maneuvers, he discovers the truth, calls in the police with whom he has a tenuous relationship, and everyone goes to jail. The detective ends up alone and back in his office with his secretary. If the woman survives both the investigation and stays out of jail, it may be implied that they will begin an affair, but the audience knows it will be short-lived.

While some elements will vary, such as the nature of the client's problems, the detective's personal issues and the resolution, we can be reasonably sure of the key plot elements from the opening images and sound due to our understanding of the language of the detective crime genre. When this is challenged, as in some contemporary films (most notably *No Country for Old Men* where the supposed hero dies halfway through the film), the audience is left floundering, uncertain as to how the film will proceed, and from this arises considerable tension.

This tension caused by a play with the genre formula is found in *Mildred Pierce*. I've already mentioned that the film appears to be a melodrama encased in a *film noir*, but I believe it is necessary at this point to say a few words about the debate surrounding *film noir*. Currently critics disagree over whether *film noir* is a genre or a film style. Most often associated with crime dramas, *film noir* is characterized by elements such as low key lighting and unbalanced compositions. This could be represented by the "set-up" scene in *Mildred Pierce* where Wally Fay discovers he has been lured to the beach house by Mildred so that he can take the fall for the murdered Monte Berragon. As Wally frantically tries to find a way out of the house, the shots become more and more

unbalanced, and angular shadows jut out from all directions, creating a jarring visual companion to Wally's growing terror.

The term *film noir* was first coined by French critics in 1946, who, after seeing American films they had missed during the war, noticed a new darkness and pessimism in the films. This was noted particularly in the crime dramas, but also in some melodramas (Schrader 581). This trend towards a darker tone continued after the war, with films becoming more fatalistic, the characters more corrupt, the supposed happy endings ambiguous. *Film noir* most commonly refers to the period between the late thirties and very early fifties, which invites the question of whether it more accurately characterizes a period of film style rather than a genre. It is perhaps unwise to assign a canon to *film noir*, for this creates the risk of attempting to fit a film to noir rather than apply noir elements to a film, but most notable examples of noir include *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) and *Touch of Evil* (Orson Wells, 1958). These films are noted for their use of low key lighting, oblique and vertical lines and moral ambiguity that are the traditional marks of *film noir*. How many elements are needed to create a noir film? Rather than pin this down, it seems easier to consider the mood these elements create within a film, and how these elements reflect the inner conditions of the characters and affect the plot.

In *Mildred Pierce*, noir frames the action, and, thus situated, Mildred's flashbacks, which signal the melodramatic aspects of the film, take on the form of a confession. The audience begins the film believing Mildred to be the murderer. It is logical to hold some doubt as to the accuracy of her memories, as well as to what exactly, she is confessing. Though Monte's murder is the crime in question, Mildred's confession

seems more in answer to the detective's question of why she divorced Bert. Mildred's feminine discourse resembles that often portrayed in melodrama. As such, it is made up of passions and emotional turmoil, subjective modes when contrasted with the cold, logical reality of the masculine noir crime world. This world may be fragmented and psychologically jarring, but is still seen as dealing with right and wrong. It is also a male world, dominated by the police detective who guides Mildred and her story paternalistically.

Opposition between Mildred and patriarchal order is established in the first scenes of the film. The initial action revolves around a false suture which sets up a snare: a shot is heard; we see a man fall to the ground clutching his chest. He calls out the name of a woman: "Mildred." Who shot the man? Who is Mildred? What was the motive for his murder? The exclusion of the reverse shot which would show the murderer and the inclusion of Mildred's name seems to suggest that she is the culprit. This suspicion is reinforced when Mildred subsequently sets up Wally Fay for the murder. She returns to her home, feigning ignorance of Monte's death when the police arrive with the news. As Mildred's story moves back and forth between past and present, we fully expect the admission of guilt in the end. However, this confession is based on duplicity, the exposing of which involves the intrusion of the detective and the Law. The symbolic act of opening the blinds to the rising sun after Veda is led away reinforces the idea that the Truth has been revealed, all duplicity negated and a return to order ensured.

Mildred's mendacity is suggested by the lighting as well. In the segments of the film which take place in the present, and which are characterized by noir elements, there are sharp contrasts with lighting which produce shadows, indicating that all is not being

revealed (Cook 81). The *mise-en-scene* in the police headquarters, the blocking which positions the men around and above Mildred, Mildred's questionable role in the crime, her face half hidden in shadows, all serve to align her with other *femme fatales*. This makes the truth of the subsequent flashbacks which contain Mildred's story, suspect, despite the even lighting and revealing close-ups these sections contain. Nina C. Leibman remarks that *femme fatales* are typically narcissistic and overly concerned with their own image. Since Mildred is placed in this role rather than choosing it for herself, it makes sense that her image as object of desire would be accompanied by filmic techniques as well.

The use of Woman's body as image of sexual desire, as instrument of visual pleasure, is prevalent in our society. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey has shown how use of the female body as image of desire in film has created a co-mingling of looks between the spectator and the male characters which leads the spectator to identify with the male protagonist as a filmic alter-ego. This forces the females in the audience into the uncomfortable position of appropriating a male perspective while stripping her cinematic representative of any actual agency. As Julia Kristeva writes, the female spectator must "look as a man would, for a woman" (Doane 157). While we look directly at the dying Monte, for instance, we first view Mildred from behind and above. Rather than the focal point of the scene, she is part of the overall *mise en scene* that is created by her mink-draped image, the rainy docks, the flickering streetlamps, and the night streets.

Mildred is ostensibly the main character of the film so how do we reconcile the apparent contradiction between Mildred as both the subject of the gaze and the focus of

the narrative? Mildred oscillates between passive feminine domesticity and the active masculine business world. Ultimately her re-integration within the male discourse reconciles her sexual dilemma, ensuring her return to her rightful gendered place.

Consider Mildred as we find her in the police station. Before this we have seen her in the role of *femme fatale*, trying to frame Wally. Based on our previous knowledge of *film noir*, we have already identified with the male figures as the locus of action, while Mildred has so far functioned only as a catalyst. She has been driven through the scenes by the male characters, many of whom have been policemen, or agents of the Law. Mildred as *femme fatale* is morally suspect; therefore her containment within the confines of the Law appears to signal a return to social order.

Part of Mildred's containment includes shots which continually remind the audience of her body. Close ups of Mildred's face and individual body parts reinforce her femininity, a tool also used in the book, where repeated mention of Mildred's exceptional legs remind the reader of her gender despite her success in the business world. While some of these shots occur in the noir sections of the film, the majority occur in the melodrama section which we enter into by way of her voice over.

Take, for instance, a scene mid-way through the film. Mildred has begun work on her restaurant, initiated a divorce from the ineffectual Bert, and appears in control of her future. The scene opens on two legs dangling from a ladder. They are attractive legs, clad in high heels and extending from a skirt pulled up to reveal the knees. Monte Berragon enters the restaurant and says to the legs, "You know, it's moments like this that make me happy that nylons are out for the duration." The camera moves up to show Mildred's upper torso and face. Her hair is disheveled and she is wearing a plaid work

shirt, a cleaning rag draped over her shoulder as she works on a chandelier. “I came by to check up on my investment,” he says. Mildred replies, “Well, how do you like it?” Looking directly at her legs, Monte replies, “Delightful.” As Mildred attempts to show him around the restaurant, Monte keeps his eyes directly on her, interrupting her to ask her out. Mildred and her potential success as a restaurateur have no meaning here. We have been directed by Monte’s gaze back to Mildred’s feminine attributes and this redirection signifies his interest in her not as a business partner, but as a commodity in herself. She may or may not make the restaurant a success, but for Monte, her success as a product is insured.

Again, this can be illustrated in the scene preceding this, where Wally and Monte bargain for Mildred’s use of Monte’s property for her restaurant. Monte comes to Wally and shakes his hand vigorously, then stares at Mildred for the remainder of the conversation. The blocking in this scene places Mildred on the chair while the men stand above her. When Monte speaks directly to Mildred, Wally answers for her, appropriating her voice and establishing himself as the authoritative voice. Mildred’s business proposal is the reason for the meeting, but Mildred herself is being judged and evaluated by the men as well. Monte never looks at her proposal or appears to have much interest in the practical aspects of the pitch. He seems to decide for or against Mildred solely based on her physical aspects. He purports to have no interest in the proposal as put forth by Wally, but when Mildred is the supplicant, he capitulates. Mildred has shown herself to be outside of Wally’s control, placing her sexual availability within Monte’s reach, which, as we saw in the above mentioned scene, is much more the objective here than partnering in a business enterprise.

While Mildred is the subject of the male gaze, this does not mean that she does not have a gaze of her own. Catherine Jurca writes that Mildred has more point-of-view shots than any other character and that these shots are analogous to “typical *film noir* narrator’s point-of-view shots, insofar as it introduces someone with whom Mildred will become sexually involved” (34). Further point-of-view shots focus on bills, checkbook and money which associate “Mildred’s point-of-view with her financial insecurity and ambitions rather than with sexual desire” (Jurca 36). Monte is attractive physically, but more importantly, he is attractive for his ability to help her financially.

We see the business meeting between Monte, Mildred and Wally first through Mildred’s eyes. She watches Monte enter the room in a long shot, while Monte keeps his eyes on Wally. A few minutes later Mildred’s point-of-view shot continues and she sees Monte leering at her. Monte is attracted to her and because the shot is “recorded through Mildred’s eyes, we not only know that he desires her, but we also know that Mildred knows” (Jurca 35). This set of viewing relationships is repeated later when Monte comes to the restaurant and we see Mildred’s dangling legs. Monte is much more concerned with Mildred’s legs than with business, although Mildred’s use as a commodity is not lost on him, hence the term “investment.” Mildred is aware of his gaze though and responds, “Are you sure you’re here to check up on your investment?” The script has Mildred’s awareness of Monte’s gaze as the reason for coming off the ladder (MacDougall 146). She is aware of her position as subject of Monte’s gaze, but she exhibits some control over it, deciding when and how he should look. While Mildred and Monte’s relationship clearly becomes a matter of money and class status later in the film, these scenes allow Mildred to take ownership of the gaze and direct it to serve her best interests.

If Mildred is identified strongly with the body in the film, the use of the voiceover serves to embody her further. The sound of the female voice is an evocative symbol of desire, loss, and pleasure, and has been studied in detail by many critics, including Kaja Silverman and Mary Ann Doane. Mary Ann Doane's essay, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space", examines the relationship between image and sound as it is used in cinema. There is a need, in cinema, for the audience to believe that the sound they hear is issuing from the image that is shown on the screen. Even in instances of voice off and voiceover, an establishing shot generally precedes the departure of the voice from the body, so that the audience has a clear idea to whom the voice belongs when the image no longer matches the sound.

For instance, consider what happens when Mildred brings Wally back to the beach house under the guise of seduction, but actually with the intention of framing him for Monte's murder. We have previous associations of Mildred's image accompanied by the sound of her voice. Mildred leaves the screen, but we hear her in the next room in a voice off. We know this is Mildred, and the implied extended dimensions remind us that there is another space that we are limited from viewing. We are reduced to Wally's field of vision here, and have no more knowledge of what Mildred is up to than he does. Since the voice off erases the physical limits of the screen, it extends Mildred's deception beyond the screen, and enters the auditorium to take in the audience as well. The voice off works in a twofold manner: while the voice off works to include the audience in the misdirection, it also validates the diegesis since it "supports the claim that there is a space in the fictional world which the camera does not register" (Doane 323). It draws us

further into the fictional world by accounting for the lost space (323). The audience becomes at once a spectator and a participant.

Doane comments that the voice off, while not confined to the visible space provided by the camera, is linked to the diegesis through its association with the body. While we do not see the character the voice belongs to, we know the two can be re-united at any time through reframing (324). We hear Mildred from the other room, and then shortly after, we see her hurrying away to her car, her voice and body together.

Doane uses the linking of body and voice to move from a discussion of voice off to a discussion of voiceover, which is also dependant on the body. Voiceovers typically begin by issuing from the person speaking, then moving above the action to introduce a flashback or internal monologue (324), as is seen in *Mildred Pierce*. Voiceovers usually return to the body they issue from at the end of the narrative, or occasionally at key points in the action, to re-orient the audience with the present. Mildred's narrative is interrupted. The crime noir *mise en scene* of the police station inserts itself in the place of the melodrama to remind the audience that we are hearing from a duplicitous woman. We must be wary of how much we trust her voice.

The voice-over functions also as an explanatory device, exposing the interiority of the character and allowing the audience to view private thoughts, events or desires. In this way, Silverman says the "embodied" voiceover "emanates from the center of the story, rather than from some radically other time and place" (53). Mildred's narrative constructs the core of the film. It is central to the current events to re-visit the stages that have brought the characters to their present states.

Mildred appropriates a male voice by taking control of the situation and narrating events as she chooses, much in the way that, as we have seen, she takes control of the gaze and uses it to her advantage. Mildred takes advantage of her role as *film noir* narrator and shapes her account of the action in such a way that the listener follows her story to its natural conclusion and believes that she is Monte's killer. Not only is Mildred speaking from a position of superior knowledge, but she is using that knowledge to twist the truth into the version she wants made known.

Lest Mildred assume too much power in constructing her own story, it is important to remember that her confession is guided by a male detective. In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman discusses a type of film she calls "talking cure" films. "Talking cure" films are identified generally by the interaction between a male of some authority, usually a doctor, and a female of lesser authority, usually a patient. In the films that make up this category, such as *Possessed* (1947), *Lady in the Dark* (1944), *The Spiral Staircase* (1945) and *The Snake Pit* (1947), a woman is anchored to "a fantasmatic interiority through involuntary utterance; she is obliged to speak, and in speaking to construct, her 'own' psychic 'reality' – a reality which, we are told, has been there all the time, albeit repressed and forgotten (Silverman 59)". The woman's illnesses are seen as an exterior manifestation of an interior blockage. By verbalizing the interior, by bringing it into exteriority, the repressed and forgotten is brought to light and with the help of the male who engendered the process to begin with; the female patient can begin to heal.

If we apply this to *Mildred Pierce* we add dimension to the narrative. We have a police detective and a murder suspect in place of the doctor and patient, but there is still the feeling that the detective is attempting to guide Mildred into a psychological "cure."

He is full of apology at their first meeting; they have the killer; she shouldn't have been bothered, sorry to trouble her. But this is subterfuge; Bert is presented as the murderer to spur Mildred's "confession." What follows is much more than a confession of murder. What emerges is Mildred's misplaced desire for Veda, her appropriation of a male role to gain her daughter's affections, and her willingness to transgress social norms to secure Veda's affection. Mildred's "cure" is her re-integration into proper domesticity, with her husband as head of household and her work brought back into the home. Following the tradition of the "talking cure" films, this realization should come through Mildred's verbal account of her past. However, Mildred turns this around somewhat by never fully relinquishing control of her story. She never backs away from maintaining her guilt for Monte's murder. It is only when the detective forces her hand by bringing her face to face with Veda that the "cure" is achieved. Veda is taken away; Mildred is reunited with Bert and they leave the station together, walking through the first rays of dawn.

The male position of superiority is important here, for it is the male role to reign in and guide the female voice to expose her interiority and create a psychic order. This is apparently not something she could do on her own; it relies upon the paternal guiding hand of a more knowledgeable male. Silverman mentions that this causes the male to be positioned firmly at the site of diegetic exteriority and the female confined to a "recessed area of the diegesis, obliging it to speak a particular psychic 'reality' on command, and imparting to it the texture of the female body" (63). The performance of the female voice is orchestrated by male desire, in this case the desire to hear, not the desire to watch, but the effect is that the voice and the body are linked inextricably.

CHAPTER 3

MOTHER'S OWN: MISPLACED DESIRE IN *MILDRED PIERCE*

Previously I remarked on the obsessive love that Mildred has for Veda, and how that love guides Mildred's action. In this chapter I will examine this obsessive love as I take up the rather knotty nature of the relationship between Veda and Mildred, and the fluidity of roles that positions Veda as Mildred's *femme fatale* and as her ultimate object of desire.

"The story Mildred tells is a mother's story" Scheman asserts (78). It is Mildred's strong attachment to her daughter that features as the primary motivating force for the events of the film. Veda is demanding of Mildred, and blames her for the family's lack of money and social standing. She orchestrates an engagement to a man of wealth by way of a false pregnancy, and uses this to extort money. Mildred marries Monte as a vehicle to gain the social standing Veda craves and wins Veda back, but Mildred is never truly able to transcend gender or class, and this leads Veda despise her mother even more than she already has. She insists, however, upon continuing financial dependence on Mildred who herself is unwilling to acknowledge or admit to her own lack of power. By the time the law steps in, the only way out of this destructive relationship is the severing of Mildred's attachment to Veda, enacted both by the arrest of Veda, and by the manipulation of events which make it appear as though Mildred has betrayed her.

Veda is portrayed as vain and materialistic in both the film and novel. Cain's novel points this out by calling attention to Veda's attachment to Bert, especially her habit of inspecting his "tuxedo, his riding breeches, his shiny boots and shoes, which was a daily ritual that not even a trip to her grandfather's was going to interfere with" (Cain 232). These are linked in Veda's young mind as things associated with the upper class, and her attachment to her father and her desire to imitate his manner illustrates her desire to transcend her class status. Her involvement Monte also shows this. Monte is desirable for his name and his status as a member of the upper class, despite his lack of funds. Mildred, on the other hand, will always be associated with the middle class for Veda, despite her mother's financial success. When Mildred asks Veda why she extorted money from the Forrester's, Veda replies, "With enough money I can get away from you... from you and your chickens and your pies and your kitchens and everything that smells of grease" (LaValley 200). Never mind that Mildred has been paying for Veda's lessons and material goods that allow her to enter upper class society. Never mind that Mildred has been paying for Monte's shirts and polo ponies. Money alone will not affect Mildred's class transformation. As Veda tells her mother, "You think now you've made a little money you can get a new hairdo and some expensive clothes and turn yourself into a lady, but you can't, because you'll never be anything but a common frump" (LaValley 201). Her hatred of Mildred is rooted in Mildred's lack of breeding, a lack that Veda sorely resents.

This dedication to material wealth despite the emotional trauma she may cause coupled with Mildred's obsessive need to possess her daughter allows Veda to take on the role of Mildred's *femme fatale* when we enter the melodrama via flashback. Mildred

shifts into the protagonist role with Veda as the woman Mildred desires and cannot have. Although this is different from the role Mildred played in the opening scenes of the film at the wharf. There is the sense that despite the lack of classic noir cinematic techniques, we have not fully shifted genres. Pamela Robertson notes that by positioning Veda as the *femme fatale* the lines between the noir and melodrama discourses blur and:

domestic relations come to be understood in the same way that we understand typical noir romantic relationships. Veda's actions and desires recode Mildred's mother-love and place her in the desiring masculine role. Due to this interplay, Mildred's discourse of motherly love becomes, for the implied narratee, tainted by a subtextual perception of incestuous physical object love (49).

Mildred has an intense need for her daughter, but this is not shared by Veda. However, Veda is aware that she is able to manipulate her mother and this compounds an already volatile situation.

Mildred's obsessive love is evident right away in the film, as our first encounter with the Mildred/Veda relationship has Mildred indulging Veda, trying to please the girl and ferociously defending her, even from Veda's own father. "One of these days I'm going to cut loose and really clip her one," Bert says, complaining of Veda's attitude. MacDougall's script tells us that Mildred replies, "If you ever touch Veda," and that her "vehemence stops Bert cold" (MacDougall 100). Within a page and a half of this exchange, Mildred has kicked Bert out of the house. The overt reason for this is Bert's affair with Mrs. Beiderhoff, but there is a hint that his disapproval of her relationship with her children, especially Veda, is his real transgression in Mildred's eyes. At this

point Mildred seems simply an overindulgent parent who is enabling her children to become spoiled brats. Bert alerts us that something else may be going on, however. He says, “There’s something wrong, Mildred. I – I don’t know what. I’m not smart that way. But I know it isn’t natural” (MacDougall 101). He is cut off here by Mrs. Biederhoff calling, and this is followed by Mildred’s ultimatum and his leaving the home, so we never get to hear the rest of his objection, but it is telling nonetheless.

Cain’s novel expands on Mildred’s “unnatural” behavior towards Veda that bothers Bert. Both in the novel and the film though, the actions which signify Mildred’s object choice occur after Bert has left the home and Kay (Ray in the book) has died. The presence of a second child masked Mildred’s obsession with Veda since she provided for lessons and such for each of them. With the child’s death, Mildred is able to concentrate solely on Veda, and while Kay/Ray’s death is a significant tragedy for Mildred (though hardly marked in the film), she is clearly grateful Veda is the one left alive. The film simply has Mildred crying out “Please don’t ever let anything happen to Veda”, but the book gives this declaration greater meaning. After Ray’s funeral, Mildred asks Veda to sleep with her. As she gets into bed, she takes Veda into her arms and gives way to “torrential shaking sobs, as at last she gave way to this thing she had been fighting off: a guilty, leaping joy that it had been the other child who was taken from her, and not Veda” (Cain 351). She has not been separated from Veda, not by Bert and not by death, and now she is not even separated by the existence of another child. Veda is now hers alone.

Throughout both the novel and the film, it is affection that Mildred most craves from Veda. In much the way that a hurting child will cling to the mother to offer succor, Mildred longs for Veda’s approval and seeks it out often to her own detriment. After

being punished by Veda's withdrawal after failing to buy her the piano she was counting on, Mildred decides to cut Monte loose and use the money she had been giving him to indulge Veda. After an eventful rain soaked night ending things with Monte, Mildred returns home and tells Veda she will buy the piano in the morning. Veda squeals with delight and at "the warm arms around her neck, the sticky kisses that started at her eyes and ended away below her throat, Mildred relaxed, found a moment of happiness" (Cain 419).

If we understand the depth of Mildred's attachment to Veda, it allows us to view several scenes from the film in a different light. By positioning Veda as the object of her mother's obsessive love, Mildred's unease at the friendliness between Monte and Veda becomes jealousy not of Veda, but of *Monte* and his easy access to Veda's affections. She sends Veda home with Wally the night of her grand opening, not so she can spend time with Monte, but so Monte can't spend time with Veda. Furthermore, the final scene where Mildred finds Monte and Veda together at the beach house has Mildred's shock and pain not at the thought of losing Monte, but at the thought of losing Veda.

This is reinforced in the novel both when Mildred discovers the pair and when she learns of Veda's supposed pregnancy. The novel does not contain the murder, as has already been discussed, but it does contain the revelation that Monte and Veda are lovers. Mildred discovers them in Monte's room and Monte begins accusing Mildred of ignoring him, of using him for bait to attract Veda and so on, but Mildred ignores him. She sits stunned, thinking only of "the lovely thing in the bed, and again she was physically sick at what its presence there meant" (Cain 510). She watches Veda move about the room naked, "with the Dairy quaking in front, to the slim hips, to the lovely legs" (Cain 510-

511), and attacks Veda viciously, strangling her and severely damaging her throat. It is not Monte and the loss of their relationship that she muses on prior to the attack, but the physical beauty of Veda and this sexualizes Mildred's love and suggests that it is the loss of Veda that causes the violence. In the film, on the other hand, Mildred's reaction to the discovery of Monte and Veda is curious since we are told throughout the film that Mildred doesn't love Monte anymore, and we know she marries him solely as a means to win Veda back. Losing *Veda* on the other hand, is a significant tragedy, the one Mildred has tried to avoid throughout the film. Faced with this loss, and understanding the feelings beneath the reaction make Mildred's pain and resignation more understandable.

Mildred experiences similar feelings prior to this when she believes Veda to be pregnant. She is tortured by a "sick, nauseating, physical jealousy that she couldn't fight down" (Cain 444). This is a strange reaction for a mother to have. Disappointment perhaps, worries for her daughter's future certainly, but jealousy seems a feeling more typically reserved for lovers, or for a child learning of the arrival of a sibling. The existence of Mildred's jealousy shows that her feelings toward Veda are not simply that of a much abused loving mother and hints at an incestuous subtext.

Mildred's jealousy and anger over the false pregnancy causes her to kick Veda out, but while in the film she becomes a dancer in Wally's cheap bar, in the novel Veda becomes a highly sought after coloratura soprano and it is the knowledge that Mildred is excluded from this exquisite voice that is freely shared with everyone else that causes her marriage to Monte and her attempt to lure Veda back to the home. When Mildred finds Monte and Veda together, she attacks the girl, aiming for her throat. In damaging the voice Veda shares with the world, Mildred also damages the options Veda has for leaving

Mildred and creating her own fortune. While it may be an unconscious move on Mildred's part, the destruction of Veda's voice eliminates yet another obstacle keeping her from the girl and greatly increases the chances that Veda will remain with her.

What follows is the re-establishing of the family. Bert moves back in, they re-marry and the three live together again in the house in Glendale. Mildred's object choice is apparently re-oriented back to her husband. When Veda reveals that her voice is still intact and she is leaving for New York with Monte, Mildred is ready to give her up. "To hell with her," says Bert, and Mildred echoes, "To hell with her!" Presumably the two will now live in relative domestic harmony.

The film also alludes to this ending. The detective forces Mildred's hand by offering Bert as the murderer. She attempts to take the blame herself, but the detective knows the truth. The final meeting between mother and daughter leads Veda to believe her mother has sold her out. This has the effect of separating them and Bert and Mildred walk out together. The film ends with the pair exiting the station with the early dawn washing over them. MacDougall's script leaves it less tidy however. "What will happen to her?" Mildred asks Bert. "She's very young" he replies, "There was no premeditation. Juries think of these things. Maybe a few years. Why?" Mildred answers, "I'm still her mother." The direction reads, "Mildred looks up at him and smiles a little" (MacDougall 236). This leads us to think that the separation has not been affected after all, and that Mildred has not necessarily re-oriented herself. Though this scene is cut from the film, the ending leaves the audience with considerable doubt about the future for Bert and Mildred, and perhaps the inclusion of this scene would help erase some of the tension that is felt by the ending's apparent lack of closure.

The film's tagline, "Mildred Pierce, don't tell anyone what she did," has led many critics, both at the time of the film's release and now, to speculate on what actually she is guilty of. On a surface level, she is guilty of attempting to trade her domestic kitchen for a commercial one, challenging ideas about woman's place even though it could be argued that she never truly leaves the domestic space. Yet, by following the arc of Mildred's obsessive love for her daughter it can be shown that Mildred's actions are shaped much more by her desire to please Veda and thereby keep the girl for herself. This perverts Mildred's mother love and positions Veda as Mildred's *femme fatale*. Only the reorientation of Mildred's object choice from Veda to Bert can quash these quasi-incestuous feelings, and this seems to be Mildred's true journey in the film. Her transgression is not so much the desire to succeed in the male dominated world of business, but her desire for her daughter.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Mildred Pierce debuted over sixty years ago, and though critics were not overly fond of the film at that time, it has survived to see more favorable criticism today. Recent critics focus on some of the themes I have explored here, namely the role of women, the body imagery throughout the film and the interesting mix of genres. There are others who look at the film from an economic angle, investigating what the film is saying about the capitalist system and what an obsession with material wealth does to families. And there are those who focus on Joan Crawford's performance in the film as a re-imagining of Crawford herself, pointing out how Crawford used her Mildred persona to carve out a place for herself in Hollywood that did not rely on her ability to play the romantic lead.

I have chosen to focus on the complex character of Mildred Pierce herself. Mildred begins the film as a *femme fatale*, setting up Wally Fay to take the fall for a murder the viewer believes she committed. She lures him back to the beach house by hinting "there's better stuff to drink at the beach house" (MacDougall 77). Wally responds eagerly, "maybe this is my lucky day." To which Mildred responds, "Maybe" (MacDougall 77). She quickly leaves this role no seducer however, and the audience sees her as a doting mother, willing to do anything to provide for her children. She shifts again though as the true obsessive nature of her love for Veda becomes evident, making

Mildred seem much more like the protagonist in her own *film noir*. The novel by James M. Cain does not include the murder or the murky mix of genres, but it does highlight the unnatural nature of Mildred's love for her daughter in a way the film cannot due to restrictions by the Production Code. The screenplay by Ranald MacDougall includes some scenes that were cut from the film's final product which allude to the fact that despite the apparent separation between mother and daughter, and Mildred's supposed reunion with Bert, she may not be completely severed from Veda psychologically. By taking each of these texts together, we are able to arrive at a more complete picture of Mildred than is possible by simply viewing the film, or reading the book. Mildred is a dominating participant in her story, not solely due to her main character status but also to her intriguing psychological and emotional turmoil that leads her to indulge in her obsessive love for her daughter despite the ruin it causes.

In the time since I began this project it has been announced that HBO is planning a miniseries remake of *Mildred Pierce*. It is not clear whether it will follow the novel or the film, but I imagine Mildred's quasi incestuous love for Veda will still permeate much of the storyline.

Mildred is still Veda's mother after all.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altman, Rick. "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Seventh ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 552-63. Print.
- Blumenberg, Richard M. *Critical Focus: An Introduction to Film*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1975. Print.
- Bordwell, David. "Cognition and Comprehension: Viewing and Forgetting in *Mildred Pierce*." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (1992): 183-98. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Cain, James M. *Mildred Pierce*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2003. Print.
- Cook, Pam. "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*." *Women in Film noir*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: British Film Institute, 1978. 68-82. Print.
- Corber, Richard. "Joan Crawford's Padded Shoulders: Female Masculinity in *Mildred Pierce*." *Camera Obscura* (2006): 2-31. Web. 12 April 2010.
- Corrigan, Timothy, and Patricia White. *The Film Experience: An Introduction*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. Print.
- Crawford, Joan, perf. *Mildred Pierce*. Dir. Micheal Curtiz. 1945. Warner Brothers. CD ROM.
- de Laurentis, Teresa. "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory." *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 140-61. Print.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. Print.
- . "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 86-99. Print.

- . "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Seventh ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 318-39. Print.
- Elise, Dianne. "The Primary Maternal Oedipal Situation and Female Homoerotic Desire." *Psychoanalytical Inquiry* 22.2 (2002): 209-28. Print.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963. Print.
- Harvey, Sylvia. "Woman's Place: the Absent Family of *Film noir*." *Women in Film noir*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: British Film Institute, 1978. 22-34. Print.
- Jurca, Catherine. "Mildred Pierce, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family." *Representations* 77.(2002): 30-51. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Is the Gaze Male?" *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 119-38. Print.
- . "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 466-78. Print.
- La Valley, Albert J. "Introduction." *Mildred Pierce*. Ed. Tino Balio. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980. Print.
- Lloyd, Justine, and Lesley Johnson. "The Three Faces of Eve: The Post-war Housewife, Melodrama, and Home." *Feminist Media Studies* 3.1 (2003). Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Metz, Christian. "Some Points in the Semiotics of Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Seventh ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 65-70. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Karyn Kay. New York: E.P Dutton, 1977. 407-28. Print.
- Place, Janey. "Women in *Film noir*." *Women in Film noir*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: British Film Institute, 1978. 35-54. Print.
- Robertson, Pamela. "Structural Irony in "Mildred Pierce," or How Mildred Lost Her Tongue." *Cinema Journal* 30.1 (1990): 42-54. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Roof, Judith. *All About Thelma and Eve: Sidekicks and Third Wheels*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Print.

- Schatz, Thomas. "Film Genre and the Genre Film." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Seventh ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 564-75. Print.
- Scheman, Naomi. "Missing Mother/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women." *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (1988): 62-89. Web. 23 Mar. 2010.
- Schrader, Paul. "Notes on *Film noir*." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Seventh ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 581-91. Print.
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. Print.
- Sochen, June. "Mildred Pierce and Women in Film." *American Quarterly* 30.1 (1978): 3-20. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Straughn, Victoria. "Hollywood "Takes" on Domestic Subversion: The Role of Women in Cold War America." *OAH Magazine of History* 17.2 (2003): 31-36. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- Walsh, Andrea. *Women's Film and Female Experience 1940-1950*. New York: Praeger Publishing, 1984. Print.
- Williams, Linda. "Feminist Film Theory: Mildred Pierce and the Second World War." *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*. 12-30. London: Verso, 1988. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 22 Mar. 2010.
- "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Seventh ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 602-16. Print.
- " 'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 479-504. Print.

VITA

Parish Conkling was born in Eugene, Oregon on August 26, 1975. She completed a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Maryland in 2007 and entered Texas State University – San Marcos in the spring of 2008. While enrolled in the Literature graduate program, she presented papers at several professional conferences, including the 2009 meeting of The American Studies Association of Texas, the 2009 meeting of The Texas Medieval Association, and the Philosophy Department's 2010 Student Symposium. She also acted as commentator during a session of The New Mexico – West Texas Philosophical Society's 2010 meeting. Her paper, "The Triadic Nature of Women in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction" was published in the 2009 issue of the Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas. Parish served as an Instructional assistant for the Philosophy Department until graduation.

Permanent Address: 3031 Rocky Ridge Loop

Canyon Lake, TX 78133

This thesis was typed by Parish Conkling.