

The year is 1939. Women wave goodbye as their husbands head off to war to defend the rights of the citizens of the United States. To “fight the good fight”. Now, the year is 1945. At this time, over 140,000 women are enrolled in the Women’s Army Corps, 60,000 in the Army Nurses Corps, and 100,000 in the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service. In addition, women take on roles on the homefront. While their husbands are away at war, women all over the nation step forward to take on the role of both caregiver, as well as breadwinner of the family. As more and more women entered the workforce, anxiety crept through the patriarchal society of the United States. Many believed that by women joining the workforce, the strength of men and their position within the family would be threatened. They believed it would lead to child neglect as a result of the mother’s absence from the home. This social setting gave way to the creation of the film *Mildred Pierce*, which follows the life of a divorced California woman raising her children on her own after separating from her husband, Bert. As a result of the pressures to economically support her family as a single mother, as well as the unyielding discontentedness of her selfish daughter Veda, Mildred takes on a job as a waitress. As time goes by, Mildred opens a series of restaurants and becomes a very successful businesswoman, yet her lucrative lifestyle does not last long. The heart racing suspense and tragic tale of *Mildred Pierce* helped the film to earn its fame, however, the film brought to light the absence of feminism during the era of World War Two.

Feminism, as a societal movement, has struggled against the restraints of a male-dominated society for centuries. As quoted in the passage “How World War Two Affected Women: *Mildred Pierce* and Women in Film”, “Strength is an unwomanly trait, always to be punished”. As a character, Mildred represented a strong, successful, and independent business

woman working in a male-dominated society. Yet, her primary responsibility was that of being a mother. Therefore, the film served as a warning: strong women threatened men. The idea was to advocate for female submissiveness - warning women that they won't find a husband unless they submit and know their place within society. The era of World War Two seemed to be the perfect time for women to break out of this predetermined niche. While women took major steps toward expanding their influence beyond that of the kitchen, the dream seemed too good to be true. As soon as the war came to a close, and husbands began to return from war, American society proclaimed that the heroes of the nation needed jobs in order to provide for their families and assimilate back into American life. At that point, it seemed as if Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were rolling in their graves.

Due to Michael Curtiz's use of film-noir, the film was full of symbolism through the use of pessimism, as well as an emphasis on the concept of hopelessness, specifically the struggles that Mildred faced throughout the film. Curtiz also heavily alluded to societal norms through his choice of characters. As acclaimed by Dennis Lim, a *New York Times* film critic, "Sensitive to the effects of the Great Depression on family and gender dynamics, the director depicts Mildred's relationships primarily as transactions played out through money, through finance, and through class". Mildred Pierce, as stated earlier, is characterized by her success as a businesswoman, yet her failure as that of a mother. Veda, whose name refers to "empty life", clearly stands as the antagonist of the film. Despite her mother's extensive efforts to support her children, as well as her efforts to keep up with Veda's selfish desires for all material things, Veda was still consumed by her bourgeois desires. The audience can't help but to hate Veda as she consistently gives her mother grief for her shortcomings as a single mother. Mildred's youngest

daughter, Kay, received little attention in the film. The audience sees Kay as a happy-go-lucky tomboy, who prefers mud-covered overalls over floral dresses, unlike Veda. Unfortunately, Kay dies as a result of pneumonia. Conveniently, the little girl that doesn't fit within society's beauty standards never has the ability to grow old. In reference to societal influence, Letty, the family's servant, played a subservient role in that she only spoke in agreement to her orders. A final woman that spoke volumes through her sharp-tongued and outspoken personality was that of Ida. At one point in the film, Ida and Mildred have a conversation about Ida's love life. She tells Mildred that men often speak to her man-to-man, and are often sent running if their relationship could potentially grow beyond platonic. As a result, Ida comes to symbolize the more masculine type; Ida serves as a warning to women that if one is to behave in such a way as Ida, they will find it difficult to find a husband. As demonstrated above, seemingly all of the characters of *Mildred Pierce* serve a deeper meaning than face value.

One of the main points of contention within the film is that of Mildred's failure as a mother. As mentioned before, while Mildred was a successful and entrepreneurial woman, she did not leave much of an impact in terms of her significance as a mother. As a result, Mildred was wholeheartedly blamed for the behavior of her children, specifically Veda's. Characterized by her spoiling of Veda and reluctance to reprimand Veda for her behavior, Mildred is at fault for the selfish and egocentric person that Veda had become. As stated by Alessandra Stanley, a *New York Times* film critic, "The tale gives fresh expression to an age-old primal fear: a mother's dread of being supplanted or destroyed by a daughter". In addition, while Kay was dying at Bert's mistress's home, Mildred was engaged in a tryst with her eventual second husband, Monte Beragon. This stands out because Mildred was ignoring her motherly duties. By

this, it is implied that Mildred was selfish in that she was not there for Kay when she needed her mother most. Mildred's guilt is further reinforced when Kay's dying words were "Mommy". As a mother, Mildred was forced to endure the worst kind of pain: one daughter died, and the other had been arrested for the murder of her second husband. This pain is that of a defeated mother. As claimed in the reading, "Defeat became her fate: ambitious women beware".

The film *Mildred Pierce* follows the rise and fall of a California divorcee doing her best to provide for her children. Mildred was able to rise from the ashes of her separation from her husband, and build an affluent restaurant from the ground up. While Mildred was able to transform from rags to riches through her successful empire, all came crumbling down when her business was sold out from underneath her and her only surviving daughter murdered her husband. Through including the societal struggles of the time, as well as embedding symbolism through his characters, Curtiz was able to develop a movie with an enthralling plot. Ultimately, mothers found themselves wiping the stray tears from their cheeks at the end of the movie. As a result of Mildred's unfortunate hand she was dealt, as well as her self-sacrificial tendencies, women were not disgusted by the film, nor did they revolt as a result of its portrayal of women. At this point in time, women did not question the ways of society, they simply obeyed; they must stay within the domestic sphere. Yet, aside from its depiction of women, *Mildred Pierce* was the first film in which Joan Crawford did not simply overcome her tribulations with poverty as a result of her beauty. Instead, the film was characterized by a woman's struggle to cope with her failures, as well as her ability to cling to a small glimmer of hope, thus characterizing *Mildred Pierce* as one of the greatest films of its time.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/arts/television/mildred-pierce-with-kate-winslet-in-on-hbo-review.html>

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