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**GOLD-DIGGERS IN THE LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE
OF THE 1920'S AND 1930'S**

By

Clarence Ray Slavens

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

GOLD-DIGGERS IN THE LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE OF THE 1920'S AND 1930'S

By

Clarence Ray Slavens

This study traces the development of the gold-digging woman of literature and popular culture from her early roots in the 1890's when she was more often than not the victim and example in a morality tale. Next, it follows her through the 1920's when she expressed her desire for greater access to the economic growth of the decade, usually in baby-talk. After exploring the tenuous relationship of the gold-digger and her culture in the 1920's, it continues into the early 1930's, when the gold-digger came of age and demanded that she was a force to be reckoned with; then, it examines how the gold-digger calls gender and class inequities into question and thereby comes to be regarded as an increasing threat to American systems of economics and morality. As a result, efforts to contain her were put into place by the mid thirties in the form of legal restrictions and censorship. Finally, this study traces the gold-digger's continuing fall from grace through the 1940's and 1950's. Drawing on feminist theories, class studies, and popular culture theory, this study examines the gold-digger as an important force that grows out of women's dissatisfaction with their limited opportunities for movement in a wealthy nation.

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Dedicated to Franny and Penny.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Toward a Definition of the Gold-Digger	3
Popular Culture, Feminism, and Class Studies: The Gold-Digger in Theory	9
CHAPTER 1	
THE EMERGENCE OF THE GOLD-DIGGER, 1890-1919.....	20
The Gold-Digger and the Gibson Girl	22
The Gold-Digger and the Urban Frontier	28
<i>Sister Carrie</i> and the Gold-Digging Chorus Girl.....	33
Avery Hopwood's Popularization and Justification of the Gold-Digging Chorus Girl.....	43
CHAPTER 2	
THE GOLD-DIGGER WHO ISN'T A GOLD-DIGGER AND THE CAUTIONARY TALE—THE 1920'S.....	55
Negotiating the System Through Performance.....	56
The Gold-Digger's Rebellion and Changes in the American Family.....	59
Rural or Urban? The Gold-Digger on the Frontier	65
Blurring the Boundaries of an Urban Frontier.....	73
Gold-Diggers and Working Women.....	79
<i>Gentlemen Prefer Blondes</i> and Standards of Taste.....	83
<i>That Certain Thing</i> (1928): Democratic Attitudes Toward the Gold-Digger.....	93
The Failed Gold-Digger in the Works of Dorothy Parker, Jean Rhys, and Nella Larsen.....	96
CHAPTER 3	
THE HEYDAY AND DECLINE OF THE GOLD-DIGGER—THE 1930'S	105
Gold-Diggers and Poor, Rich Buffoons.....	107
Hope, Opportunity, and Economic Failure	112
The Gold-Digger as a Tough Broad.....	116
Social Justification: Why the Gold-Digger Digs Gold	120
Getting Away With It: Success and the Gold-Digger.....	125
Depression-Era Women and <i>The Gold-Diggers of 1933</i>	131
Putting the Gold-Digger Back in Her Place: the Second Half of the 1930's.....	138
Condemning the Women: Clare Boothe and Society Wives	147
CHAPTER 4	
CRIMINALS AND SEXUAL BABIES:	
THE GOLD-DIGGER IN THE 1940'S AND 1950'S	156
Women in the Workforce and Hollywood's Reaction.....	159
The Anti-Gold-Diggers of 1940.....	163
The Femme Fatale Gold-Digger	168
<i>The Palm Beach Story</i> and <i>The Lady Eve</i> : Femmes Fatales Gold-Diggers or Good Girls?.....	175

Post-War Gold-Diggers: Nostalgia and Trash	180
CONCLUSION.....	197
BIBLIOGRAPHY	205

INTRODUCTION

Lisa Johnson begins her 1995 self-help book, *How to Snare a Millionaire*, by asking the question, “Why date a millionaire?” and then speculating on possible responses she might get from modern women: “Some women would laugh and find the answer to this question ridiculously obvious. Others would scorn such a mercenary pursuit. To the latter, I say, ‘don’t knock it until you try it, Toots’” (3). Johnson’s advice on marrying a millionaire is largely a matter of self-improvement in a more general way, as she says, “this book can also help you become a more interesting, comfortable, and confident person” (7) and “you’ll learn to incorporate quality into your very being” (8). Her advice can be condensed into one simple piece of wisdom: “subtle and refined is better than loud and brash” (27). Similar advice can be found in Ruth Leslee Greene’s 1996 book *How to Marry Money: The Simple Path to Love & Glory* as she says a woman who is interested in marrying a wealthy gentleman should “sustain a dignified, as well as delectable, carriage” and “familiarize [her]self with the traditional forms of genteel behavior” (35). In Ginie Sayles’ 1999 *How to Meet the Rich: For Business, Friendship, or Romance*, the advice is a bit more precise, but it still emphasizes dignified simplicity: “One of the biggest differences between the upper class and other classes when it comes to social wear is that upper classes are comfortable in dressier clothes and do not rely on denim, which is a staple of the lower classes” (197). She continues later, “Being dressed up requires certain behavior, of course, such as not walking with big steps and arms swinging wildly, not sprawling in your chair or exhibiting behavior that looks coarse” (232).

The advice found in the pages of these books and others like them seems based on

common sense, although Johnson, in her tongue-in-cheek list of reasons to avoid dating a millionaire, misses some of the common reasons one might find by studying the multitude of texts in which gold-diggers appear throughout the twentieth-century: being trapped in unhappy marriages, finding one's economic security tied to one's all too fleeting beauty, being treated like a possession, or being a dependent and as such at the mercy of a wealthy benefactor. While much of the advice provided by these texts seems common-sensical, it also clearly indicates a sense that there are clear markers that define the boundaries of taste and sophistication and implies that taste and sophistication are useful ways to distinguish between the higher and lower levels of social and economic class. This image of a polished, sophisticated, and intelligent gold-digging woman who is classy and not trashy, well-spoken but not pretentious, seems to go against most of the manifestations of the gold-digger as she has been represented in film, fiction, and song throughout the twentieth-century. Often trashy and given to excessive, gaudy dress, often brash and outspoken at the most inappropriate times, the gold-digger of the twentieth-century imagination has been many things, but seldom has she been what these how-to books suggest she should be. Perhaps that is because the women represented in much of the popular culture of the twentieth-century did not have the benefit of hindsight as Johnson, Greene, and Sayles do. Often flashy and crude, the gold-digger of twentieth-century lore has been a disruptive force in varying degrees.

My interest in the gold-digger as a character type grows out of a life-long fascination with the Hollywood musicals in which she flourished. As a thoroughly twentieth-century phenomenon, the gold-digger grew up with and in the movies, finding her most fertile period of growth in the early years of the Great Depression before the Production Codes stripped her of much of her power. My goal in this study has been to

trace the development of this type, along with this new use of the term gold-digger, from her early roots in the Gay Nineties and to discover how she functioned as part of America's cultural development throughout the past century.

While characters like the gold-digger begin the twentieth-century as negative characters, miserable young women who lead tragic lives, by the twenties and thirties, the gold-digger becomes much more aware of her position in a culture that leaves little room for a women to advance herself socially and economically, save for her attachments to men with the means by which she can raise herself. As she becomes more and more aware of her situation and sees gold-digging as a means of social mobility, she also becomes increasingly viewed as a threat that must be contained. By the mid-thirties she becomes a devalued character, symbolizing a threat to a system in which forces opposed to gold-diggers attempt to maintain rigid boundaries between men's roles and women's roles and boundaries between social classes. Film censors and lawmakers successfully return the gold-digger by the late thirties to a criminal underworld where, to a large degree, she remains for the rest of the century, recontained yes, but still holding onto her ability to shock and disrupt, still working her stiletto heel into the cracks in the pavement upon which restrictive gender and class distinctions were based.

Toward a Definition of the Gold-Digger

The Oxford English Dictionary provides two definitions of the term gold-digger, the first a noun originating by the 1830's to describe gold miners, the second a slang term originating in the United States by the 1920's, a noun that describes "A girl or woman

who attaches herself to a man merely for gain” (OED). The verb gold-dig, also of United States origin, appearing sometime in the 1920's, is “To behave as a gold-digger . . . towards (a man); to extract money from” (OED). The earliest definition of the 1920's slang usage of the gold-digger that I have located is found in Avery Hopwood's 1919 play, *The Gold Diggers*. Blake, an attorney to the wealthy and a member of the upper classes himself, explains to his friend and client Stephen (and to the play's audience), that “A gold digger is a woman, generally young, who extracts money and other valuables from the gentlemen of her acquaintance, usually without making them any adequate return” (56). He goes on to explain that all women are gold-diggers: “They start in as daughters and gold-dig their fathers—and then they develope (sic) a sort of side-line and begin gold-digging their beaux—oh, very nicely and sweetly. . . . Then they marry—and that's when the real gold-digging begins!” (56).

Some important considerations come from these definitions. First, the term is marked as feminine, and although clearly there are men whose behavior seems similar to the behavior of gold-digging women, this genderization of the term is important to note. The fact that gold-digging is seen as feminine territory (and men who gold-dig are seen as feminized—“male gold-diggers”) opens up the opportunity to discuss the gold-digger as an important site in which women were able to negotiate their limited positions in a culture offering little opportunity for women to raise their social and economic status.

Second, although in many texts the gold-digger may indeed put out (or render sexual services in exchange for economic and social benefits), one trend in the criticism of the gold-digger is to suggest that she is a tease. She is in control, and she does not necessarily give the sexual satisfaction that seems to be promised by her actions. Other critics and texts assume that the gold-digger really does give the satisfaction she promises

which implies that the gold-digger is little more than a high class prostitute. She attempts to negotiate the cultural standards prohibiting prostitution by raising her social and economic status through means which appear to legitimize certain types of prostitution—i.e. marrying for money or accepting gifts which are not legally seen as direct payment for sexual service. Generally, these distinctions between the gold-digger as virgin and the gold-digger as whore serve the cultural needs of their time. Often, the distinctions are ambiguous at best, left up to the interpretation of the individual consumer of the cultural artifact in which the gold-digger exists. Sometimes the gold-digger's placement on the virgin/whore spectrum is clouded because we are not sure if we can trust the narrative voice telling the story.

In light of the fact that many gold-digging characters—such as Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Miss Janet Lee in *Wild Women*, and Peggy Hopkins Joyce in *Men, Marriage and Me*—tell their own stories through diaries and letters, what is told by the gold-digger may seem suspect, and one may begin to speculate not only about the truth of what is said but also about what might not be said in those accounts. In other words, if a gold-digger is sexually satisfying her wealthy patrons, but it is important for her not to let this be known publicly to protect her image and status, then she might be inclined to leave those details out of her writing. This is especially true of the heroine of Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. While Katharina Von Ankum claims that Lorelei Lee “preserves her virginity until she marries the wealthy Henry Spoffard . . .” (164), T.E. Blom notes that “Lorelei's record of her adventures and thoughts is not the product of a freely associating stream of consciousness, but a document carefully couched in deceptive language” (44). Blom assumes that Lorelei does provide sexual gratification for her male companions, but that in order to get away with it, without being

labeled a prostitute, she must maintain her image of naivete: “the appearance of moral and intellectual stupidity in the beautiful woman clothes her desirable body in a facsimile of innocence, making it possible for the man to accept her willingness to grant sexual favors as evidence not of immorality, but of naive unawareness of the moral norm” (43). Lorelei must pretend to be innocent (stupid even) to get away with trading her body for economic and social gain. Considering the number of texts in which gold-diggers work to protect their virginity and/or reputation, it becomes clear that gold-diggers are aware of the value placed on their bodies as commodities and that virginal bodies have a higher value on the sexual-economic market. The image of virginity, regardless of the reality or unreality of that image, is priceless to the gold-digger.

In addition to preserving her image of virginity for economic gain, the gold-digger must also do so in order to gain and keep social acceptability. It is important to note that the gold-digger often wants more than economic wealth. She also wants to be part of a cultural and social elite. She wants to have all that comes with being a refined lady without necessarily having to live up to the standards and under the taboos that come with being part of a cultural elite.

Another common irony in twentieth-century gold-digger lore is that she is often someone who wants to be taken care of, even babied, yet she wants her autonomy as well. She does not want to work in a dead end job in an office, a flower store, a hotel, a department store, or a factory. She does not want to take care of a man, his home, his children—often she doesn’t even want to have children, and she demands a maid to take care of the house. Sometimes she refuses to give sexual satisfaction to her provider and demands the right to go out with other men and have a good time. She does not want to be controlled. She demands her status as a free agent in return for the appearance of

being possessed, like a pretty, expensive, desirable object, by her benefactor. As a result of this arrangement, her goals are often at odds with the goals of the man who keeps her. This fact causes strife between the two, and as a result, the female gold-digger sees her benefactor as the enemy. He is someone with whom she can never be honest because men simply cannot be trusted. They only want to control the women they purchase. The gold-digger must trick him into giving her what she wants: economic support, social status, and her freedom to do as she pleases.

As a woman who seeks social and economic advance through men but who works hard to maintain her autonomy, the gold-digger is a boundary breaker, one who disregards the boundaries of gender and class that confine her. In fact, the gold-digger may come from any social class. She may have wealthy parents, as does Gloria in John O'Hara's *Butterfield 8* or the Flapper in Elinor Glyn's *The Flirt and the Flapper*. She may have formerly wealthy, dispossessed parents, as does Jerry Healy in the film *Night After Night* (Archie Mayo, Paramount, 1932). She may have middle class parents, as does Gloria in Beatrice Burton's novel *The Flapper Wife: The Story of a Jazz Bride*. She may have poor parents, as does Peggy in *Men, Marriage and Me* or Mazie in John Held, Jr.'s *Crosstown: The Story of a Jazz Age Golddigger*. Or she may come from a single parent home, as does Ann in the film *Our Dancing Daughters* (Harry Beaumont, MGM, 1928). She might even be an orphan, as is Madge in John Stone's *The Play Girl: A Thrilling Romance of a Madcap Gold Digger*. Whatever her upbringing, she has limited opportunity to control her own life and must work within the confines of early twentieth-century American life to make what gains she can. Similarly, a gold-digger may dig within any class in which she sees the opportunity for a rise in economic and social status; hence, while some gold-diggers dig for extremes of luxury among the very

wealthy, others have somewhat more humble desires and only dig among the middle class doctors and attorneys who may, after all, be more accessible. While Gloria, in *The Flapper Wife: The Story of a Jazz Bride*, learns to accept and love her modest position as a young attorney's wife, in *The Gold Diggers of 1935* (Busby Berkeley, Warner Brothers, 1935), one character dumps her medical student fiancé in order to marry a wealthy playboy whom she does not love. In a number of texts, such as Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Peggy Hopkins Joyce's *Men, Marriage and Me*, and Clare Boothe's *The Women*, titled Europeans court and sometimes marry wealthy women of humble origins in order to raise their economic status. Gold-digging takes place on a variety of levels.

In addition, the gold-digger may employ many strategies for advancement. She may marry for money or attempt to marry for money. Or she may be kept by a wealthier individual or individuals. She might blackmail a wealthier person or entrap him for breach of promise. Another manifestation of the gold-digger is the individual who has economic capital but works to gain access to various forms of cultural capital by associating herself with members of some cultural elite and by attempting to become a lady. Yet another may have access to cultural capital but not the economic capital to match her standards of taste and class and seeks to gain economic capital by associating herself with wealthy individuals, often those who lack the social and cultural discrimination to support the status their economic position implies. This final type is best described by Thorstein Veblen: "The decayed gentleman and the lady who has seen better days . . ." who even though "abjectly poor and living a precarious life of want and discomfort . . . are morally unable to stoop to gainful pursuits" (42). These members of a crumbled elite litter gold-digger lore, especially when the gold-digger makes a trip to Europe and meets the dispossessed titled aristocracy there.

Finally, the gold-digger is an urban creature, although on occasion she may appear in rural settings. She may have come from a rural setting and migrated to an urban one, or in her attempts to rise, she may chase a man and his wealth to the country (usually with unsatisfactory results). However, the gold-digger is clearly a child of the twentieth-century's urban growth. As Lynn Dumenil discusses in *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*, as urban centers in the United States grew rapidly due to immigration and rural-to-urban migration, and as the majority population shifted from rural to urban, the city came to symbolize opportunity for both men and women. In addition, due to urban anonymity and often more relaxed moral standards, the city seemed to be a place in which a gold-digger might more easily ply her trade without facing the kind of moral censure one might expect to find in a small town or in the country. Very often, the gold-digger is, indeed, a migrant from a small town who sees her life in that past place as morally restrictive and lacking in economic and social opportunity. To climb to greater heights, the gold-digger must go to the city.

Always more complex than she initially might seem, the gold-digger is a woman who sees the limitations she faces because of her sex and class and who works to break through the boundaries that contain her and find her place among those she regards as more fortunate. She does so by trying to forge sexual and economic connections between herself and the men with whom she comes in contact.

Popular Culture, Feminism, and Class Studies: The Gold-Digger in Theory

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are drawn from contemporary popular

culture studies, feminist studies, and class studies. In discussing filmmakers of the Great Depression, Andrew Bergman claims that these producers of cultural artifacts may not have “intuited the yearnings of a national unconscious, but rather . . . they felt the same tensions everyone else did and wanted to represent them in various ways” (Bergman xiv). In this study I will discuss many texts produced by individuals and groups of individuals, and my goal is to identify and explain patterns in the manifestation of the gold-digger within these texts. In doing so, inasmuch as Bergman’s claim is valid, I hope to identify possible pressures felt within the culture represented by producers of culture, who were part of their greater culture during a precise historical moment. Popular culture theory tells us that “to understand the meaning(s) of a cultural text or practice, we must analyse it in its social and historical conditions of production and consumption” (Storey 3). Drawing on the works of Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, John Storey tells us that the various meanings of any cultural artifact depend on many factors, including the sometimes conflicting intentions of those various individuals involved in production of the artifact as well as the various interpretations produced by those various groups and individuals as they consume the artifact at various points along a historical continuum (1-6). Cultural artifacts, then, may reflect various attitudes towards gold-diggers, and these same artifacts may then be used to guide future attitudes toward future gold-diggers as well as the production of new gold-digger artifacts that will again, in turn, be reformulated in the process of consumption.

This study employs a historic approach to the cultural artifacts it analyzes, attempting not to find a definitive meaning that all producers intentionally sought to create or that all consumers created in using the artifacts. Instead, this study attempts to trace, over a period of several decades, trends in the development of the gold-digger, her

rise in popularity, and finally, the attempts to contain and displace her from the social consciousness, to use her as an example of what young women should not aspire to. These attempts at containment may not be only from individuals who have access to economic or cultural capital. As suggested by critics ranging from Karl Marx to Herbert Marcuse, individuals in the middle and lower classes may adopt expectations, tastes, and values that do not seem to be in their own best interests or in the interests of promoting a more equitably distributed system of wealth¹. Women, then, may also participate in confining and disempowering gold-diggers, despite the fact that in doing so, they may be maintaining an economic system that works against them. This work, however, focuses less on consumption than on production and the forces that helped shape what was produced. Examining meanings created in use of these texts would require much greater access to the original consumers of gold-digger texts and for the most part falls outside the scope of this study (although such research could provide fascinating insights into the ways in which often negative stereotypes of gold-diggers may have been co-opted and used by women who sought to improve their economic and social circumstances, most notably early female readers of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* who co-opted the text as a how-to guide (Pettit 51)).

At the basis of this study is the idea that inequities of gender and class are expressed in the cultural texts in which gold-diggers appear. As Lori Landay says,

In mass consumer culture, fictional characters and celebrity personas are created by individuals and groups who reflect, critique, endorse, recast, and reject their personal experiences of the society they live in. The resulting constructs are fantasy figures who do what we cannot or dare not, and they call our attention to where we draw the lines that separate what is appropriate and shocking, possible and impossible. And imagining the impossible, finding an escape from what

¹ For a detailed discussion of how consumers might work against their own best interests, see "Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: An Introduction" and "The Consumption of Everyday Life" in John Storey, *Cultural Studies & the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*. Athens, Georgia: U. of Georgia P., 1996. 1-8, 113-136.

seems inescapable, creating room where others find only restriction: this is what the female tricksters discussed here do, a powerful act of imagination that can produce real-life possibilities. (xi)

The gold-digger artifacts discussed in my study, like the tricksters in Landay's book, not only offer imaginary visions of what might be; they also potentially open up new opportunities. However, in opening up opportunities that might not have existed before, new opportunities for criticism and containment also arise. This is crucial to the historical story of the gold-digger, whose primary tools of self-advancement were rendered immoral by the film industry and illegal by the state of California by the late 1930's. Yet the gold-digger, by the end of the twentieth-century, had helped women's movements toward greater gender equity, in part by bringing to the forefront of cultural consciousnesses the very inequities that led women to use men for social and economic advancement. Landay identifies how woman's success has been linked to her ability to achieve lucrative marriage: "Mainstream American culture has portrayed women's access to the good life as dependent on their ability to attract, lure, marry, and keep a husband who will provide them with the economic means with which to participate in mass consumer society and satisfy their desires" (7). The gold-digger helped to emphasize how inequities in marriage, the home, and the workplace limited women's power to be mobile in a culture in which fantasies of easy social mobility were a core part of commonly held ideologies. In acting out various means by which the gold-digger attempted to work the system to her advantage, she also pointed out the various problems created by her own methods of self-advancement, namely that no matter how much she gained from men, she was still dependent on men. As implied by Linda Mizejewski's *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema*, the gold-digger, like the Ziegfeld chorus-girl, "was both marginalized, as lower-class and associated with prostitution, and

centralized, as a popular, nonthreatening challenge to traditional ideas about female modesty and the place of women outside the home” (67-8). While the gold-digger was a potential “symbol of liberation and independence,” she was also a woman, like a prostitute, who depended on men’s attraction to and use of her body for their pleasure (68). Or as with the camp icons discussed by Pamela Robertson, what is positive in one generation’s gold-diggers “becomes... available to be used against her...” in the next (142).

This study also depends heavily on class theories expressed by scholars ranging from Thorstein Veblen to Pierre Bourdieu and beyond. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu claims that the hierarchy of the arts corresponds to the hierarchy of consumption. According to Bourdieu, taste is a marker of class, and to understand the distinction between high and popular art, one must be educated in the meanings of what these arts signify based on artistic tradition and standards and not only in how we react emotionally. For instance, he distinguishes “three zones of taste which roughly correspond to educational levels and social classes” and claims that the highest of these levels, “*Legitimate taste*...increases with educational level and is highest in those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital” (16). Decoding art depends on one's knowledge of the code. In a cultural system with unequal distribution of wealth (any cultural system, that is), those who have the code to understanding art and distinctions between high art and other forms of cultural expression tend to be those who grow up with high art and are trained from a very young age into an understanding of the code, often without knowing they have been educated into that system or recognizing the advantages that come with their class level and the education that comes with it. As Bourdieu says, “Academic capital is in fact the

guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school” (23). Hence, the educated and the wealthy who have the means to expose their children to the so-called higher arts will often have a noticeable advantage over the working classes due to their exposure to the means of deciphering the cultural codes that distinguish between good taste (high art) and bad (popular culture).

Assumptions about what constitutes good and bad taste are markers that separate classes. Bourdieu's importance to the study of the gold-digger as a character type is important in that the gold-digger's attempt to gain economic capital is often accompanied by an attempt to gain cultural capital as well. In order for a person to raise her social and economic position by the means espoused by gold-diggers, one must have access to the wealthy and the elite. If one does not have the economic means to gain this access, it may be useful to know how to appear as if she has it.

Appearance is crucial to the gold-digger, appearing to have what she cannot afford, appearing to understand what constitutes class and taste in a social circle higher than her own, appearing to be what she assumes men want (i.e. stupid and childish) while having the smarts to outwit those very men. The gold-digger, then, must be an astute student of appearances and must be willing and able to imitate those appearances with limited economic means. She must understand how the elite separate themselves from individuals from lower economic circles and justify doing so. Just as the Ziegfeld girls described by Mizejewski “performed race as class and class as sexuality...” defining the ideal American girl of the time, the gold-digger performed within defined class, sexuality, and gender patterns in order to better her economic and social standing with varying degrees of success (10). As Landay states, drawing on Judith Butler,

The emotional, sexual, and social machinations of the dating and marriage market, the self-objectification that presents an appealing façade: these are

achieved by employing the trickster tactics of deception, impersonation, disguise, duplicity, and subversion. Because the social practice of femininity is a form of trickery, tricksters in cultural texts resonate with and expose a fundamental tenet of the social relations of the sexes in American culture: the only way for a woman to survive... is to use the covert power of female trickery. (11-12)

Through the use of performance and trickery, gold-digging women may, at least in some film and fiction, gain access to elite social circles. Regardless of the level of success of the gold-digging individual, performance is at the heart of the gold-digger. Upon gaining access to elite circles, however, the gold-digger may influence the tastes and attitudes of the elite and potentially bring about changes that will benefit her and others from lower social and economic positions, at least in the fictional world of musical comedies in the early 30's.

Her exposure of class inequities as well as inequities of gender poses a potential threat, since in exposing the inequity, she may also ask us to question the inequity, potentially causing the distinctions between men and women, between the economic and social elite and the common woman (or man) to face greater scrutiny at least, potentially to cause cracks in the standards by which these precarious distinctions are upheld. Again, Bourdieu's study of taste is crucial to this examination of how gold-diggers helped to shatter assumptions about good and bad taste, especially in the early years of the Depression. Bourdieu, drawing on Ortega y Gasset, identifies a "pure gaze" and a "naïve gaze" which identify themselves each in opposition to the other (32). The "pure gaze" ... "sets the aesthete apart from the common herd..." and "implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world..." (31). The "naïve gaze" is associated with "conspicuous consumption" and crudity; it is the territory of the individual without sufficient cultural, academic, aesthetic, and, presumably, economic capital to develop a purer gaze, one that sets the individual outside the "common herd" and the realm of the "ordinary" (31). In

examining the gold-digger's ability to disrupt the boundaries between those who have the "pure gaze" and the "naïve gaze," one need only look at the attempts made by fictional gold-diggers to develop a purer gaze, the failure of the gold-digger in some cases to do so (while still succeeding in getting her man despite her vulgarity), and the refusal of the gold-digger to accept the standards by which she might be defined, in Bourdieu's terms, as "naïve." In each situation, the gold-digger disrupts the notion that only those trained to decode the most complex aesthetic artifacts will be able to do so. First, the gold-digger may potentially disrupt Bourdieu's distinctions by suggesting that by hard work, she might actually learn to improve the purity of her gaze, despite limited training. Like the "[a]dult immigrants" in Loren Baritz's *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class*, who "were clearly eager to become American, earn money, and buy new clothes" (39), the gold-digger might acculturate herself to increasingly fulfill her aspirations toward the tastes and values of a higher social class. Second, the gold-digger might disrupt rigid social boundaries by suggesting that those standards by which distinctions between the pure and the naïve are made are not so important after all, at least not when a gaudily dressed, garish, but buxom broad walks into the room. The gold-digger, in many of her manifestations, most notably Mae West, Marilyn Monroe, and Anita Loos' fictional Lorelei Lee, was disruptive in her very desirability that crossed class and taste boundaries. Third, the gold-digger was potentially disruptive, especially in the early thirties, in her ability to suggest that the standards imposed upon culture by those trained in the so-called pure gaze are not so pure or superior after all, that perhaps those who possess the greatest cultural capital are as blind to the merits of naïve art as those from the working classes are to the merits of the pure art held in such high esteem by those in the elite social and economic classes. In this case, the gold-digger's working

class hostility toward the upper classes supports John Fiske's claim that "Popular culture is the culture of the subordinated and disempowered and thus always bears within it the signs of power relations" (4). The gold-digger's exposure of the wealthy sugar daddy as a buffoon, a criminal, or an otherwise reprehensible being, as often was the case in the first half of the thirties, suggests that in one sense the gold-digger text of the early thirties was, indeed, a bottom up cultural artifact, one that espoused working class beliefs and values and elevated them to a position higher than those of the higher classes. In other words, Bourdieu's pure and naïve gazes were turned topsy-turvy by the working class women in films of the early thirties, and the rich became the foolishly under-informed dupes who needed to be trained to understand the purer (common sensical, socially responsible) gaze of the poor, as the democratic ideals feared by many mass culture theorists (Ortega, for instance) seemed to be realized. However, by the late thirties and forties, as the gold-digger was pushed into Hollywood's criminal underworld, this reversal was once again reversed.

Due to limitations of time and space, I have focused almost entirely on women as gold-diggers. One should not presume, however, that men cannot gold-dig. Representations of male gold-diggers are many in twentieth-century culture. However, males are seldom referred to as gold-diggers. The gigolo, however, is a common figure in twentieth-century film and fiction. Despite the presence of these male gold-diggers or gigolos, however, often alongside their female counterparts, a separate study of their presence is needed in order to provide any thorough understanding of that type and the differences faced by male gold-diggers based on gender. Since the term gold-digger is a feminine gendered term, and since effeminized gigolos are often referred to as "male

gold-diggers” (as in *The Gold Diggers of 1935*), issues of masculinity and sexuality must be examined thoroughly before reasonable comparisons can be made between male and female gold-diggers.

This study is constructed chronologically, examining first the roots of the modern gold-digger, followed by her rise to prominence, and finally, her fall back into the criminal underworld and trash underworld. Chapter 1 briefly examines the roots of the modern gold-digger in the late nineteenth-century, acknowledging similar characters in works by Daniel Defoe and Jane Austen before moving on into a discussion of often tragic social climbers in the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson and fiction by Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser. The chapter examines the origins of the term gold-digger and the character type’s growth from an unhappy bride of a wealthy old man to a relatively successful business woman by the late teens in Avery Hopwood’s *The Gold Diggers*.

Chapter 2 traces the arrival of the gold-digger in the mainstream of American culture during the 1920’s. It is during this decade that the gold-digger became regarded as a viable role-model for women, due in part to the incredible popularity of Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Pettit 51). These young women of fiction and film during this ostensibly affluent decade wanted greater access to the economic growth that seemed boundless in the years prior to the Stock Market crash of 1929, and more often than not, they were successful despite having to sacrifice some of their autonomy and some of their immature and playful ideals and despite their attempts to deny being gold-diggers in the first place.

Chapter 3 discusses the two main trends in gold-digger history in the thirties. The

gold-digger reaches the height of her popularity and her unwillingness to compromise during the early years of the Great Depression. During this period, gold-diggers were more heroic than at any other time before or after. As a result, their threat became an issue of great concern. The second half of the thirties sets the mood for gold-diggers during the rest of the twentieth-century, as Hollywood's censors and the state of California reduce the gold-digger's popularity and means of self-improvement and leave her with little room for movement outside a criminal underworld.

Chapter 4, the final chapter of the study, examines the continuing downfall and criminalization of the gold-digging femme fatale of the forties and the relatively powerless sexpot gold-digger in the fifties. As the forties and fifties progress, the gold-digger sinks deeper and deeper into the gutter, and since that time she has never been entirely reclaimed.

Chapter 1

THE EMERGENCE OF THE GOLD-DIGGER, 1890-1919

*She's only a bird in a gilded cage,
A beautiful sight to see,
You may think she's happy and free from care,
She's not, though she seems to be,
'Tis sad when you think of her wasted life,
For youth cannot mate with age,
And her beauty was sold,
For an old man's gold,
She's a bird in a gilded cage.*

Arthur J. Lamb and Harry Von Tilzer, "A Bird in a Gilded Cage" (1900)

It is, at best, difficult to pinpoint a moment at which the gold-digger appears on the American cultural scene, if in fact she is an American creation at all, as the Oxford English Dictionary suggests she is. T. E. Blom briefly suggests similarities between Anita Loos's Lorelei Lee, the quintessential gold-digger of the mid-1920's, and earlier English literary mercenaries Moll Flanders and Becky Sharp (41). Blom, along with Lewis A. Erenberg and Lea Jacobs, also aptly identifies the gold-digger as an extension of traditional Cinderella mythology (Blom 41, Erenberg 223, Jacobs 12). In her introduction to a 1998 edition of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Candace Bushnell notes a tradition leading from Elizabeth in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* through Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and on to Lorelei Lee (XV). As the first few decades of the twentieth century progress, the presence of distinctly defined gold-digging characters becomes more and more common. Lea Jacobs says that the earliest documented usage of the term gold-digger to describe these social climbing young

women was in Avery Hopwood's 1919 play, *The Gold Diggers* (12), and others claim that Hopwood himself coined the term. However, Constance Rosenblum states that "the expression had made an appearance around 1915" and that "some people even claimed the term had been coined by a Hearst newspaperman to describe Peggy [Hopkins Joyce]" (83). The Oxford English Dictionary cites 1920's reviews of Hopwood's play as its first examples of this twentieth-century usage (OED).

Regardless of where the term "gold-digger" came from and whether or not it had its origins in Hopwood's play, it is clear that the character type was not a new creation of Hopwood's. Jack F. Sharrar says, "The plot and the character of the stereotypical chorus girls that seem hackneyed today, were probably not much fresher in 1919 . . ." (115).

Clearly, evidence of the gold-digging chorus girl abounds prior to 1919. Erenberg says,

Since the Floradora Girls in 1900 married prominent men about town and saw their names featured in lights, the chorus represented a potential stepping stone to personal happiness and self-advancement. In fact, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* moved from a small-town Wisconsin home to the big city, where after involvement with several men, she made her way through a Broadway chorus to eventual stardom. (222-3)

I do not claim that the gold-digger did not exist prior to Hopwood's play which did popularize a term which was until then apparently not in wide circulation since, when the play was originally produced by David Belasco, "Belasco's advance men advised him to change the title because audiences expected a play about the forty-niners" (Sharrar 115). What I would like to suggest, however, is that the gold-digger, for the most part, is a twentieth century phenomenon, and that she was most active and influential during the period between the two World Wars. As Constance Rosenblum says,

The gold digger was a type peculiar to her century. . . . The twenties offered a particularly fertile soil for the cultivation of the breed: a great many people were terrifically rich, and an enormous amount of money seemed to be floating around,

available not only to men who scored a killing in the stock market but also to the women who played their cards right. (Rosenblum 83-4)

I would also like to suggest that unlike prior decades, the 1920's and 1930's provide us with an abundance of texts which center on the gold-digger as a central character, a phenomenon which suggests that she has become much more important as a cultural figure. Unlike her predecessor, the gold-digger of the twenties and especially of the early thirties becomes increasingly unapologetic and aggressive, and she finds her way into nearly every film genre of the early thirties, before she is finally tamed by stricter film production codes and changing moral standards of the mid thirties. By the 1940's, the gold-digger will once again be contained in the form of the gold-digging femme fatale who is more often than not punished or reclaimed by the bourgeoisie. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to examining the gold-digger's emergence as a fully developed cultural phenomenon between the 1890's and 1919, the period during which the gold-digger came of age as an important icon who quickly, by the early 1920's, moved out of the chorus and into the secretary's office, the store's front counter, and, most ominously to many Americans at the time, the suburban home.

The Gold-Digger and the Gibson Girl

An important source where early gold-digger-like characters flourished was in the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson, the creator of the Gibson Girl. Countless cartoons depicting social climbers grace the pages of *The Gibson Book: A Collection of the Published Works of Charles Dana Gibson*, including a 1904 series of plates illustrating

the adventures of the ambitious Mr. Tagg and his family. Many of Gibson's illustrations, like those describing Mr. Tagg and his family, show social climbing males, however, such as a 1902 plate entitled "The Heiress" under which reads the following rhyme as a caption:

She cannot talk, she cannot sing,
She looks a fright; but folks aver
Ten millions have been set apart
To talk and sing and look for her.

The cartoon itself shows a caricature of an obese, homely heiress sitting on a pile of coins. Another plate, from 1903, simply has five dollar signs in lieu of a caption, and the picture shows an unattractive woman wearing jewels and surrounded by hopeful gentlemen. On the other side of the room in which she sits, a beautiful woman without jewels sits alone. A similar scene, from 1901, entitled "Parasites Basking in the Golden Sunshine," offers a similar unflattering caricature of an obese woman in rich clothes and jewels who is surrounded by hopeful suitors. In addition to these social climbing males, the ambitious female, a woman who sometimes bears a strong resemblance to the gold-digger, does appear frequently in Gibson's works. A 1903 plate entitled "Another get-rich-quick swindle" offers a wedding scene. The elderly groom and his youthful bride stand side by side in wedding attire. There is a tear on the bride's cheek. Similarly, in two plates from 1902, "A Suggestion for ill-assorted pairs" and "The Ambitious Mother and the Obliging Clergyman," the theme of the wealthy older husband and the beautiful bride is exploited. In the first, iron bars are placed between the beautiful young wife and the ugly older husband. In the latter, a caricature of an ugly, short groom and a beautiful, young wife stand before a blind-folded preacher at their wedding. The bride's mother stands behind her daughter, holding the train of the bridal gown. In earlier plates, similar

themes appear such as in “The American Girl Abroad: Some Features of the Matrimonial Market” from 1894. The beautiful young woman in this plate inspects a line of older gentlemen, prospective husbands. Above each man we see his monetary value and his coat of arms.

These illustrations all share a condemnation of the social-climber’s activity, a condemnation that will continue to be an important theme, although usually in much less severe form, throughout many of the gold-digger texts of the 1920’s, with a few notable exceptions such as Hopwood’s *The Gold Diggers*. In an 1893 plate, the caption reads, “These young girls who marry oldish millionaires should not be wandering over the plains with impecunious cowboys when their husbands are trying to entertain them.” The illustration shows an older husband reading to his young bride. In the background we see the image of a young cowboy superimposed on the wall between her and her husband, the image that haunts the young bride as she pretends to listen to her husband. Certainly, a character akin to the gold-digger of the twenties and thirties did exist at least as early as the 1890’s. This may help to explain why often the gold-diggers of the twenties and thirties find themselves in movies set in the Gay Nineties, most notably in the films of Mae West throughout the 1930’s. Unlike later gold-diggers, these social climbers tended to go after the very wealthy, and they tended to be very unhappy.

As suggested by Candace Bushnell, another good example of this hopelessly unhappy, early twentieth-century social climber is found in the character of Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*. Like many gold-diggers of later decades, Lily Bart is all too aware of her position as a woman and her dependence upon men for economic advancement. When she first visits Lawrence Selden in his apartment, she says, “How

delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (5). She also notes that when it comes to marriage, "a girl must, a man may if he chooses" (10). During this visit Selden thinks that "she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her" (4). It is true that Bart has been fashioned by her until recently favorable circumstances. Her upbringing has been luxurious, and her tastes continue to be expensive, but since her father's financial ruin, she no longer has the economic means to support her tastes. She needs to make a connection with someone who can support her; a man of means must marry her. After her father's financial ruin, Bart's mother tells her, "But you'll get it all back—you'll get it all back, with your face" (26). Here, as in the analysis of Selden, a connection is made between physical beauty and the ability to move within social classes. If Bart sells her beauty to a wealthy husband, she will restore herself to the rank for which she was trained. Unfortunately, Bart, despite her desires for comfort and social standing, is fickle when it comes to the offers made to her by several men. Lawrence Selden, early on, seems like he might be interested in marrying Bart, except for the fact that she does not seem to want to marry him, a fact which he says deters him from visiting her more often than he does (7). Later, his more than platonic interest in her becomes clearer as he says that he does not want to marry her, but then he tells her, "Perhaps I should if you did" (69). Later he tells her, "The only way I can help you is by loving you" (132). Fickle Lily Bart, however, continues to put him off, and when he finally returns at the end of the novel, finally having found the right word which perhaps will convince her to marry him, it is too late. Lily Bart is dead.

Similarly, Bart wavers when it comes to other men in her life who are in a

position to keep her in luxury. True to the ways of her manipulative, modern, gold-digging followers, Bart knows how to manipulate events and people to fit her purposes. Knowing Percy Gryce will be on the same train she is taking, Bart goes out of her way to “accidentally” fall into a conversation with (and nearly into the lap of) Gryce. However, she ends up sabotaging her own very likely possibility of an engagement with this wealthy man even though “the certainty that she could marry Percy Gryce when she pleased had lifted a heavy load from her mind, and her money troubles were too recent for their removal not to leave a sense of relief which a less discerning intelligence might have taken for happiness” (46). Imagining how boring her life would be, Bart fails to keep a date at church with the staid, shy momma’s boy:

She would have to go to church with Percy Gryce every Sunday. They would have a front pew in the most expensive church in New York, and his name would figure handsomely in the list of parish charities. . . . There was nothing especially arduous in this round of boredom which loomed across her path. And who could consent to be bored on such a morning? (53)

Bart cannot consent to such boredom, and when she is supposed to be in church with Gryce, she is instead found walking with Selden. Shortly afterward, she learns that Gryce is engaged to another woman. Later, it becomes clear that Gus Trenor, the husband of Bart’s friend Judy, is more than willing to help her financially in return for sexual favors, and in anger he accuses her of not only using him, but also of using many men for economic gain: “I don’t doubt you’ve accepted as much before—and chucked the other chaps as you’d like to chuck me. I don’t care how you settled your score with them—if you’ve fooled ‘em I’m that much to the good” (140-1).

Perhaps the most realistic and businesslike offer Bart receives is from Mr. Rosedale, who because of his Jewish heritage and his nouveau-rich position is not

allowed full passage into Bart's social circle despite his ample financial resources. To Rosedale, Bart represents acceptance into a more prestigious social circle. When he proposes to Bart, her response is at best lukewarm, and she tries to gently refuse. To this rebuff, Rosedale responds, "I'm just giving you a plain business statement of the consequences. You're not very fond of me—yet—but you're fond of luxury, and style, and amusement, and of not having to worry about cash. You like to have a good time, and not to have to settle for it; and what I propose to do is provide for the good time and do the settling" (169). Bart refuses this offer, despite her declining opportunities. Even when Bertha Dorset spreads vicious rumors about Bart, and it is clear to Bart that Bertha's husband George would gladly leave his wife and marry her, she still refuses, and Rosedale notes that Bart is not interested in "that particular form of getting even" although clearly it is another opportunity to secure her economic position (247). Bart simply passes up chance after chance to marry for money, and in the end she dies alone, the victim of scandal and her own inability to make a choice that might save her life.

Clearly, if Lily Bart is an ancestor of the gold-digger of the twenties and thirties, those women of later decades generally do not seem to have made the same mistakes she made. As a gold-digger, she is a failure, and by her experience turn-of-the-century morality is supported. A woman's opportunities, the novel seems to tell its audience, are very limited, and she is better off accepting a boring but lucrative marriage than flitting from man to man, accepting gifts and flirtations from many but committing to none. This is a conclusion that a twenties gold-digger like Lorelei Lee would find utterly ridiculous. Candace Bushnell says,

Up until about the time Loos wrote *Gentlemen*, these women, although beautiful and often cultured, *could not* marry the men who supported them—society

prohibited it. Wealthy men were expected to marry within their class, and woe to the woman who tried to flout society's rules and marry up. Novels at the time were full of cautionary tales of women who tried to go too far. . . . In *House of Mirth*, Wharton's heroine, Lily Bart, who . . . comes from the right class but unfortunately has no fortune, ends up dying of consumption after a series of increasingly disastrous relationships, none of which lead to marriage. (XV)

From the illustrations of Gibson to Wharton's novel, and also in other turn-of-the-century works such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, the life of the social climbing woman tends toward the tragic. By the 1920's new innovations in the gold-digger character type will come about. The 1920's gold-digger will go out of her way not to be perceived as such, even by herself. As a result, she will also very often lose her guilt altogether in what seems to be a clearer understanding of what she must do in order to survive. Rarely will she suffer the kind of fate Lily Bart is subjected to, although like Bart, she will often find herself in the middle of scandals. The gold-digger's light-hearted approach to the world in the twenties and thirties will more often than not save her. No longer will the gold-digger suffer the fate of the social climbing woman in the 1900 popular song and be "A Bird in a Gilded Cage" (Lamb 34-7).

The Gold-Digger and the Urban Frontier

Up to this point, my discussion has focused mostly on women who have been trained toward a luxurious life and not on individuals bent on changing their habits, only on those interested in maintaining a style of living which their economic situation cannot support. Lily Bart has been trained from childhood to be a member of the upper classes, although her financial circumstances make it difficult to survive in her customary social

circle. Similarly, the women depicted in the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson give little indication of having come from any place other than the class to which they aspire. Another important source for the gold-digger, however, can be found in examining those texts which show us individuals who are trying to move up the social as well as the economic ladder. Although Lily Bart is trained to move within an elite circle but lacks the economic capital to do so indefinitely, other characters have even less to work with than she does. Without the benefit of social training, they must reconstruct themselves through performance and costuming in order to fulfill their social goals.

By the early twentieth-century, America had long been mythologized as a place in which individuals might easily raise their social and economic status. Issues of class, race, ethnicity, and gender in the early part of the century coincide with the development of more unabashed social climbing characters in an urban frontier. In *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Richard Slotkin says, "[b]eginning with the California Gold Rush of 1849, the 'bonanza' became the characteristic theme of each new frontier enthusiasm. The bonanza frontier offers the prospect of immediate and impressive economic benefit for a relatively low capital outlay . . ." (17-8). The gold-digger of the 1920's and 1930's is a variation on this American dream of financial success, although instead of digging in the ground for gold, the new woman of the early twentieth-century instead digs in the pockets of gentlemen companions. With little economic output, she can become wealthier simply by offering herself to someone who already has economic and cultural capital. One seeks financial security and even wealth through the presumed easiest, quickest channels. America is a land where class boundaries can be easily transgressed, at least according to our

mythology, and the gold-digger is often not much different than the saloon girl or frontier prostitute who uses her body as a means of economic gain.

The language and texts of the gold-digger occasionally literally connect her to the earlier definition of the gold-digger as a miner. In Hopwood's *The Gold Diggers*, for instance, Mabel says, "I'll go and put on some war paint--and then watch me come cut and do a scalp-dance" as she prepares to help trick Wally's uncle Stephen into accepting the proposed marriage between the wealthy Wally and Mabel's chorus girl friend Violet (54). By associating the gold-digger's makeup with the war paint of Hollywood's Indians and her jazz dancing with a "scalp-dance," this statement metaphorically places the urban female gold-digger on the frontier where miners might expect confrontation with Native Americans. It also exposes an economically and culturally antagonistic gender relationship between men and women. Gold-diggers and sugar daddies are at war. This relationship is preserved in an updated film version of Hopwood's play, *The Gold Diggers of 1933*. In the 1919 typescript of the play, Jerry also describes herself as having been "green" before she learned how to work a man. Again, Hopwood borrows a term often used in accounts of the American frontier, as the inexperienced in both the literal wilderness and the gold-digger's urban wilderness are described using variations of this term. It is also interesting to note that in this urban wilderness, new immigrants who have not yet learned to blend in with other Americans are also described as green (or as greenhorns) by more experienced immigrants who have assimilated, as in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* (36). This similarity may suggest the influence of new immigrants on gold-diggers. In order to be financially successful in America, often immigrants, like gold-diggers, found it necessary to change their appearance and their behavior and

language so that they might pass for a higher class. For immigrants, this higher class is composed of established Americans who already have access to the economic and social benefits promised by America; moreover, for gold-diggers, this higher class is whatever social class they might at the moment be attempting to elevate themselves into. In several of the late 1920's and early 1930's films of comedians Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey, such as *Rio Rita* (1929), similar brief commentary connects the modern gold-digger to American frontier mythology. Sinclair Lewis's novel *Mantrap* (1926) and the film of the same year and title, *The Gold Rush* (1925), Mae West films such as *Klondike Annie* (1936), westerns such as *Roughshod* (1949), and the musical *The Unsinkable Mollie Brown* (1964) also place the modern, urban gold-digger in close proximity to frontier mythology and the literal gold-digger, the miner of gold.

Slotkin also notes the symbolic turning point announced in 1893 by Frederick Jackson Turner in his "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Slotkin says,

Turner himself asserted that he and his audience stood at the end of the first and formative epoch of American history: an epoch whose triumphs of democracy and economic power he associated with the development of the agrarian frontier, an epoch that had ended in 1890 with the disappearance of the vast reserve of undeveloped land that had constituted the frontier. (29)

The perception that the heretofore seemingly endless expansion of America had come to an end coincided with an immense immigration of new Americans from foreign lands (prior to the Immigration Act of 1924) and massive migration from rural areas and the American South to northern urban centers. Lewis A. Erenberg says that "in the *Report on the Social Evil of 1910*, the committee noted, 'Youth is gravitating toward the city, away from home, religious and personal ideals, breaking the moorings of the past before

the newer social ideal is grasped” (64). Lynn Dumenil states that at least in the minds of many Americans, the shift from a rural to an urban population was of critical concern as “the U. S. Census Bureau’s findings . . . marked 1920 as the turning point of the country’s urbanization: fully one-half of America’s 105 million people now lived in cities” (11). Although she notes that in the 1920 Census Report, any town with a population of 2,500 or more was considered a city and therefore the statistics are somewhat “dubious,” she says, “Observers in the 1920s had a sense—at times oversimplified—that they were witnessing an urban/rural conflict, a battle between the forces of change and the forces of reaction” (11). Clearly, in the early decades of the twentieth century, America was becoming more urban, and that urban environment helped to provide a new freedom for young people of all backgrounds. This freedom was rooted in the relative anonymity of the city’s masses, in a freer mixing of young women and men of various class, race, and ethnic backgrounds, and consequently, in a breakdown of older moral standards, ideals, and roles—the very freedom which had allowed the chorus girl, already set apart from her traditional moral community, a greater range of experience in the decades leading up to the 1920’s.

The title character in Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel, *Sister Carrie*, goes to the city because it offers excitement and opportunity that small town Wisconsin does not, and in the city, she finds anonymity which allows her to transgress social boundaries. She lives with two men to whom she is not married, pretending to be married to both, and she gets away with it precisely because of this new, urban frontier where nobody knows her and nobody seems to care enough to check out whether or not she is actually married to Drouet in Chicago or to Hurstwood in New York City. When she becomes a success on

the stage, under the assumed name Carrie Madenda, nobody bothers to look into her past and reveal the scandals to be found there. In the anonymous city of the early twentieth century, old rules and taboos are easily overlooked.

Sister Carrie and the Gold-Digging Chorus Girl

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, although it provides an interesting stepping stone toward the development of the gold-digger, is not, in itself, a novel about gold-diggers. Carrie is far too reluctant to be a true gold-digger. Certainly she does desire an economic rise in status. In the very beginning of the novel, as the narrator describes her aspirations, he notes her desire to go to Chicago where "there were lights and a roar of things. People were rich" (3). Early on Carrie, like gold-diggers such as Anita Loos's Lorelei Lee, is not really interested in intellectual pursuits. "Books were beyond her interest," Dreiser tells us (4). However, by the end of the novel, under the influence of Mr. Ames, Carrie's interest in reading has grown, and the last time we see her, she is reading *Pere Goyrot* in her room at the Waldorf. From the very beginning, however, it is clear that Carrie understands the need for improving herself as a means of improving her economic circumstances: "And yet she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things" (4). Later, she is described as "an apt student of fortune's ways . . ." (98).

Carrie, like later gold-diggers, also does allow men of means to take care of her. Upon first meeting Charles Drouet, the narrator tells us, Carrie notices "something

promising in all the material prospect he set forth. There was something satisfactory in the attention of this individual with his good clothes” (8). When he shows her his “roll of greenbacks” on the train, “it impressed her deeply. . . . The purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit and the *air* with which he did things built up for her a dim world of fortune around him of which he was the centre. It disposed her pleasantly toward all he might do” (8-9). However, when Drouet offers Carrie an opportunity to escape the socially dull and economically unrewarding life at her sister Minnie’s home, Carrie balks. She resists his offers to buy her clothing, despite her need for warmer winter garments, and she resists his offer to rent a room for her, despite the dreaded probability that she will otherwise have to return to her childhood home in Columbia City, Wisconsin. Drouet buys her clothing, but almost immediately she feels ashamed and plans to give it back to him, feeling that she is somehow morally compromising herself. She cannot let her sister see her new clothing because then she would have to explain how she got the money to buy the new items. It is true that Carrie does not put up much of a fight; she gives in and finally moves into an apartment with Drouet without a great deal of hesitation. But the fact that she hesitates at all, that she is a passive, somewhat unwilling and even innocent (to a point) receiver of these gifts, sets her apart from later gold-diggers who do not seem to have any qualms about taking the gifts of wealthier men. Dreiser says, “Once these things were in her hand, on her person, she might dream of giving them up; the method by which they came might intrude itself so forcefully that she would ache to be rid of the canker of it, but she would not give them up” (98). Carrie desires lovely, rich things, but she also has some scruples, enough, at least, to make her pause and consider the moral standards of her world while living off the generosity of her

male friends. With George Hurstwood, Carrie understands her limited position as a woman, and although she feels he has betrayed her by not telling her he is married and later by taking her with him to Canada under false pretenses, she decides to stay with him because he says he can and will provide for her, and she doesn't believe she can provide for herself. It is clear that she does not feel any great love for either Drouet or Hurstwood; she simply sees in them an opportunity to better her own economic circumstances.

Another important difference between Carrie and later gold-diggers is that when she finally does find success and economic security, it is not because of her ability to get men to take care of her but because of her own good looks, work, talents, and not a small amount of good luck. Drouet leaves her, and she does not realize that he might take her back despite his offers to continue taking care of her and to forgive her for her indiscretions with Hurstwood. Hurstwood becomes a complete failure, stealing money from his firm, letting his wife take all the wealth that he has built up, and Carrie ends up taking care of him for a time. Her final success comes only when she leaves behind men and takes care of herself, forging a career on the stage. As a notable actress, she receives notes from wealthy gentlemen who offer to take care of her, but she does not answer them. By the end of the novel, Carrie is much more interested in acquiring the cultural and intellectual capital necessary to become a literate person, someone worthy of an intellectual like Mr. Ames, than she is in simply being a wealthy man's plaything. This desire to develop her mind and her refusal to be a toy for rich men sets her apart from most gold-diggers of the following decades. The fact that she uses talents other than flirtation, sexuality, and trickery to insure her own success also sets her apart from later

characters who have a similar desire to increase their social and economic positions.

Unlike later gold-digging chorus girls, Carrie's position in the chorus and later as a headliner on the stage is a means in itself; it is not a means of securing a wealthy gentleman who can offer economic security and status. She gains these things by her own talents and luck.

Characters more like gold-diggers than Carrie herself do appear in *Sister Carrie*, however. At one point, a broken Hurstwood reads in his newspaper about "a young, handsome woman, if you might believe the newspaper drawing, suing a rich, fat, candy-making husband in Brooklyn for divorce" (354). The relationship of Carrie's and Hurstwood's neighbors, the Vances, also seems to be something like a gold-digger/sugar-daddy relationship, as the narrator notes that "the portly Vance . . . owed his seemingly comfortable matrimonial state much more to his money than to his good looks" (321). And it is clear that Hurstwood's middle class family values wealth over other values, as his beautiful daughter Jessica distinguishes between the young men who are attracted to her. When Jessica's mother asks who has walked home with her, Jessica responds that Herbert Crane is "no one. . . . He's just a student there. He hasn't anything" (84). However, the narrator tells us "the other half of this picture came when young Blyford, son of Blyford, the soap manufacturer, walked home with her" (84). When Jessica's mother asks who is with her this time, Jessica is described as "a little flushed with running up the stairs, and perhaps something else," and she goes for a stroll in the park with this young man of means (84). This and similar situations paint a portrait of Jessica and her mother as individuals who see the importance of connections to economically secure individuals as crucial to the success and survival of a woman. Jessica and her

mother judge men by what they have, not who they are, or perhaps more accurately, they do not distinguish between what a man is and what he has but judge his quality by what he has. Jessica and her mother, in this sense, are very much like the middle class gold-diggers of later decades.

One similarity between Carrie and later gold-diggers is her belief that she does not necessarily owe her benefactors anything in return for their generosity. While she seems to accept the arrangements by which she lives with Drouet and later Hurstwood as a wife (while never being legally married to either man), and while apparently, at least part of the time, she performs her sexual duties in return for financial security, she maintains her own independence from them as well. When Drouet finds that Carrie has been cavorting with Hurstwood, he says, "You oughtn't to have done anything that wasn't right after all I did for you" (227). In anger, she responds, "What have you done for me?" (227) He reminds her of the clothes he has given her and the places he has taken her, but she responds, "Did I ask you to? . . . You talk as though I had persuaded you. . . . You stand there and throw up what you've done. I don't want your old things. I'll not have them. You take them tonight and do what you please with them" (228). Later gold-diggers more often than not do make it known to their men friends that they expect generous gifts; Carrie does not. Her point seems to work on Drouet, who shortly afterward tries to convince her to stay in their apartment because she has nowhere else to go. She at least says she will give up all the comforts he has given her rather than be made to feel that she is in his debt. He offered her gifts; she did not ask for them as many of the gold-diggers who follow will not hesitate to do. She did not go into the relationship assuming that her debt to him included complete control of her sexuality or

her future life. One might claim that Carrie's refusal is selfish and that her unwillingness to be made to feel guilty is simply a very effective method of manipulation which she holds over her men, but she has established a clear boundary between her sexual duties (which she has apparently rendered without complaint) and his financial ones. It is also interesting to note that while Drouet does not have any problem with his own indiscretions with other women while he is keeping Carrie, he does expect her to remain faithful. Carrie establishes an equality here in which her affair with Hurstwood is not to be thought any less scrupulous than Drouet's indiscretions with his many women friends. When Hurstwood runs out of money and is unable and unwilling to find work, Carrie moves out of the bedroom she had previously shared with Hurstwood. He no longer provides her with financial security; therefore, she will no longer provide him with sexual satisfaction (365-6). Like the gold-diggers of later decades, Carrie demands her own rights as a free individual and refuses to let men have full control over her.

While Carrie uses her own theatrical abilities to insure her success, chorus girls in the early twentieth century have a bad reputation as mercenaries who use the chorus as a stepping stone to wealth. Often actresses were regarded in the same category as prostitutes. In 1912, Octave Uzanne noted in *The Modern Parisienne* that "Parisienne women are very much like stage queens; many earn their royalty by terrible privations and sordid poverty. Thanks to their spirit, their sense of coquetry, and their happy carelessness, they are able to hide under a graceful appearance the terrible wounds they bear" (9). Despite his attempt at a sympathetic understanding of women's desperate plight in the modern, urban world, Uzanne places the actress next to this Parisienne woman, who is later described as a "harlot," a victim of "our extravagant society, which

is a very forcing-house of debauchery” (9). In 1927, Netley Lucas also clearly placed the gold-digger near, if not necessarily in, the Broadway chorus in *Ladies of the Underworld: The Beautiful, the Damned, and Those Who Get Away With It*, as he says, “‘Gold-diggers’ are the denizens of New York’s vampire Underworld—they are in fact the *cocottes* and adventuresses who ‘hit the high spots’ on Broadway, and who are to be found in all the cabarets and fashionable roof gardens, and also in the many hooch and booze joints which infest the purlieus of Fifth Avenue and Seventh Avenue” (15). Erenberg provides a detailed discussion of how the sinful chorus girl of the 1890’s and early 1900’s was transformed by the 1920’s so that she became more acceptable, less hardened. He describes the gold-diggers of the twenties as “girls who were exciting playmates and also ladies, capable of reflecting a man’s success and status. Whether ladies or not, their clothes and upkeep cost money. Figures of high consumption, chorus girls were women of leisure upon whom a man could lavish a good deal of money in return for her pleasing him” (221). This connection between the gold-digger and the chorus girl is part of the gold-digger lore in many of the musicals of the 1930’s, in some Jean Harlow films of the same period, and even in the 1950’s in nostalgic films such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and *Auntie Mame* (1958).

In addition to *Sister Carrie*, other early texts which offer social climbing chorus girls are Roy L. McCardell’s *Conversations of a Chorus Girl* and the 1906 play *The Chorus Lady*, which Jack F. Sharrar calls “a successful predecessor on the same theme” as Hopwood’s *The Gold Diggers* (117). Linda Mizejewski, in *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema*, discusses Roy L. McCardell’s *Conversations of a Chorus Girl*. Mizejewski says, “McCardell’s focus is the chorus girl relationship with men as an

exchange of goods—companionship in return for jewelry, champagne, dinner at Rector's. McCardell implicitly links commodities sold on stage with the selling of this racy new female character" (70-1). However, Mizejewski overstates the importance of gold-digging in McCardell's 1903 work. McCardell's focus on the chorus girl's exchange of goods for companionship is not exactly the main point of the stories his chorus girl tells. There are fifteen short stories in the volume. Of those fifteen, only five make explicit the chorus girl's use of wealthy men to advance her own economic status, and only one makes that advancement the center of the story, "An Experience With A Jay-Town Mayor." In that story, the narrating gold-digger decides this small town bumpkin millionaire is not worth her time and trouble since he is embarrassing to look at and, worse still, a penny-pincher (25-32). In other stories, the chorus girl briefly mentions her desire to be kept by a wealthy man, but the references are never fully developed. In "In the Glamour of the Footlights," the chorus girl says, "It's nice to come on in the coon song chorus behind a shine soprano and know that you have a friend in front who has money to arbitrate and who's anxious to be an angel" (64). But a paragraph later, the chorus girl is on to other subjects, mostly overblown accounts of her performances, descriptions of parties she has attended, gossip about other chorus girls, and her experiences in shows that flopped. Clearly, in this particular text, the chorus girl's gold-digging plays a relatively small role in the tales she tells, unlike in later texts such as Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* where gold-digging is a central theme.

The presence of the chorus girl in the development of the gold-digger as an American cultural force is important also in the sense that to be a gold-digger, in many ways, one must also be an actress and a quick study. Gold-digging generally involves

passing as something other than what one actually is by birth or cultural conditioning and preparation. As suggested by later gold-digger novels involving ethnic exoticism and racial passing, such as Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the importance of pretense, costuming, and performance is of critical importance to the gold-digger. Since, as Thorstein Veblen says, "unproductive consumption of goods is honourable, primarily as a mark of prowess and a perquisite of human dignity" (69), the gold-digger must reeducate herself into the manners, tastes, and adornments of the class to which she aspires, and she must perform those manners and tastes and costume herself as if she were a member of a higher class to which she aspires. In Gibson's sketches, the difference between a woman who successfully lures prospective husbands and one who does not is little more than a matter of costuming, as the unattractive women who drape themselves in jewels are more successful than the attractive women who cannot. In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie is very aware of the importance of appearance, and she becomes increasingly aware of the opportunities that are open to individuals who give the appearance of affluence. Early on, Carrie recognizes that she does not compare well even next to Chicago's shopgirls. In a Chicago store, Carrie

Noticed . . . with a touch at the heart, the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained. Carrie was not familiar with the appearance of her more fortunate sisters of the city. Neither had she before known the nature and appearance of the shop girls, with whom she now compared poorly. . . . Their clothes were neat, in many instances fine, and wherever she encountered the eye of one, it was only to recognize in it a keen analysis of her own position—her own shortcomings of dress and that shadow of *manner* which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she was.
(23)

Carrie is aware that she does not measure up and that those who know how to assume the appearance of even a slightly wealthier status look down on her. Working in a shoe

factory, Carrie is able to look down on the women around her, however, recognizing that she “had more imagination than they. She was not used to slang. Her instinct in the matter of dress was naturally better” (53).

A good student of cultural capital and its importance to her success in the modern, urban world, Carrie quickly learns that if she is to be a success in this urban environment, she must study other women and learn to appear to have access to a higher social circle than that from which she is derived. Drouet points out a woman he describes as a “fine stepper,” and Carrie agrees; then, says the narrator, she notices “a little suggestion of possible defect in herself . . .” and decides, “If that was so fine she must look at it more closely. Instinctively she felt a desire to imitate it. Surely she could do that too” (99). Under the influence of Drouet and Hurstwood, and with the help of good meals and better clothes, Carrie appears more attractive, and she notices as she goes out to look for a job after breaking with Drouet that “she was treated with more consideration. It was plain that comely features and good looks went for something with these people” (256-7). Near the end of the novel, following Carrie’s first real successes on the stage, her celebrity status opens many doors for her, and she finds that she has opportunities based on reputation that were not available to her before. A gentleman from the Wellington, an exclusive residential hotel, offers her a suite at a rate much lower than its actual rental price, precisely because she will enhance the reputation of the hotel. Her performance as a celebrity gains her entry into a living situation previously closed to her, and in turn, her appearance as a resident of the hotel will bring in a finer, more elite clientele.

Ironically, Hurstwood’s downfall is a reverse image of Carrie’s success. As his own clothing becomes shabbier, his opportunities decline, until at last he is reduced to

begging for change in the streets and living in the Bowery. Appearance is everything, and as Hurstwood's life slips into the gutter, the very things he formerly took for granted are no longer available to him. When he goes into the stage door of a theater where Carrie is performing to beg for money from her, he finds himself rebuffed and is shoved out into the snow. Outside the door which is now closed to him, precisely because of his run down appearance, he yells at the attendant inside, "I—I hired people such as you once" (494). Hurstwood's decline is a dramatic representation of Thorstein Veblen's belief that "in persons of delicate sensibility, who have long been habituated to gentle manners, the sense of shamefulness of manual labor may become so strong that, at a critical juncture, it will even set aside the instinct of self-preservation" (42). Hurstwood, while still living with Carrie, cannot bear the shame of working at a menial job. Dreiser tells us that after searching the want ads for saloons in which he can invest his meager stolen funds, Hurstwood then "turned to the male help-wanted column, but with disagreeable feelings" (355). Hurstwood spends much of his time sitting around reading newspapers and watching his bankroll dwindle, and finally, in abject poverty, unable to survive in a lower class world, this formerly respectable, middle-class gentleman commits suicide in a cheap boarding house.

Avery Hopwood's Popularization and Justification of the Gold-Digging Chorus Girl

By 1919, the gold-digger is apparently a well-known character type, and the egalitarian play *The Gold Diggers* by Avery Hopwood goes far in popularizing this type

as well as in offering a sympathetic understanding of her position. According to Jack F. Sharrar, Hopwood got his inspiration for the play during a conversation with a self-proclaimed gold-digger, Kay Laurel, in New York's Ritz. Laurel's definition and justification of her life as a gold-digger, in response to Hopwood's confusion upon hearing the term for the first time, is quoted by Sharrar:

That's what we call ourselves! You men capitalize your brains, or your business ability, or your legal minds—or whatever other darned thing you happen to have! So why shouldn't we girls capitalize what nature has given us—as our good looks and our ability to please and entertain men? You men don't give something for nothing—why should we? It's an art to amuse men—to thrill them, to fascinate them, to make them happy. Why shouldn't we be paid for it? (114)

Hopwood's work stands out as a rare, sympathetic presentation of the gold-digger which will seldom be seen before the early 1930's when the importance of acting out clearly defined class boundaries takes a back seat to real economic concerns. Sharrar claims, "Clearly, Hopwood, who had always been a gold digger himself, so to speak, knew where his strengths lay" (117-8). This suggestion that Hopwood himself was a gold-digger further explains the sympathetic look at the type in Hopwood's play. According to Sharrar, "Heywood Broun felt that, despite a somewhat sentimental, and at times burlesque treatment of the characters, the 'essential spirit' of the girls was 'quite the most accurate portrayal of the type which the American stage [had] known'" (117).

Although until he met Kay Laurel, Hopwood was apparently unfamiliar with the term, *The Gold Diggers* is not Hopwood's first play to deal with the theme of crossing economic boundaries through sexual means, nor is it his last. As early as 1907, Hopwood's first play, *Clothes*, begun by Hopwood in 1904 or 1905 (Sharrar 1) and essentially written by Hopwood but credited as a collaboration with Channing Pollock (Sharrar 24-5), centers on Olivia Sherwood who "must marry a rich man who is able to

keep her in the fine clothes and surroundings to which she has grown accustomed” (Sharrar 19). Charges of plagiarism were brought against Hopwood for *Clothes* by Charles Frohman, who “tried to prove that the play had been stolen from *The House of Mirth*, which he had paid Clyde Fitch and Edith Wharton to dramatize from her novel” (Sharrar 25). Frohman’s case was thrown out when Hopwood easily proved that his work was written earlier (Sharrar 25). In 1909, Hopwood collaborated with Mary Roberts Rinehart to produce *Seven Days*, in which artist James Wilson must lie to his wealthy aunt about his divorce in order to keep from losing his allowance (Sharrar 40). *The Best People* (1924), Hopwood’s adaptation of a play by David Gray, involves a son of wealthy parents who marries a gold-digging chorus girl and his sister who marries the family chauffeur against their parents’ wishes (Sharrar 166). Hopwood’s unfinished novel recounts the adventures of Julia Scarlet whose desire to become a success on the stage leads her to marry John Wilson “for security” and later to become the mistress of Charles Everett, a “wealthy businessman” (Sharrar 201). Meanwhile, in his personal life, Hopwood’s handsome but physically abusive young lover, actor John Floyd, received generous financial gifts from Hopwood before his death as well as in his will (Sharrar 150). It is clear that Hopwood was well acquainted with the character type who is the center of his most famous play.

In *The Gold Diggers* the upper class and those who try to act upper class are the butt of jokes; the lower classes are where wisdom, sincerity, and virtue is to be found. According to Sharrar, “Hopwood amassed a fortune on the playmaking theory that the drama was a ‘democratic art,’ and that the dramatist was not the ‘monarch, but the servant of the public’” (xix). In order to understand this pro-democratic framework in

which Hopwood's play works in opposition to earlier works which seem to emphasize the importance of traditional categories and more strictly maintained boundaries, it is useful to look at the writings of cultural critics George Santayana and Gilbert Seldes. George Santayana, in 1911 in "The Genteel Tradition In American Philosophy," criticized the egalitarian poetry of Walt Whitman because in it "the various sights, moods, and emotions are given each one vote; they are declared to be all free and equal, and the innumerable common-place moments of life are suffered to speak like the others" (53). Yet Santayana sees in this egalitarian poetry "a beginning, or rather many beginnings, that might possibly grow into a noble moral imagination, a worthy filling for the human mind" (53). Santayana, at least, assumes that within (or perhaps in spite of) Whitman's egalitarian presentation of "sights, moods, and emotions" there is the possibility for something new and "noble." By 1918, in "Philosophical Opinion in America," Santayana notes what Jose Ortega y Gasset and Dwight Macdonald will later comment negatively on as a sign of the decadence brought about by mass culture, the fact, as they see it, that "never was the human mind master of so many facts and sure of so few principles" (115). However, instead of simply stating what seems negative to all three writers, Santayana goes on, at least, to ask the question, "Will this suspense and fluidity of thought crystallize into some great new system?" (115). While he never answers his own question outright, the implied response is a resounding maybe. The next year, in "Materialism and Idealism in America," Santayana seems even more optimistic as he says, "When the senses are sharp and joyous, as in the American, they are already half liberated; and when the heart is warm, like his, and eager to be just, its ideal destiny is hardly doubtful. Time and its own impulses will give it wings" (130). By 1931, in

“The Genteel Tradition at Bay,” he goes so far as to say, “For my part, though a lover of antiquity, I should certainly congratulate myself on living among the moderns, if the moderns were only modern enough, and dared to face nature with an unprejudiced mind and a clear purpose. Never before was the mental landscape so vast” (163). It would seem that in a period of two decades Santayana has come to respect, if not like, this new American world in which the old traditions and standards no longer carry the weight they once did, this new egalitarian world in which a gold-digging chorus girl’s tastes, desires, and needs are as important as those of the wealthy man she preys upon.

Similarly, by 1929, Gilbert Seldes, in *An Hour with the Movies and the Talkies*, notes that “the movie has no fixed form, no standards, no classics; it is full of equivocation and paradox. It is the first form (of art or entertainment) to be developed in the era of universal (that is, low standard) education, yet it requires no education in the spectator” (8). In the age of egalitarian education, or so Seldes assumes, film is an egalitarian entertainment, perhaps even an art, as he says that although most films are “stupid, tasteless, and wearisome,” there have been “in the thirty years of the movie’s existence . . . a score of films which have interested men and women of intelligence and have suggested that the moving picture is, or can be, an art” (7). While Seldes does not give himself over completely to an egalitarian view of the world, he does at least suggest that even with this view of the world, art can be made, and not only by removing oneself from the realm of mass produced culture, and he cites D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and a handful of other films as examples of film that at least come close to achieving the status of art while also being economically successful. As Seldes notes, “With *The Birth of a Nation*, the box office taught the producers that a film a hundred

times better than any they had dared to make, could turn in \$15,000,000 as gross receipts and, to do this, could attract people for ten years without a break” (74). Within the mass industry of film, art (or something like art) can be produced, and it can bring in a tidy profit. Ironically, Seldes uses a blatantly racist film to show the possibility that art might be produced by the new egalitarian, mass man. While both Santayana and Seldes may be suspicious of this new egalitarian, mass culture outlook, they both also seem to recognize that despite their own suspicions, the world has changed, and perhaps new forms of art may be possible despite the loss of accepted standards.

Octave Uzanne, in his 1912 *The Modern Parisienne*, shares some of the uncertainties that Santayana and Seldes suggest, but he does not show the potential for hope they occasionally see. His work takes broader social concerns similar to those discussed by Santayana and Seldes and applies them to a study of women in the modern world. He says the women of Paris, like many of the women of the rest of Europe and America, take their lessons from the underworld which is filled with “those who voluntarily lead an irregular life, those who rebel against conventions, independent members of honourable families, widows not yet tired of the world . . . [and] poor and uneducated girls who have fallen” (10). In the modern, democratic world, ladies of the legitimate and under worlds meet regularly, and “they have considered each other in the light of rivals, placed themselves almost on a footing of equality, and met quite naturally at charity bazaars, races, and hotel tea-parties” (10). Legitimate women take their fashion and behavior lessons from the lower class women with whom they mingle, “flaunting vices they are not guilty of . . . affecting a false perversity which has not the excuse of an overmastering temperament . . .” (11). Although Uzanne’s moralistic analysis of the

position of women in the early century poses as sympathetic to women, the suggestion is still clear that modern, urban women are little more than prostitutes due to the limited opportunities women face, and in order to compete, those who are not prostitutes must act like them. Uzanne says, "Everything seems to conspire against them; the blindness of the law and the want of police protection, as well as the universal love of amusements, frivolity, and desire for pleasure" (9). Modern, urban life, which values pleasure and amusement more than art, which values the underworld as highly as an established upper class, is to blame for the downfall of women.

I wish to look at Avery Hopwood's *The Gold Diggers* as a play which also works within this belief that, for better or for worse, old standards may no longer apply in the new, mass culture world where the acquisition of money is the motivating force driving new art forms, and where old distinctions between people of taste and culture and those without are quickly breaking down. In *The Gold Diggers*, this breakdown of categories of people based on their economic status and what it gives them access to is not at all a bad thing. It is a very welcome change. The women in *The Gold Diggers* present their story to us looking from an economic perspective toward the bottom of the social scale instead of from the top down. Hopwood's play is not tragic as *Sister Carrie* and *House of Mirth* are, and unlike in Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* a few years later, the women in Hopwood's play are not the butt of jokes they unwittingly make of themselves. Instead, the plot of the play consists mostly of the attempts these women make to dupe their so-called betters, wealthy men, old money individuals who are supposed to be the guardians of cultural capital, into sharing the wealth and learning to respect the lower classes. At the beginning of the play, the apartment where the women gold-diggers of the

play live is described as tasteful but not expensive:

The living room is furnished in an entirely distinctive and distinctly feminine manner. It is not, however, the femininity of the average housewife, not that of the society matron. It suggests a certain amount of Bohemianism—it smacks of the theatre. It is unrestrained, without being disorderly, and original, without being bizarre. It has intimacy and charm, and although there has been no set plan for its decoration and furnishing, it is in good taste. It is not elaborate or expensive. The effect is rather that a somewhat limited amount of money has been made to go a long way. (1)

That this room is described as having a degree of Bohemianism and that it is in good taste suggests that these women are not like Lorelei Lee, the bumbling fool who only gets by because of her ability to manipulate men blinded by her good looks. Instead, these women are artistic and enterprising women who are able to do very well despite limited means.

Instead of inadvertently making statements that accidentally contain a sort of wisdom as Lorelei does, the characters in this play have a good sense of their position and their wisecracks attest to their practicality in matters of the business of romance. At one point, Mabel says, “I should worry what I lose, so long as I keep my alimony. . . . to have had a husband, and got rid of him—and get paid once a month, because you did get rid of him! That’s my kind of matrimony—the kind that ends in alimony!” (89). Earlier in the play, Mabel has commented that, “alimony is a woman’s insurance policy!” (24). Yes, Mabel comes across as mercenary, but there is a kind of wisdom here, and there is also a clear understanding of women’s economic dependence on men. To offset the mercenary appearance of these gold-diggers, we are given insight into another side of the chorus girl’s economic circumstances and her generosity. Jerry says, “There’s hardly a girl in the show business that isn’t helping to take care of somebody beside herself” (24). Characters in this play, like many working young people in the early twentieth century,

are helping to provide for family members. As Lynn Dumenil says, “Daughters, unlike their brothers, turned over their entire pay packet to their mothers and then received a small expense allowance, a practice that became a source of contention in many families by the 1920s” (113). While these gold-diggers do not live with parents and do not give all of their income to family, their financial need is not simply a matter of greed and a desire for high living. These women have responsibilities beyond themselves and require extra cash to meet those responsibilities.

An older woman the showgirls discuss is Cissie Gray, who has not been as lucky as Mabel. She now sells soap to make her living, whereas before she lost her looks and while she was a young woman on the stage, she had coaches and horses and a town house, all provided by her gentlemen friends (21-2). Cissie’s story acts as a cautionary tale for the other women in the apartment and presumably for the women actresses in the play and the women in the play’s audience. The women in this play are also very aware of their own assets in this sexual-economic culture. Trixie says, “Jerry always makes the men come across—and she never comes across herself!” (10). Mabel responds, “Jerry isn’t the only girl that knows it’s better to keep a man guessing than to give him the answer to the riddle” (10). Trixie answers back, “Yes—a man will pay a lot more for a thrill than he will for the real thing!” (10). In this exchange, it is clear that for these women, teasing their hopeful suitors is more effective and lucrative than actual prostitution. Maintaining one’s sexual desirability depends on maintaining one’s sexual inaccessibility. And maintaining one’s income depends on maintaining one’s desirability. The wisdom to know when not to put out, along with the ability to hold onto their physical beauty and the ability to snag a wealthy husband, are the things which will

ensure that these young women will not share the fate of Cissie Gray.

True to democratic American ideas about the enterprising and respectable lower classes, the salt of the earth, *The Gold Diggers* shows the lower classes to possess greater intelligence, craftiness, and higher survival instincts than the upper classes do. Even individuals who attempt to act “upper class” are put down. One gold-digger, Eleanor, speaks French, a language somehow equated with high culture, and affects a “refined” accent as she says, “Oh good mawning, deah!” (37). Another girl responds, “Ain’t she vulgar!” (37). Vulgarity, to these women, does not arise because of debased, slangy language or non-standard language usage. To be vulgar, one must pretend to be something she is not and affect the language of a thoroughly buffoonish upper class. At the very heart of the play, we see this lower versus upper class conflict, with the lower classes coming out on top, as the wealthy men of taste and high moral standards are tricked into seeing that these chorus girls are not only smarter than they are but also just as morally sound. Wally is the wealthy young man who has fallen in love with Violet, but Wally’s uncle, Stephen, controls Wally’s finances and threatens to cut him off if he marries Violet. Stephen regards women as expensive items to be possessed and not shared. He says, “If I married a girl—I’d hate to think that any man who had the price of a theatre ticket would have the privilege of seeing her on the stage undressed” (48). The theatre, to Stephen, is an immoral place, and the women in it, by association, must be immoral people. Ignorant of the economic need that drives women to the stage, Stephen assumes the worst about stage women and refuses to give his permission to Wally to marry Violet. Stephen and his attorney, Blake, hatch a plan to prove their own assumptions about chorus girls and get the women to show themselves to be truly

mercenary, thereby curing Wally of his desire to marry Violet. However, after Stephen mistakes Jerry for Violet, Jerry decides to turn the trick around and show Stephen how wrong he is about Violet and thereby get him to accept the marriage. In the end, Stephen and Blake learn the trick, that Jerry was only acting like a mercenary in order to teach them a lesson, but by then, each has fallen in love with a gold-digger. Stephen realizes, perhaps erroneously, that Violet “underneath all this glitter and frivolity, is just a nice old-fashioned girl!” (37). To say that these gold-diggers are old-fashioned is a bit much; certainly they are a little too street-wise to be called old-fashioned. However, the wealthy men have learned their lesson that these women are not purely mercenary and that they do, indeed, have hearts, and class boundaries are exposed and disposed of as the play ends happily with everyone either married off or on their way to the altar—Wally is with Violet, Jerry with Stephen, and Mabel with Blake.

Hopwood’s *The Gold Diggers* was a great success, opening at New York’s Lyceum Theater on September 30, 1919 and running for 720 performances (Sharrar 226). Sharrar says this play is the one for which Hopwood is most likely to be remembered, along with his collaboration with Mary Roberts Rinehart, *The Bat*, the movie version of which apparently offered an image which inspired the Batman comics that have been popular ever since. Although Hopwood’s sympathetic, comic portrayal of gold-diggers ushered in the 1920’s, running from the fall of 1919, throughout 1920, and well into 1921 and was produced in London beginning in December of 1926 (Sharrar 226), understanding representations of gold-diggers remain relatively rare throughout the 1920’s. The next chapter will discuss the trend most common in the 1920’s, that found in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which criticizes the gold-digger as an example of the debased

level of American mass culture. While *The Gold Diggers* anticipates a trend which becomes more common and apparently much more popular by the early 1930's, throughout most of the twenties, more often than not, fiction and popular culture tended to mildly punish the gold-digger and then lead her back into the safe containment of middle class morality.

Chapter 2

THE GOLD-DIGGER WHO ISN'T A GOLD-DIGGER AND THE CAUTIONARY TALE—THE 1920'S

*A man loaned me his Cadillac
And I said that I would bring it back.
Oh, tell me, is there anything wrong in that?
Well, it was so cold in that great big boat
So I just, uh, took his racoon coat.
Oh, tell me, is there anything wrong in that?
I took my mother driving on that very same day
And she said, "Dear, you must return this car right away."
But the funniest thing—you'll never guess—
I forgot his name and his address.
Oh, tell me, is there anything wrong in that?*

Helen Kane, "Is There Anything Wrong In That?" (1928)

The 1928 song, "Is There Anything Wrong In That?" as performed by the original boop-boop-bee-doop girl, Helen "Candy" Kane, seems best to capture the spirit of the 1920's gold-digger. One of the most important trademarks of the 1920's gold-digger is her attempt to appear child-like and innocent and her insistence that she is not really a gold-digger at all. Rarely do the gold-diggers of the fiction and films of the twenties blatantly own up to their position; moral and romantic expectations are closely guarded despite the broad cultural, intellectual, and sexual experimentation taking place during the decade. Taboos against social climbing still seem firmly in place, and the gold-digger must do her best to appear cultured and thereby show herself to be deserving of her wealthy lovers or she must, by the end of the text in which she lives, give up her gold-digging ways and accept her position as middle class housewife. Unlike earlier social climbers, the 1920's gold-digger is no longer a tragic figure or a purely mercenary

individual; she is simply a spoiled youth, attractive in her attempts to rise, not bad but misguided and easily brought back into the fold, where she must live as contented wife.

Negotiating the System Through Performance

Like her predecessors, the gold-digger of the twenties must perform convincingly if she is to succeed. As Angela J. Latham reminds us, in *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s*, “the body inevitably functions as a site where cultural values are displayed, contested, negotiated, and ultimately transformed” (11). The gold-digger, sometimes aware of the implications of her actions and sometimes not, uses her body and the way she presents it as a means of negotiating her position within a culture in which her options are severely limited. She often begins by acting as if she is from a lower class than she actually is from, using the shocking behavior of the lower classes to attract attention, acting out the role of a bad, party-hungry, rebellious individual, at once a lower class vixen and a sophisticated urbanite, a role that threatens cultural ideals and assumptions about the purity of ideal womanhood. As Latham says, many “women of the 1920s, keenly aware of the censure they faced, also attempted and sometimes succeeded in thwarting the impositions that would have physically, emotionally, and spiritually restricted their rightful autonomy” (2). However, the twenties gold-digger more often than not must forsake her bad girl pose and learn the stolid act of an older generation not yet ready to entirely throw over nineteenth century values. Latham notes that “unempowered groups are often to some

extent coerced into performing the values of the dominant” (12). She also reminds us that women often participate in imposing detrimental ideologies on themselves and others around them (13). Countless mothers-in-law and matrons attempt to obstruct the progress of gold-diggers throughout the twenties, and often they succeed to some extent. Yet in the gold-digger’s desire to escape from the drudgery of dead end jobs and dull housework through connection to a man of means, she is not simply performing and imitating what she assumes about the sometimes scandalous behavior and luxurious lifestyles of the fashionable set produced by American mass culture, most particularly the set exposed in Hollywood’s gossip magazines. She is also expressing her recognition of the economic and gender inequalities in her culture and outwardly articulating and displaying her sense of injustice.

The quest of the twenties gold-digger, then, is to find a balance between expressing her anger and frustration about her social and economic limitations and learning to work within established social rules which will allow her to have at least a part of what she desires. Molly Haskell suggests that “for the most part the ‘new morality’ extolled in such films [focusing on rebellious women in the twenties] was more rhetorical than real, a vicarious splurge for women who wanted to look and feel daring without actually doing anything, who wanted to shock the world by coming home after midnight—but no later” (76). While it is true that most gold-diggers in the twenties tended to stay within certain bounds of respectability even while rebelling, the return of the gold-digger into the fold by the end of the stories found in the twenties is a return that comes with new insight and appreciation for the values that she comes to accept. It is also a return with greater experience, drawn from experimentation with a devil-may-care

lifestyle. In accepting the values of her parents' generation, she may be undermining her own desires to be equal to the economic and social elites she presumes exist, but at the same time over and over we find twenties gold-diggers finally insuring their own success by giving in to a portion of the values of their parents' generation, only after exploring the possibilities offered by urban anonymity and somewhat more relaxed rules of behavior. In this negotiation, as Latham says, women of the twenties may have been able to find a way to perform their traditional roles while not entirely forsaking their own desires: "Expected at least to conform in their appearance, whether to the mandates of a morality that judged character by hemlines and hairstyles or to the tyranny of the fashion system itself, many women achieved some measure of freedom by disguising defiance to look like conformity" (2). The gold-digger's performance is the performance of an individual caught between youthful exuberance and adult responsibility, but it is also the performance of an individual caught between changing gender and class expectations and attempting to negotiate a new position and new possibilities for advancement within and outside of accepted traditions. Latham notes that "performative behaviors themselves may simultaneously comply with as well as resist such hegemony . . ." (17). The twenties gold-digger is a young woman greedy not only for the greater economic opportunity the twenties seem to offer but also for the greater cultural opportunities that come with it. However, her desires are not merely due to her greed; they are also the expression of her defiant sense of self worth.

The Gold-Digger's Rebellion and Changes in the American Family

Paula Fass, in *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's*, examines how the changing American middle class home, church, and school allowed for freer experimentation and autonomy among middle class youth as the influence of church and family gave way more and more to peer influence. Children and young adults stayed in school for longer periods of time and maintained greater influence over each other while the traditional authoritarian family shifted in the direction of companionate marriage and affectionate relations between parents and children. Fass notes that social scientists in the twenties observed the “democratization of family relations, increases in affection between husband and wife and parents and children, and more latitude for emotional expression for each member of the family” (54). According to Fass, these changes had been slowly occurring since at least the 1880's, but by the 1920's the change was felt more intensely. Fass also notes that critics in the 1920's felt that religion had lost its authority as a moral agent (42). Growing up in a home less restricted by the dictates of church doctrine, a somewhat less formal home where her voice has more authority than it had in previous generations, the young gold-digger-to-be learns that she has a voice and that it might be heard, and that her desires can be fulfilled if she expresses them.

Yet the young woman of the twenties, even while experimenting more than the women who came before her, still tended to guard her virtue and needed to be seen as a good girl and not a loose woman. As Patricia Erens says, “In a sense she was the answer to the American male's dream—combining qualities of both the dark vamps and the golden haired princesses. She promised much, yet in the end proved moral enough to

make marriage feasible” (134). Growing out of modern, mass, industrial culture, the gold-digger, whether she was rewarded or punished, taught the American consumer not only that her desires were important and worthy of expression, but also that she had a commodity that could be traded for economic and social advancement and security, her own body, provided she was able to appear virtuous, innocent, and youthful. With a more emphatically expressed desire to control her own body came an increased awareness of what one could gain by controlled commodification and distribution of one's body.

An example of this new woman in the middle class family is found in a 1922 novel, *Wild Women*, by Miss Janet Lee (Sophomore). In this novel, the patriarchal family is thrown over for something like the companionate, affectionate family we are told by historians had come to exist by the 1920's. At the dinner table, a conversation about the definition of love finds father hiding (and grunting his disagreement from) behind a newspaper while mother gives her ideas about love at the request of her sixteen year old daughter, Janet, the narrator of the story. No stereotypical Victorian patriarchal scene is to be found here. Mother, a modern woman, says, “Well, if you want my definition for Love, I’d say it’s a crazy idea that a young girl is apt to get into her head, that her own home does not offer excitement enough for her and causes her to let some silly young man convince her that darning his socks for him is the most exciting thing in the world” (11). Mother is not the traditional wife who sees herself as the caretaker of her husband, and she teaches her daughters that marriage is not all romantic notions; it has a mundane side as well. The narrator follows her mother’s definition by observing that “Dad disappeared behind the evening paper with a grunt, as usual after being sat upon” (11). The father is a hen-pecked man in a houseful of gold-digging women; we are reminded of

the attorney Blake's claims in *The Gold-Diggers* that every woman is a gold-digger, especially wives and daughters (Hopwood 56). Janet's sister May, when asked to define the same word, says, "I do not waste my time thinking about such silly things as Love. I am not the least interested in such subjects. The only thing that could possibly interest me in any MAN is Money" (13). She then recants, embarrassed at having clearly exposed herself as the gold-digger she is, and says, "Of course, that sounds mercenary I know, but Love won't build houses! And one Must live, you know" (13). Only Aunt Priss and brother Bill's friend Jack defend love. Jack says, "Love . . . is a blessing that only a woman can bestow—a woman that wants to build a home, not a reputation" (14). Aunt Priss, the old maid aunt and resident Victorian in the household, lisps, "Lovth a Beautiful Dream" (14).

The bulk of the novel consists of the adventures of young Janet sneaking out in her older sister May's clothes and too much makeup to meet older men in theaters and restaurants. While May has the freedom to interact unsupervised with young men, Janet, being younger, is supposed to be restricted. Like many gold-diggers in the fiction and film of the 1920's, Janet is spoiled and willful, yet she persistently maintains her own innocence even when exposed in her adventures. After skipping a performance of *Macbeth* that she is required to attend for her English class, Janet says to her mother, "I am not trying to shirk the punishment, even though I am innocent, and if you will excuse me now, I'll hurry to my room to fulfill my obligation to the school that Miss Branson has seen fit to add to my burdens. And in answer to your last question, let me ask, have I ever been untruthful?" (110). Of course, the reader knows just how untruthful Janet typically is, as does her sister May, who laughs and says, "You mean—have you ever been caught?"

(110). Janet is excused from the family table, and proceeds to sneak out to meet a man with her friend Mary. Friend Jack follows the cab in which Janet and Mary are riding, a car chase ensues, and Jack has an accident. The truth comes out, and in this new modern family where supervision is not particularly well enforced or successful, and friendship between parents and children is valued over discipline, Janet is not punished: "Mother just told me to wash my face, and she kissed me rather absent-mindedly . . ." (132).

Father says,

I'm glad my little girl doesn't tell stories—and anytime she wants a new dress, all she has to do is ask Dad—I guess he knows who's his friend in this family. He's been neglecting his pals of late—but I guess we won't have to dress for breakfast, dinner, and supper, and all other occasions however slight, just to wear out the hand-me-downs of the entire family. (133)

In the end, the novel finds May engaged to Jack only after learning that he is a millionaire, a fact that helps Janet escape punishment and the middle-class shame of wearing her sister's cast-off clothing.

Such changes within the family along with increasing urbanization coincided with World War I just prior to the 1920s, providing fertile ground in which the gold-digger might emerge as an icon. Elizabeth Stevenson says of the flapper,

She was born perhaps in the experiences some few women had in the war of 1917-1918, when all sorts of freedoms and equalities with men occurred during the exigencies of the Red Cross and other welfare work among the soldiers or particularly in the excitements of entertaining soldiers. Travel, informality, closeness of contact between the sexes in situations of danger changed the relations between men and women, at least for short periods in certain places; and some of this carried over into the period after the war, when some women began asserting themselves with impudence and self-assurance. (123)

Frederick Lewis Allen connects the breakdown of traditional moral standards not only to the anonymity of the city but also to the effects of witnessing World War I: "A whole

generation had been infected by the eat-drink-and-be-merry-for-tomorrow-we-die spirit which accompanied the departure of the soldiers to the training camps and the fighting front” (78). Certainly representations of the gold-digger of the twenties provide us with ample evidence of the importance of the pleasure-at-any-cost attitude that pervades our image of the roaring twenties. The gold-digger is adamant about having a good time. As Patricia Erens says of the gold-digger’s close relative, the flapper, “If most of her efforts were reserved for getting a husband, at least she was going to enjoy herself first” (133). In Sinclair Lewis’s *Mantrap*, for instance, Joe Easter suggests that instead of throwing a wild drinking and dancing party upon the arrival of Ralph Prescott, he and his wife, Alverna, should invite over the staid members of the Mantrap Landing community, Mr. and Mrs. McGavity and Rev. Dillon. Alverna throws a tantrum in response: “‘Damn you!’ She flew into a tantrum of a four-year-old child. She stamped her foot. She seized his lapels and shook him. ‘I could kill you! You never listen to a word I say! I want a party! I don’t want a funeral!’” (120).

In the 1925 novel *The Flapper Wife*, by Beatrice Burton, the gold-digging Gloria also wants to have a good time and wants a man who can provide her with the means to do so. She says, “I can marry that man and his money too” (14). Gloria has no desire to have children or do housework and expects extravagant gifts from her new husband just because he is a lawyer. She does not take into account that he is a young lawyer, only beginning his career, or that he has gone into debt to provide a comfortable home for her. Shortly after marrying Dick, Gloria decides to throw a party, and when her husband asks what the washtub in the kitchen is for, she responds, “That’s what we’re going to make the punch in. . . . This isn’t going to be a Sunday school festival, sweetie peach. It’s

going to be a real live party with a kick in it! And I want the punch to be one-third fruit juice and two thirds gin” (30). On the morning after the party, however, Gloria’s mother-in-law’s maid, who is temporarily working for Gloria, threatens to leave because she is shocked at the events of the party: “I’ll not be stopping another night in a house like this! Women drinking and smoking and carrying on right in front of my eyes. . . . Look at yourself! Hardly able to stand!” (43). Gloria’s refusal to do her own housework and her insistence on throwing wild parties and cavorting with individuals who do not measure up to the standards of her husband’s family lead to a separation between her and husband Dick. Only when Gloria decides to become a devoted housewife is the marriage saved and the happy ending of the novel insured.

Also typical of the gold-digger is the fact that she sees the relationship between a husband and wife as an adversarial one. Just as the women in Hopwood’s *The Gold Digger* are likened to warriors putting on war paint and doing scalp dances, in other gold-digger texts the relationship between the husband and wife is described in terms of opposition. In *The Flapper Wife* the narrator describes Gloria’s impression of a husband/wife relationship: “A man was a born hunter. He loved the chase. . . . Well, she would keep Dick running after her!” (4). The very behaviors of the new woman of the twenties were, according to Patricia Erens, disruptive and combative: “Lingerie parties, scanty attire, drinking, smoking, frenetic dancing and all-night socials may not seem serious today, but it was open rebellion in the twenties” (133). Erens further notes that in all Clara Bow films “romance becomes a game. . . . The idea is to set up a situation so that the man chases her. For this she is not opposed to being the initiator or using special tactics. These include using legs and eyes—two sure-fire weapons” (136).

An example of this adversarial relationship between gold-diggers and their men is found in *The Play Girl: A Thrilling Romance of a Madcap Gold Digger*, a 1928 novel by John Stone written after a film of the same title. The story begins with the gold-digger's romantic dream of a wealthy soldier. Madge Norton works in a flower shop in the Ritz-Plaza Hotel, and when a dirty old man gets too fresh with her, she locks him in the cooler where the flowers are kept fresh and, as a result, she loses her job. Once again, the relationship between men and women is seen as adversarial, and a young woman must work hard to defend herself. Later in the novel, another wealthy man, Mr. Courtney, who has been buying Gloria expensive gifts, tries to collect the sexual favors he assumes she owes him, and as she tries to defend herself and fight off his advances, Bradley, the real hero of the novel, saves her from the lecherous Courtney. Across the board, almost all gold-digger texts present relations between the sexes as adversarial and gold-diggers as individuals who value a good time over almost anything else. In addition, like Sister Carrie, many of these young women do not assume that they owe their men sexual favors in return for generous gifts.

Rural or Urban? The Gold-Digger on the Frontier

Although gold-diggers tend to exist in urban settings, we find on occasion gold-diggers who leave behind urban environments in hopes of finding wealth on the frontier, but their experience in rural areas tends to be short-lived and unhappy. Sinclair Lewis's 1926 novel *Mantrap* provides one of the most thorough examples of the flapper on the

frontier as well as a good example of the gold-digger who refuses to be known as a gold-digger. New York lawyer Ralph Prescott has gone for a hunting trip in the Canadian wilderness where he befriends Joe Easter, a frontier trapper and merchant. Prescott, Lewis tells us, “knew nothing, nothing whatever, of the trappers and prospectors who still guard the frontier” (15). Joe Easter’s wife, Alverna, is a flapper, formerly a manicurist, whom Joe met and wedded on a trip to Minneapolis. She is an urban creature, and she is one of only two white women at Mantrap Landing. The other, Mrs. McGavity, is a moralistic busy-body who looks down on Alverna Easter’s flirtatious behavior, especially among the Native Americans of Mantrap. Upon their meeting in Minneapolis, Alverna’s attempt to give Joe a manicure is described in terms that sound very much like she is mining his hand for gold as she is described “digging and blasting” at his hand (107). She is an orphan and has ambitions toward a higher class, as is shown by her first dinner date with Joe Easter in an upscale Minneapolis restaurant. Alverna attempts to reform Joe by performing manners well above her social standing, showing her awareness of cuisine that is usually accessible only to individuals of greater financial and social means than she has. Joe has the cash necessary to pay for the meal, and Alverna apes the refinement he lacks. Joe describes their dinner to Prescott: “She taught me a lot of new stuff to eat. Joe Easter, shoveling in alligator-pear salad . . . and lobster Newburg, and kidneys that the waiter—he fixed ‘em right before your very eyes, there on the table, in a chafing-dish” (109). Later, Joe will describe Alverna as an “able-bodied grafter” (124). Mrs. McGavity implies that Alverna is a gold-digger, when she says, “You certainly do know how to handle your husband and make him buy things! You can make him bring you a new dress every time he sticks his nose outside Mantrap . . .” (140). Alverna later

protests, however, angrily explaining to Joe why she doesn't like Mrs. McGavity: "Aside from calling me a fool and a rotten housekeeper, and saying I gold-dig you for all the money I can get and blow it on foolishness, and saying I was a dirty little coward . . . and hinting I was a streetwalker—oh, otherwise she was mother's little sunbeam, the damn' neighing hyena!" (148). As is typical of many 1920's gold-diggers, Alverna does not want to be identified as such. Although she wants the benefits of wealthy and influential connections in an urban environment, she also wants to appear to be moral and by the end of the novel will appear so.

Yet Alverna is a gold-digger. It becomes clear that she has aspirations beyond what Joe Easter and Mantrap Landing can offer. She is described as having "more costumes than were to be expected in a northern cabin" (202), and as she leaves a dance among the Native Americans in Mantrap, after spending the evening dancing and flirting with every man except her husband, the narrator says, "The onlookers made way for her, and she flowed through them, bowing right and left, looking as much like the lady of the manor as was possible . . ." (184). Her albeit racist performance is the performance of a queen, perhaps a movie queen, someone who clearly and defiantly expresses her belief in her own superiority. However, the presence of the suave urbanite Prescott reminds Alverna of what she is missing in the city. Like the chorus girl narrator of Roy L. McCardell's "An Experience With a Jay-Town Mayor," Alverna will not be content with her wealthy bumpkin. Her aspirations toward a cultural position higher than her birth and education have provided also are suggested as she says, trying to impress Prescott, "You'd be s'prised if you knew how I read the magazines and everything. And books, too, when I get time . . ." (223). Reading, to Alverna, is a sign of affluence and cultural

superiority, and she desperately attempts to show that she has access to this greater cultural capital. Also important to Alverna are connections with the right kind of people, something she lacks in Mantrap. She recalls her work as a manicurist at the Hotel Ranleagh in Minneapolis and attempts to impress upon Prescott her own importance as she describes the important people she met there:

Why the people that I've met—and talked to! Senators and bankers and automobile racers and bishops and big advertising men— And then Joe expects me to settle down here! When he could just as well start a store in Winnipeg (I hear that's a dandy town) or some place like that, and see life! The people I've met! . . . Once, when he was in Minneapolis, touring, I did the nails of Jack Barrymore! (153)

In Mantrap, Alverna does appreciate having her own home and kitchen, something luxurious in comparison to the flat she shared with several other young women in Minneapolis. She says, "I like my own kitchen and my own house, and doing things in my own time. . . . I couldn't stand going back and having to be in the shop exactly at eight-thirty, and taking all the mean customers . . ." (154-5). This sentiment is repeated as Alverna says, "What am I going to do, Ralph? I'm scared to stay here, and so bored! Joe won't support me Outside. And how could I stand going back to manicuring, or being on my feet all day long in a store, or maybe a hired girl getting bossed around" (158).

Her ambitions become still clearer as she flirts with Ralph Prescott, and finally as she manipulates him into taking her back to civilization with him, knowing that he has fallen for her flirtations and will not refuse her, despite his loyalty to his new friend, Joe Easter. Alverna's true gold-digging nature surfaces late in the novel, after she has run away with Ralph Prescott, and as they are making their way through the wilderness. She

asks her companion, “What do you make, Ralph? I haven’t got the least idea if you make four thou a year or four hundred thou” (264). He responds, “Well, say about forty” (264). Alverna is impressed and says, “Forty–thousand–dollars–a–year! Gee! Well, I hope you’ve saved it, because when we get to Winnipeg you got to lend me my fare home, and enough to buy a dress and some shoes and stockings. Think of having clean silk stockings again!” (264). Although it is unlikely that Prescott and Alverna will ever meet again once they part, in order to distance herself from a distasteful reputation as a gold-digger Alverna demands a loan, not a gift, from Prescott, thereby attempting to insure her reputation as a good girl.

In the film version of *Mantrap* (Victor Fleming, Paramount, 1926), Alverna (Clara Bow) tells Prescott (Percy Marmont) that she “only flirted” with an airplane pilot who finds them lost in the wilderness, “because it was necessary. . . . To get the eats one of us had to flirt with him—and it couldn’t be you, could it?” Clearly, to Alverna, gold-digging, or using her physical charms for economic gain, is a survival skill. The film, however, emphasizes the gold-digger theme more directly than the novel from its very beginning. In the film, the reason Ralph is so stressed and needs to get out of the city is because of his gold-digging clients. The film opens with Mrs. Barker (Miss du Pont), a blonde gold-digger, rubbing her foot against Prescott’s leg as she says, “A clever lawyer like you should get me alimony and the custody of the Cadillac.” A cue card tells the viewer that “Ralph Prescott feels that even when a woman gives a man the best years of her life, he gets the worst of it.”

However, as is often the case in gold-digger texts of the 1920's, the gold-digger in Lewis’s novel and in the film adaptation turns out to be not quite what she seems. In the

film, Alverna goes back to Joe, and it seems that all will be well between the two of them. Although she starts to flirt with a Mounty who comes into their store, she stops, then hugs Joe and tells him to hold onto her because she is “slipping just a little.” In the novel, her solid morals appear, and she tells Ralph why she cannot marry him once she gets a divorce from Joe Easter: “They’d say, ‘That Jane’s a vulgar manicure girl, that’s what *she* is,’ and you’d get the toothache in your social standing. And you’d begin to feel you’d done Joe dirt, and—you’d hate me” (266). Alverna’s ambitions take on a new direction as she decides she doesn’t want to be kept by either Joe Easter or Ralph Prescott. As the two men argue over her future, Joe wanting to send her to live with his aunt in Iowa and straighten her out and Ralph wanting to take her to New York and marry her, Alverna says, “You men think you can dispose of me; you think you can buy and sell me and give me away, as if I were a dog. You could of, once. You can’t now!” (271). This gold-digger is atypical in that in the end she no longer wants her man, and she no longer wants to gold-dig. She will no longer be the kind of person who will sell herself to the highest bidder. As the story becomes a rather typical, perhaps subtly homoerotic or at least homosocial buddy novel, Prescott tries to decide whether to take Alverna or Joe to New York and a new, potentially more affluent future. Prescott chooses Joe, and in a scene paralleling Joe’s description of his first date with Alverna, the two men enjoy a dinner in a swanky Winnipeg restaurant where Prescott orders dinner for the two, and once again Joe feels overwhelmed by his lack of survival skills in an affluent urban setting. Although Joe is tempted to gold-dig Ralph Prescott, in the end he jumps off the train to New York at the last moment, leaving Ralph to go alone. Both Alverna and Joe seem, at least temporarily, cured of the desire to gold-dig, and the three are finally separated and

returned to their ideal environments, as Ralph heads back to New York, Alverna heads back to Minneapolis, and Joe seems destined to disappear once again into his wilderness.

The 1925 film *The Gold Rush*, directed by Charles Chaplin for United Artists, makes the connection between the literal gold-digging of the wilderness and the figurative gold-digging of ambitious women even clearer, yet it still maintains the 1920's emphasis on the gold-digger who really does not want to appear to be a gold-digger at heart. When Georgia (Georgia Hale), a Klondike dance-hall girl, first encounters the unsuccessful prospector (Charlie Chaplin), she does not even notice him as she walks right past him into the arms of another man. Like Alverna Easter, Georgia is bored in the wilderness and says, "If I could only meet some one worth while—I'm so tired of this place." Meeting a man who has the means to get her to somewhere else is her ticket to success. Throughout the film, Chaplin's prospector is the butt of jokes perpetrated by Georgia and her friends. However, when Chaplin's character helps a miner with amnesia, Big Jim McKay (Mack Swain), to find his stake, McKay gives him a share of the gold and makes him a millionaire. On the ship back to civilization, Chaplin sheds his urban millionaire's clothes, including top hat and dress overcoat, and puts on his old mining clothes to be photographed. In this old garb, he runs into Georgia once again. Thinking he is a stowaway, she tries to hide him, but then finds out he is really a millionaire. The two agree to marry, and the film leaves the audience with the comfortable knowledge provided by a happy ending in which the woman gets her man and his money too, but she does not have to be considered a gold-digger. Yet no mention is made of marriage until after Georgia learns that Chaplin's prospector is rich.

Despite the occasional appearance of gold-diggers in rural settings, generally they

are most at home and successful in the city. Lynn Dumenil notes that industrial advances along with the devastation caused in Europe during World War I led to a newfound prosperity and a “get-rich-quick mentality” in the United States (7). This mentality was combined with concern over “urban poverty, decay, and disorder” and “the decline in individual and community autonomy and the hardening of class lines . . .” (Dumenil 6). America’s cities seemed to be places where an individual could become wealthy overnight, yet the majority of urban citizens did not share in the full benefits of this prosperity. Many lived in urban squalor. If most people’s reality did not include wealth and lives of luxury, the perception that gaining wealth and access to luxury was possible was an important part of the culture and potentially an important part of explaining the increasing popularity of fictional gold-diggers who made the dream come true. Even though the reality was that only a minority of the population did actually live in luxury, Erenberg notes that “in working-class, black, and immigrant cultures, new institutions of amusement and leisure were growing into general respectability, offering immigrant children and middle-class urbanites visions of a more luxurious and experiential life, one not bound by the old restrictive ways” (61). The working classes gained more free time as the work day was shortened, and they gained access to new forms of entertainment. As restrictions formerly imposed by family and church were becoming less influential in urban areas as workers gained more leisure time, new amusements such as the movies, dance halls, and saloons appeared (Erenberg 66).

Blurring the Boundaries of an Urban Frontier

The disillusionment identified by Frederick Lewis Allen combined with a new and more uncontrolled freedom offered opportunities for the young to experiment with new ways of behaving “beyond the eyes of their parents” (Erenberg 66). As Erenberg says, “Uncontrolled at home, poorly paid, and shielded by urban anonymity, the young went out to amusements for fun, adventure, and excitement. Their ‘lower’ appetites were no longer sublimated by routine factory work or by the family, and they were lured even further along the path to prostitution by urban, mixed-sex amusements” (64). He continues, “In this dangerously open environment in the anonymous bright-light zones of Times Square, respectable women could mix promiscuously with people of unspecified moral character from whom they had been rigidly separated since the 1850s” (77). The resulting freer range of opportunity for unsupervised contact between young men and women as well as the increasing transgression of class and race boundaries within this generation allowed freer contact between people of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.

Gaylyn Studlar describes this phenomenon in *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* as she discusses one of the most famous former taxi dancers of the time, Rudolph Valentino:

Valentino’s vampish sexual desirability, combined with the knowledge that he had lived off women in his past career, fed into the popular assumption that he was, and continued to be, a lounge lizard who pursued the distinctly unmasculine goal of living off the millions of female fans who turned America’s movie palaces into “Valentino traps.” (153)

Valentino was regarded by many, especially by men, as a menace, precisely because of

his status as an Italian immigrant, his former life as a paid companion to women, and his “woman-made masculinity,” a new form of “transgressive masculinity” almost entirely aimed at women, dangerously attractive to women and preying on women’s desires for something other than the he-man vitality of the Douglas Fairbanks types (151).

According to George Chauncey, in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Underworld, 1890-1940*, by the turn-of-the-century, traditional masculinity was threatened on various fronts as urban men lost a degree of their independence as they moved into closely supervised factory jobs and as women demanded more autonomy and gained greater control of the education of young boys (Chauncey 111-2, Studlar 29-33). The result, says Chauncey, was “what the historian Elliot Gorn has called a ‘cult of masculinity’ Bodybuilding and prizefighting became immensely popular activities: one let boys and men develop their muscles while the other let them express their admiration for men who literally embodied the new manly ideal of muscularity” (114). This new masculine type was in direct opposition to the type represented by Valentino in his films.

Thin and lithe in their movements, often dark of complexion and thereby already regarded as sinister by many, displaying costuming that clearly was outside the bounds of the accepted masculinity of many established American men of the time, and a little too involved with the world of women, these men were often ethnic outsiders and already suspected by established American males of wanting to steal their women in order to become more American and gain access to the closely guarded opportunities America ostensibly offered. Studlar describes the negative attitudes of many men toward these dangerous “mollycoddles”: “American women had gone ‘dance mad’ and were

consorting with 'lounge lizards,' 'cake eaters,' 'boy flappers,' 'tango pirates,' and 'flapperroosters' who, for money, mindless pleasure, or the lack of anything better to do, indulged dangerous feminine desires—on the dance floor and off" (151). One critic compares these dangerous men to more traditionally masculine men and finds them sorely lacking: "These are male ingenues, the civilian wearers of wrist watches, the cigarstand Romeos, the disporters of silk handkerchiefs in a corner coyly protruding from the breast pocket, the smokers of perfumed cigarettes, and nine out of ten of them are 'dancing just simply divinely'" (Quoted in Studlar 151). In a rather bizarre irony, these men were perceived as threats to American women precisely because they lacked traditional masculinity and clearly were marked as homosexual. By the turn-of-the century, Harlem and Greenwich Village were home to many outwardly expressive homosexual men. Many, especially from the lower classes, called themselves fairies and adopted feminine behaviors and confrontational dress ranging from complete cross-dressing to seemingly innocent accessories—handkerchiefs or lapel flowers of a specific color or kind. As Chauncey states, the word gay "referred to something brightly colored or someone showily dressed—and thus could easily be used to describe the flamboyant costumes adopted by many fairies . . ." (17). In larger cities sexual boundaries were also more freely and openly transgressed, and it was not an uncommon practice for young heterosexual, white couples to go "slumming" in predominantly black or visibly gay neighborhoods which were often, as in the case of Harlem, the same. Although ironic, it is perhaps not surprising that established American men also felt threatened by the outward displays of homosexuals in urban centers and used similar, derogatory descriptions for gay men and for the ethnically different men they perceived as sexual

predators who were trying to steal their women away.

One work which connects this urban blurring of boundaries with the gold-digger is Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923). Upon first meeting John Manning, Sonya Vrunsky begins plotting to marry him and says to herself, "An end to darkness and dirt! I've found my deliverer! Already I'm released from the blackness of this poverty. Air, space, the mountain-tops of life are already mine!" (5). To her co-worker, Gittel Stein, she says, "Manning and I are more alike than born equals. He is trying to get rid of his riches and I'm trying to get rid of my poverty" (6). Stein, as irritated as she is awed by Vrunsky, places Vrunsky within the realm of the gold-digger, working to manipulate men for her own economic gain, when she says, "Women like Sonya are a race apart. . . . They can no more help vamping men than roses can help giving out their perfume" (11). Vrunsky, like most gold-diggers, is most impressed by Manning's appearance, the outward physical manifestation of the good taste that distinguishes wealth, and she looks "up in admiration at Manning, her heart pierced by the cultured elegance of his attire" (2). In order to get Manning to marry her, Vrunsky believes that she must change her appearance and says, "I'll rob, steal or murder if I got to—for clothes to make myself beautiful for him" (8). Her performance works, and Jacques Hollins, formerly Jaky Solomon who has changed his name in order to escape anti-Semitism and raise himself to a higher social class as a clothing designer in a posh, Fifth Avenue shop, designs a stunning dress for her at no charge, simply because he recognizes and appreciates her passion for beautiful things. Manning is deeply impressed by her performance and the fact that she is able, he believes, to rise above her own poverty as well as the snobbish sophistication of women of his own set and present herself in glorified dress. She also

borrows money from a loan shark and threatens her landlord in order to get her apartment redecorated, again to fool Manning into believing his own foolish assumptions about the noble poverty of the Jewish ghetto he idealizes.

Her landlord, Rosenblatt, even confuses Vrunsky with the gold-digging chorus girls of Broadway and threatens to throw her out of her apartment, saying, “This place ain’t fit for a classy little queen like you” (53). The term queen, an old slang term for a prostitute, shows exactly what Rosenblatt believes Vrunsky and the chorus girls of Broadway to be. In reference to her meeting him in a restaurant in the dress made for her by Hollins and inviting him to her apartment, he asks where she got such fine clothes if she is a “respectable” girl, then goes on to ask, “Why did you meet me like—like a restaurant pick-up and invite me to—to—” (54). Clearly, Rosenblatt thinks Vrunsky is sexually available for hire, when in reality, like most gold-diggers in the twenties, she is actually only for sale if a marriage license is included in the price. Vrunsky threatens to tell her readers in the *Ghetto News* how ready Rosenblatt was to go home with her when he thought she was a prostitute. She also tells him that Manning is coming to visit her, and Rosenblatt realizes that he might be fined for the deplorable condition of the apartments if Manning does visit. Rosenblatt gives in to Vrunsky’s blackmail threats and agrees to meet her demands.

With her new clothes and her newly redecorated apartment, Vrunsky is finally able to land Manning, but the marriage is doomed from its very beginning. Manning’s friends look down on Vrunsky, and she is embarrassed by the appearance of her own friends in Manning’s family mansion. She finds his family mansion cold and unfriendly, not a home at all but more like a “museum” (112). Vrunsky sees the ineffectiveness of

Manning's social reform programs within the Jewish ghetto, but feels incapable of explaining how the programs are failing. Finally, when Vrunsky's trickery in landing Manning is exposed, the marriage ends. Although the divorce of Manning and Vrunsky is atypical of the gold-digger novel of the twenties, Vrunsky's change of heart is true to the pattern of the twenties gold-digger story, except for the fact that in order to give up the marriage and retain her dignity, she also gives up the wealth that came with the marriage, a rare sacrifice in the world of gold-diggers. She tells her husband how she lied to get him, and she realizes that all she has gained is not what will make her happy. Sonya Vrunsky has found her moral ground and must leave behind the empty, wealthy world she thought she wanted and gained by deception. Vrunsky's reclamation within the clearly defined ethnic boundaries is not typical of other gold-digger novels of the early twenties. In most cases, especially in film and popular novels, marriages are saved as the gold-digger agrees to stop vamping men and start being a good wife. Vrunsky, however, loses her marriage. Unlike most gold-diggers in the twenties, and like the much earlier social climber found in Dreiser's *Carrie*, Vrunsky works her way back up, starting out with a job as a waitress, then talking her way into a job as a seamstress where her desire to bring beauty to the impoverished masses shows itself in the outstanding garments she creates. In the end she marries Hollins, thereby reinforcing the cultural boundaries which had previously been questioned by the novel. The ethnic and class boundaries previously crossed by Vrunsky are now safely intact once again, as she marries her equal in ethnicity and artistic talent, a man who, like her, rose from the Jewish ghetto. It is also important that when she marries Hollins, he is wealthy; although the gold-digger lost her first marriage and the financial security that came with it, in the end she has her wealthy

husband. Another difference between Vrunsky and other gold-diggers of the period is that her desire to leave behind the urban ghetto may not only be a selfish desire. The novel has a political edge which suggests that Vrunsky's desire to rise from the ghetto is not only a desire for her own rise, but also a desire to change the conditions in which others exist there. By the end of the novel, Vrunsky has convinced Hollins to market beautiful clothes to poor people because, she says, "Beauty should be for those who love beauty, not only for those who can buy it" (178). Vrunsky, unlike her gold-digging sisters, is not purely selfish. While Vrunsky's success is in part insured by her own hard work, and through persistence and lucrative marriage she is able to advance to a prestigious career as a dress designer, most women's opportunities in the work world were much more limited.

Gold-Diggers and Working Women

With increasing autonomy at home and increasing freedom outside the home, women could express their desire to better their social and economic circumstances but also were frustrated with the limited opportunities they found now that they had more freedom to roam outside the home. It is true that more and more women were moving into the work force during the early decades of the twentieth-century, but it is also true that within the workplace opportunities for advancement were very limited for women. As Dumenil says, working women in the 1920's "shared a narrow and highly sex-segregated labor market which classified their jobs as 'women's work,' and thereby

devalued them” (112). Professional jobs for women were few and far between. As late as 1930, Dumenil says, only fourteen percent of working women were in professional positions (116). Most working women found themselves in dead end positions in retail sales, clerical work, domestic service, and factory work. Dumenil claims that “only 10 percent of all wives worked in the 1920's” and that “the female workforce was preponderantly young” (113). The films of the 1920's provided numerous images of the working woman. However, “in the early part of the decade movies were rarely concerned with the nature of women’s work itself. Rather they featured salesgirls and clerks who found in their jobs the environment for meeting desirable husbands. . . . [A] few films linked consumption and marriage by presenting some working women as ‘gold diggers’” (115). Women were expected to stop working when they married. Latham points out that her own grandmother, a teacher, hid her marriage from her employers so that she could continue working (1-2). The taboo prohibiting wives from working indicates a strict enforcement of the idea that husbands must provide support for wives who must, in turn, stay at home. In a sense, this helps to explain the pressure faced by a woman to become a gold-digger. If job opportunities and the possibilities for advancement within a limited work world were few and far between, and if married women were not supposed to work outside the home at all, then what other opportunity for economic advancement was available to women? Gold-digging, then, can be seen as a political act by which women insist on opportunities for advancement in one of a very few socially sanctioned channels.

The gold-digger was one kind of attempt to renegotiate position by working within the system already in place but rapidly changing in the early twentieth century. As

Constance Rosenblum states in *Gold Digger: The Outrageous Life and Times of Peggy Hopkins Joyce*, "The life of Peggy Hopkins Joyce is a reminder of how very pinched a woman's options once were and how much drive and determination women needed to make their way in the world, even if that way might strike us as tawdry" (8). Madge, in *The Play Girl: A Thrilling Romance of a Madcap Gold Digger*, says of her job at the flower counter, "This is the darnedest job! . . . Men insult you and thorns stick into you" (25). Alverna, in *Mantrap*, says she could not stand to go back to being a working girl, "on her feet all day long in a store" and "getting bossed around" (158). In the film *It* (Clarence Badger, Paramount, 1927), department store clerk Betty Lou (Clara Bow) sets her sights on the store's owner, Cyrus T. Waltham (Antonio Moreno), as a means of escaping from behind the lingerie counter and her home "in that fashionable downtown suburb—Gashouse Gables," a place that is anything but fashionable. Yet the film also suggests that Betty Lou is a good girl and does not really marry Waltham just because he is rich but because she loves him. In *The Flapper Wife*, Gloria looks forward to marriage as an opportunity to escape "from the necessity of working six days a week as a typist for a real estate firm" and the narrator tells us that Gloria thinks "a job and a business career were all very well in their way for girls who weren't beautiful and desirable . . . girls whom men didn't want" (3). She also sees marriage to a wealthier man as an escape from the drudgery of housework. She says, "I've made up my mind that I'm going to be Dick's sweetheart . . . not his housekeeper. I'm going to stay in bed every day until noon, and keep my looks and my husband" (2) unlike her mother, who was "chained to the cradle . . .," "always mending," with "nothing for her but housework and her family, year after year" (1). In the end, Gloria is reclaimed as a good girl and a good middle class

housewife who no longer expects a maid to do her work for her and who is learning to enjoy housework. All of these characters attest to the fact that opportunities for women in the workplace and in the home seemed dreary and limited.

Working women, however, attempted through performance and costuming to demand that their worth be recognized, despite limited means and few opportunities for advancement. Working class women often displayed a growing desire to be recognized as people who were as legitimate as the elite. In texts that use the gold-digger type, one often sees a growing dissatisfaction with the gold-digger's limited access to the cultural capital which differentiated high and low culture, distinguishing the elite from the masses. Susan Porter Benson describes how women salesclerks rejected their servant-like roles behind store counters and on shop floors and "asserted either equality with or superiority to their customers. Copying the dress and manners of members of a higher class both protected their turf as workers and displayed their acumen as consumers" (259). Saleswomen imitated their customers in an "attempt to copy, on a saleswoman's budget, a wealthy woman's style of dress and a way of asserting equality with her. Such habits as calling customers 'Dearie' were similarly a way of breaking out of the subordinate position defined by the counter" (259). Nan Enstad notes that in the early twentieth-century "middle- and upper-class women critiqued working women's display of fashion as 'putting on airs' and 'playing the lady.' Working women countered that they *were* ladies, and should be treated as such" (9-10). These working women used the performance of what they perceived to be upper class attitudes and dress as a means of asserting their worth and confronting those who looked down on them. With this in mind, it becomes easy to see that when Madge locks the dirty old man, who happens to be

wealthy, in the flower cooler, she is not simply being impertinent as her boss feels she is; she is establishing her equality to him, refusing to be seen as a servant or a prostitute for him to use. Similarly, when Betty Lou, in *It*, is seated at a quiet corner table in the Ritz because the maitre'd does not think she looks like a suitable customer for such a posh establishment, she says, "I don't crave this table. When I'm in the swim, I want to be with the goldfish." She has taken her shop girl's dress and remade it to look more expensive, and in the restaurant she moves a flower which she has pinned to her dress and repositions it to imitate the style of Adela Van Norman (Jacqueline Gadsdon), Betty Lou's somewhat more sophisticated blonde opponent who is trying to land Cyrus Waltham. In doing so, she attempts to establish that she is as much a lady as Adela. Although she is a shop girl, Betty Lou sees herself as equal to any of the women dining in the Ritz.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and Standards of Taste

At the same time that many gold-digger texts were suggesting that working class women saw themselves as equals to wealthier women, many texts which employed gold-diggers as characters, especially in the 1920's, seemed to uphold categories of taste similar to those of upper class women, categories of taste which seemed the exclusive property of upper class women. As Pierre Bourdieu says, "The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it *naturalizes* real differences, converting

differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature” (68). In other words, real differences that are acquired culturally are designated as differences that are based on natural causes; the poor do not understand high culture, according to this train of thought, because they are naturally inclined to baser tastes. These distinctions hold true at a variety of class levels, and each class believes its own tastes to be naturally superior to the tastes of the classes below it. This is especially true in texts in which the gold-digger is from a middle-class background as in the case of Gloria in *The Flapper Wife* in which middle class taste is emphasized over the lower class behaviors of the gold-digger. In this text, the gold-digger, Gloria, finally learns that social acceptance and position is more important than having an affair with the flighty, cowardly actor, Stanley Wayburn, who won’t stand up for her. If she maintains her desire to hold onto her autonomy by insisting on being lazy, associating with men of bad reputation, and hosting scandalous drinking parties, she will lose her husband and the status that comes with his mother’s influence within upper-middle class social circles. In this middlebrow, middle-class cautionary tale, Gloria gives up her gold-digging ways to become a model housewife to her attorney husband and a perfect middle-class citizen who belongs to her mother-in-law’s women’s social organizations.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes is the most informative, complex, and arguably the most culturally significant and artistic novel focusing on gold-diggers that examines the fear of the erasure of cultural boundaries. Like *The Flapper Wife*, Loos’s novel explores distinctions between the upper and lower classes and between an intellectual elite and the masses who lacked the capability to understand distinctions between high and mass culture or the possible consequences of the erasure of boundaries between those

categories. It is telling that the book was inspired, in part at least, by cultural critic H. L. Mencken. According to Loos, Mencken was amused by the “idiotic” remarks made by blonde actress Mae Davis, one of the “transient sweetheart[s]” of George Jean Nathan (*A Girl Like I* 264). Loos was jealous of the attention these intellectual men gave to a woman she perceived as a dumb blonde. She created Lorelei Lee as a means of attempting to understand and at once criticize the fact, or so it seemed to her, that intelligent men, and especially Mencken, “preferred a witless blonde” to her (*A Girl Like I* 265). Loos was small of stature, thin, and dark haired; Mae Davis was tall and blonde. The location of Lorelei Lee’s birth, in Little Rock, Arkansas, was chosen because of Mencken’s “essay on American culture in which he branded the state of Arkansas as ‘the Sahara of the Bozart’” (*A Girl Like I* 266). In “The Sahara of the Bozart,” Mencken criticizes the post-Civil War South as a place “submerged in an industrial plutocracy that is ignorant and ignominious . . . pathetically naive and inconsequential” (72). In this instance he is discussing the state of Virginia, which he considers the highest cultural point in the South during his time. He blames the ignorance of the South not only on the economic and moral destruction caused by the Civil War but also on inbreeding and ethnic problems brought about by Celtic, French, and African cross-breeding with Anglo stock. Mencken’s racist arguments are working from the assumption that certain boundaries, when transgressed, result in a demoralization of cultures. Mencken also condemns the erasure of cultural boundaries in numerous other essays, such as in “On Being An American,” in which he says, “This dominance of mob ways of thinking, this pollution of the whole intellectual life of the country by the prejudices and emotions of the rabble, goes unchallenged because the old landed aristocracy of the colonial era has

been engulfed and almost obliterated by the rise of the industrial system . . .” (103). The old aristocracy, according to Mencken, seems to have been capable of setting a standard by which the culture could live and thrive, whereas the industrial culture which replaced it is debased and run by the rabble, the mob, the mass man.

The link between Anita Loos and H. L. Mencken, and the resulting point of inspiration for *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, suggests that Loos’s book will include consideration of some of the ideas held by Mencken and other cultural critics of the time who were concerned, in their varying ways, with the erasure of cultural standards and boundaries. In this light, it is easy to read Loos’s novel as a critique not only of this loss of standards but also as a critique of the critics who are so concerned with this loss, the intelligent men whom Loos so admired and consistently failed to attract. Richard J. Schrader cites Loos’s autobiography, *A Girl Like I*, to claim that “Loos had hoped to marry ‘a man of brains’ and was appalled to discover that she was smarter than her husband” (2).

The humor of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is aimed at a sophisticated, intelligent audience. To begin with, the language used by Lorelei Lee is carefully crafted so that an intelligent reader will immediately see her foolishness, an attempt to bring into glaring focus the inane, superficial thought of the women who seemed to entice intelligent men of her social circle, a gentle reminder for Mencken and those like him. The book begins with these lines:

A gentleman friend and I were dining at the Ritz last evening and he said that if I took a pencil and a paper and put down all of my thoughts it would make a book. This almost made me smile as what it would really make would be a whole row of encyclopediacs. I mean I seem to be thinking practically all of the time. I mean it is my favorite recreation and sometimes I sit for hours and do not seem to do

anything else but think. So this gentleman said a girl with brains ought to do something else with them besides think. And he ought to know brains when he sees them, because he is in the senate and he spends quite a great deal of time in Washington, d. c., and when he comes into contract with brains he always notices it. (3-4)

The humor here does not seem like it should be particularly difficult for the average reading adult. The use of words such as “encyclopediacs” and “contract” instead of “contact” seems easy enough to understand. Lorelei’s use of “authrodox” (8) to describe the religious affiliation of Gus Eisman’s mother and the misspelling of the word “negligays” (154) are only a few of the numerous examples of her butchering of the English language. However, such errors probably were not uncommon in the writings of adults with limited education at the time. The humor of Loos’s novel sets up a clear distinction between those who read from a position of greater intellectual and cultural capital and those who might not recognize the numerous “errors” purposefully placed in the passage by Loos.

In addition, the inane chatter of the writing might not be detected by readers who lack education and a critical eye for this kind of detail. The assumption that a senator, someone who spends time in Washington, D. C., “ought to know brains when he sees them” also seems an obvious smirk at cultural critics who found American politicians of the time less than satisfactory, suggesting that ideas about culture and breeding, not to mention modern sciences of the time such as eugenics, are forgotten by men of intelligence when confronted with a pretty face and blonde hair¹ (Loos 3-4). Mencken implies the importance of culture and breeding and the superiority of what he assumes to

¹ For a discussion of the “science” of eugenics and its application to racialized whiteness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, see Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz’s introduction to *White Trash: Race and Class in America*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 1-12.

be the right kind of ethnic and racial makeup. Loos's novel seems to ask us to consider the possibility that if intelligent men are as debased as the rest of their culture, in forgetting their own ideals at the sight of a daft beauty, then what hope is there for recovering traditional standards or developing new ones.

Loos also takes on the notion of what it means to be educated in the first place and suggests what cultural critics of the time have stated outright, that education and intelligence are not necessarily related since educational institutions, like the other institutions of modern culture, are debased. Gus Eisman and the other men who attempt to educate Lorelei convince themselves that they want to educate her because, according to T. E. Blom, they are "unable to admit either their sexuality or that of the women they desire . . . insisting that they want the companionship of a 'refined' girl whose 'brains' have been 'improved'" so that they can "carry on their affairs under the guise of providing Lorelei with moral, intellectual, or spiritual guidance" (43). Eisman provides her with books by "a gentleman called Mr. Conrad" which "all seem to be about ocean travel" but which Lorelei doesn't bother to read (10). Instead, she gives them to her maid, asking her to read them and report back in case she is asked her impression.

Eisman also wants Lorelei to

have what the French people call a 'salo' which means that people all get together in the evening and improve their minds. So I invited all the brainy gentlemen I could think up. So I thought up a gentleman who is the professor of all of the economics up at Columbia College, and the editor who is the famous editor of the New York Transcript and another gentleman who is a famous playwright who writes very, very famous plays that are all about Life. (8)

Of course, this gathering of great intellectual minds turns into a drinking party, at which Lorelei's mind has probably not been "improved." The next morning Lorelei says, "So of

course the place was a wreck this morning and Lulu and I worked like proverbial dogs to get it cleaned up, but Heaven knows how long it will take to get the chandelier fixed” (9).

These fictional intellectuals, like the real intellectuals in Loos’s circle of friends, seem to lose their high ideals when in the presence of Lorelei Lee and bootleg liquor.

When traveling in Europe to improve her mind, Lorelei finds European cities inferior to American cities. To Lorelei what is cultured, refined, and worthwhile is what is familiar, convenient, and fun. Of London, she says, “I mean we got to London on the train yesterday as the boat does not come clear up to London but it stops on the beach and you have to take a train. I mean everything is much better in New York, because the boat comes right up to New York and I am really beginning to think that London is not so educational after all” (45). She goes on to praise the Ritz in London because “it is delightfully full of Americans” and “I always think that the most delightful thing about traveling is to always be running into Americans and to always feel at home” (46). In Paris, she unwittingly criticizes the French as she says, “The good thing about the French is that every time a French gentleman starts to squeal, you can always stop him with five francs, no matter who it is. I mean it is so refreshing to listen to a French gentleman stop squeaking, that it would really be quite a bargain even for ten francs” (70). She decides that the “Foley Bergere” was “devine” and “very very artistic because it had girls in it that were in the nude” (88). French men do not compare to American men because “American gentlemen are the best after all, because kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever” (75). Obviously, Lorelei’s standards for defining art are not the standards that a critic like Mencken might desire although he might have found such claims amusing. Lorelei’s standards place the sexual

and economic above all else. Art is defined by nudity, and genteel manners pale in comparison to expensive jewelry. Lorelei is a true American, the democratic, mass culture produced individual who cultural critics of the time so feared, and yet, according to Loos, some of those critics, particularly Mencken, were completely drawn in.

Lorelei finally marries Henry Spoffard, a film censor of great wealth who professes high moral standards and who

loves to reform people and he loves to censure everything and he really came over to Europe to look at all the things that Americans come over to Europe to look at, when they really should not look at them but they should look at all the museums instead. . . . So Mr. Spoffard spends all of his time looking at things that spoil people's morals. So Mr. Spoffard really must have very very strong morals or else all the things that spoil other people's morals would spoil his morals. (105)

Not realizing what her words imply, Lorelei sees Spoffard as he wants her to see him, but due to Loos's clever manipulation, the reader recognizes Spoffard's hypocrisy. Lorelei convinces Spoffard to finance a film based on a scenario by her newest beau, Mr.

Montrose. The film is based "on the sex life of Dolly Madison" (152). American history becomes a debased film that sells sex instead of culture, all funded by a man who claims high moral standards. Lorelei, a good consumer and, as such, a good American, reduces everything to economics, including her education at the hands of wealthy gentlemen. She says, "I mean it seems to me a gentleman who has a friendly interest in educating a girl like Gus Eisman, would want her to have the biggest square cut diamond in New York"

(9). Unlike most of the gold-digger texts of the twenties, in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Lorelei, although married at the end of the novel and safe in her financially secure position, is anything but reclaimed. This failure to reclaim Lorelei fits within Loos's criticism of her culture, however, because it suggests that the gold-digger gets away with

it precisely because few men are capable of seeing or willing to see through her and condemn her for her mercenary behavior.

In the end, however, Loos's critique of American intellectuals may have failed since, according to Rhonda Pettit, "when *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* came out in book form in 1925, single women were reading it as a serious how-to manual . . ." and "Loos's ridicule became a recipe because in a time of limited economic opportunities for women, Lorelei always won, and those she vanquished continued to love her" (51). She goes on to claim that "Lorelei is not a 'symbol of the lowest possible mentality of our nation,' but a cover girl for the American Dream" (53). The criticism contained in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* may be missed by the average reader, and the book becomes an exercise in proving the debased nature of American culture made up of ill-informed mass men and women. The fact that, unlike in many gold-digger texts from the twenties, in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Lorelei ends her story as a success who does not give up her flirtatiousness or her parties also suggests that in debased American democratic culture "Lorelei takes pride in her society's egalitarian outlook that allows everyone to climb to the top" (von Ankum 166), a perception that was of grave concern to many critics of the time.

Like other gold-diggers of the period, Lorelei wants to appear refined, and her friend Dorothy becomes her foil, or so Lorelei believes. In actuality, it is Dorothy who provides a realist's voice, accurately placing Lorelei in her position as a pretentious, gold-digging mercenary that men foolishly adore and of whom women like Dorothy (and Anita Loos) are in awe, albeit awe with a critical eye. While it is all too clear that Lorelei is, indeed, a gold-digger and unashamedly so, she never once completely acknowledges her

position as such even while she is openly voicing her desire for wealth in exchange for her company. While Dorothy, like Loos, is critical of Lorelei, she clearly also admires her audacity and her success. While Lorelei may be only vaguely aware, if at all, of the confrontational manner of her behavior, insulting all that might be considered cultured by cultural critics, Dorothy, like Loos, is aware of Lorelei's brazen insult to high culture and those who fear its loss in the face of the newly enfranchised mass man. Susan Hegeman defends Dorothy on that the grounds that she is a "counterpoint to Lorelei's comic reversals of convention: she is a critic, a truth teller, and the voice of liberated, unhypocritical moral authority" (529). Dorothy recognizes what a fool Lorelei is, at least in what she says, but she also recognizes that Lorelei's foolishness is not important and does not get in the way of her success. While Lorelei has no awareness of real distinctions between high and mass culture, she certainly understands her own economic position and what it takes to get by in America in the early twentieth century. Unlike many other gold-diggers who make real attempts to become refined, Lorelei's lack of refinement is unimportant to her wealthy benefactors. She is the ultimate democratic success story, winning the appreciation of aristocrats, politicians, artists, critics, and businessmen despite her buffoonery. In this sense, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* points toward representations of the gold-digger that will become common in the thirties. In those texts, the wealthy become buffoons while the working classes are shown to be more savvy. Lorelei possesses her own degree of street smarts, and while it is clear that she is a fool, at least regarding distinctions of taste, she is also very capable of surviving and improving her living circumstances within American mass culture. While the wealthy individuals she meets may not be presented as buffoons, they certainly seem to be the butt

of Lorelei's inadvertent jokes, jokes that Dorothy and Loos seem to enjoy thoroughly.

That Certain Thing (1928): Democratic Attitudes Toward the Gold-Digger

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes is not the only work that begins to move toward this more appreciative presentation of the lower classes. One film from 1928, *That Certain Thing*, directed by Frank Capra for Columbia Pictures, stands out in that it does seem to recall the more democratic attitude toward the gold-digger found in Hopwood's *The Gold Diggers* in 1919 but for the most part absent until the first half of the 1930's. In the film Maggie Kelly (Aggie Herring) encourages her daughter Molly (Viola Dana) to marry within her own class, to a train conductor. Molly refuses and exclaims, "Listen, ma--when I marry, it'll be a real millionaire--not a street-car conductor." After work one day in a hotel frequented by rich men, Molly runs out the door to catch a street-car and literally runs into Andy B. Charles, Jr. (Ralph Graves), and both fall onto the sidewalk. She is unimpressed until she recognizes his name in connection with the A. B. C. Restaurants she sees along the street. The opportunistic Molly fakes a leg injury so that he will give her a ride home. Andy asks her to go out with him that night, and like a good gold-digger, she borrows dancing shoes and a new dress from her seamstress neighbor so she can appear in suitable costume in the company of this wealthy gentleman. Apparently the costume change works, for while they are at a nightclub that very night, he proposes to her, and they marry on their first date.

Andy goes on a spending spree and provides Molly with a new wardrobe and has

the bills sent to his cheapskate father, and the marriage is announced in the newspapers. When A.B. Charles, Sr. (Burr McIntosh) finds out what his son has done, he cuts off his son's allowance and forces Andy to return the gifts he has bought for Molly. Like a good, reformed gold-digger, Molly runs away from her husband so that his father will forgive him and restore his allowance, lying to her husband and telling him she is leaving him because he no longer has any money. She is willing to sacrifice her love (and her economic security) for the well-being of the man she has come to love. When she returns in shame to the tenement in which she had lived with her mother, neighbors stare at and taunt her, one yelling at her, "Gold-digger!" Andy does not believe that she does not love him. She cannot hide her feelings for him when he confronts her, and they are reunited, but he is incapable of earning a living through work because, just as Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* is unable to survive on his own manual labor, Andy has been part of a pampered, wealthy class for too long and cannot succeed when he tries to work for a living. Andy takes a job at a construction site, and on his first day, his incompetence gets him fired. However, before he can leave the site, Molly arrives with a box lunch for him. The workers have gone into Charles, Sr.'s restaurant and brought their meager lunches outside. Andy overhears one worker say, "The food at those A. B. C. dumps is terrible. I'll bet they use a razor to cut their ham." Realizing that they are unhappy with their lunches, Andy shares his lunch with them. They are very pleased with the lunch Molly has made for Andy, and as a result, he sees an opportunity for the two of them to support themselves based on the combination of the skills they have learned in their respective cultures. Andy asks the workers, "Say, you'd pay fifty cents for a lunch with sandwiches like that, wouldn't you?" The workers respond, "You've said a mouthful." Together,

Andy and Molly build up a business that competes successfully with Charles, Sr.'s, eventually utilizing an assembly line factory system to produce the box lunches. However, because he sees how successful his son and daughter-in-law have become, Charles, Sr. forgives the marriage, buys their business for \$100,000, and makes his son the company's manager. A happy ending is secured as the reformed gold-digger gets her man.

The gold-digging Molly fits the 1920's format by trying hard to leave behind an identity as a gold-digger once she discovers that she really loves her wealthy husband. She still comes out on top as the wife of a wealthy man's son. However, the film also tends toward more overt celebration of democratic ideals. Just as Hopwood's *The Gold Diggers* shows women of the working classes to be smarter and more capable than rich men, *That Certain Thing* also shows Molly's ability to outwit her wealthy father-in-law. In addition, *That Certain Thing* suggests that there are competing cultural capitals at work at any given time, and each economic and social class has its own capital. Andy is incompetent in a working class world because he does not have the survival skills to live in that world, survival skills that are taken for granted by members of the working class. Although those skills seem natural to the working class because they have been trained into them from birth, they are completely foreign to Andy. Similarly, because she has been brought up in the lower classes, Molly is unable to pass as a respectable, upper class girl and thereby gains the disdain of her father-in-law. Like *The Gold Diggers*, *That Certain Thing* appears to be a good example of John Fiske's bottom-up notion of popular culture, as it suggests that elevating the desires and needs of the working classes is the true aim of popular film. In an early example of what will much later come to be known

as multiculturalism, the film suggests that by working together the lower and upper classes can help each other, combining Molly's knowledge of the desires and needs of the working classes with Andy's business sense to bring about a resolution in which everyone involved is happy.

The Failed Gold-Digger in the Works of Dorothy Parker, Jean Rhys, and Nella Larsen

While the film *That Certain Thing* looks forward to trends that will become common in the early thirties, the next two years, 1929 and 1930, will find some of the most scathing critical cautionary tales in which are found characters who are unsuccessful as gold-diggers. The works of Dorothy Parker, Jean Rhys, and Nella Larsen provide examples of women writers who identify an important problem in the gold-digger texts of the previous decade as they examine the gold-digger who fails in her attempts to attract and keep a wealthy provider. In identifying this problem, these writers to some degree regress to the tragic moralism of earlier tales of social climbers such as Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, but they do so with a new sympathy for these gold-diggers, recognizing that their tragic endings grow not out of individual but cultural failings.

Parker's poem "One Perfect Rose" begins with two stanzas with a romantic description of a gentleman's choice to send the poem's female speaker a flower as a token of his love. The final stanza of the poem reverses what Parker sees as the nonsense of this romanticism as she says,

Why is it no one ever sent me yet

One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
One perfect rose. (73)

This poem quickly captures the cynical nature of several works in the late twenties that recognize one major shortcoming in the gold-digger lore of the decade—what happens when a woman is not beautiful or lucky enough to land a good rich man to provide for her? What happens when a woman finds a man but cannot remain young, beautiful, light-hearted and superficial enough to keep him? In several other poems, a similar theme is pursued. “Prophetic Soul” (1926) tells us that love has little value and will not “get me much” (66). In “The Choice” (1926) the speaker has chosen a poor man over a rich one and concludes that “somebody ought to examine my head” (96). In “Bohemia” (1928) the speaker has grown tired of the artists and creative types she has been dating and expresses her desire to find a safe and financially secure man who “solicits insurance” (114). In all of these cases, a woman remains dependent on a man, not only for economic and social advancement. In some cases her survival depends on her connection to a man who will take care of her. As Rhonda Pettit says, “It seems likely that Parker, separated from her first husband and at times struggling to make ends meet, would cringe at the ease with which Lorelei Lee made her way in the world” (52).

The message behind the works of Parker, Larsen, and Rhys seems to ask young women to consider this important issue and not head naïvely into a gold-digger/sugar daddy relationship. A woman must be self-sufficient and not count on men’s generosity. As Parker knew, one cannot always depend on a man to take care of her; she may have to fend for herself: “Parker, long before her declaration of communist sympathies in the late 1930s, may have appreciated the novel’s [*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*] humor, but must

have recognized as well the danger of its false depiction of female success within patriarchal capitalism” (Pettit 53). Biographer Marion Meade says Parker “was a married woman who insisted on being called *Mrs.* Parker and who was said to keep a husband few had seen in a broom closet and to practice free love. Scandalous stories of extramarital affairs and abortions persisted in circulating, but that was largely because she made no attempt to deny the rumors, since they were true” (xvii). Parker’s lack of success in romance was well-known. In 1928 she divorced Eddie Parker after a stormy marriage and long separation, and her failed romances were often the subject of her writing. In “On Being a Woman,” she wrote,

And why with you, my love, my Lord,
Am I spectacularly bored,
Yet do you up and leave me—then
I scream to have you back again? (123)

Meade tells us that *Sunset Gun*, the 1926 volume in which “On Being a Woman” was collected, was dedicated to one of her lovers, John Garrett, a man Parker “adored” but who “was a flirt who enjoyed being pursued and competed for by flotillas of women, especially those who were married or divorced” (190). Parker also regularly experienced financial difficulties and in response to a question concerning her worries about regularly not meeting deadlines commented, “I have an editor. I have an overdraft at the bank. I have a pain in the eye” (Meade, 189). Yet despite her position as a celebrity, especially after *Enough Rope* became a best-seller in 1927, and her well-established connection to and popularity among wealthy people, Meade tells us that while she “tolerated her wealthy friends and even gave the appearance of enjoying their company . . . she invariable found them dull, silly, and almost totally ignorant” (187).

In Parker's 1929 short story "Big Blonde" the protagonist Hazel Morse "exhibits the same 'good time' behavior with a number of men as does Lorelei, and is initially successful" (Pettit 52). However, instead of receiving jewels and expensive trips to Europe, Hazel's gifts from men tend to be much more mundane. The result is that Hazel has not built up a fortune that will keep her self-sufficient if she fails to marry a wealthy man. Similarly, Lorelei's outcome is not entirely positive. In the 1927 sequel to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, entitled *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, Lorelei is bored with her lucrative marriage. However, compared to Hazel in "Big Blonde" her life is quite good. While Lorelei continues to receive expensive gifts and live in the luxury Henry Spoffard's wealth allows, the most frivolous gift Hazel Morse receives is a sealskin coat (Parker 199). For the most part, her rent is paid, and she is provided with food and basic clothing, garments she has to alter so that she can fasten them as she grows heavier with age, lack of physical activity, and too much liquor (191). Unlike Lorelei, Hazel does not end up married. Instead, she marries Herbie Morse near the beginning of the story, and as she becomes more melancholy and dissatisfied, their marriage falls apart, and he leaves her. Then, she moves from one adulterous relationship to another, uninterested and hardly able to keep track of them: "Then Sydney married a rich and watchful bride, and then there was Billy. No—after Sydney came Fred, then Billy. In her haze, she never recalled how men entered her life and left it" (200). Her last provider is Art who "was short and fat and exacting and hard on her patience when he was drunk" (202). As her looks and mood decline, Hazel finds herself connected with less and less attractive men who are able to provide for her only the basic necessities of life. In the end she unsuccessfully attempts suicide and her maid Nettie finds her

overdosed in bed wearing “a pink nightgown, its fabric worn uneven by many launderings” (206). Clearly, this description of Hazel’s attempted suicide and the worn clothing she wears illustrates the negative side of gold-digging when the gold-digger is unable to use her body as a means to control men. As Pettit says, “Lorelei controls her men, while Hazel is controlled by hers” (53). Lorelei ends up with diamond tiaras while Hazel takes an overdose of sleeping pills while wearing a faded pink nightgown.

Amelia Simpson argues that Dorothy Parker’s “Big Blonde” also complicates the gold-digger by racializing her, foregrounding the presence of three “dark” characters, especially Hazel’s “colored maid” Nettie (Simpson 105-13). She notes that Hazel Morse is a prisoner of the men who care for her, unlike Lorelei Lee: “Parker insistently presses her protagonist into the corsetted role of the party girl. . . . Apart from her role as a party girl, she hardly exists” (107-8). Hazel’s performance as party girl becomes her trap. Her marriage to Herbie Morse ends precisely because within the comfort of marriage she finds an opportunity to express emotions other than gaiety, and Herbie cannot stand the change he sees in her. Because Nettie refuses to understand and sympathize with Hazel’s misery that leads to her attempted suicide, Simpson claims that “Nettie becomes the final enforcer of the social code that imprisons the big blonde. It is Nettie who delivers the last blow. Parker makes the black figure the embodiment of the bonds of slavery” (110). Hazel is the blonde possession of men, expected to always be cheerful and fun in this story in which the focus is on “the commerce of human bodies” (Simpson 113). As Simpson convincingly states, “Parker’s women are not free. The authority they wield is contingent, and so they are rendered vulnerable, easily disabled, replaced. To the degree that Parker compares the status of women like Morse to that of slaves, ‘Big Blonde’

represents a radical confrontation with American identity” (113-4).

A tale similar to “Big Blonde” is found in Jean Rhys’ 1930 novel *After Leaving Mr. MacKenzie*. Like Hazel Morse, Julia Martin is a woman in her thirties who finds herself attached to various men of moderate means as she ages and who recognizes that women are at the mercy of the men who can choose to keep them or not: “It seemed to Julia that at each window a woman sat staring mournfully, like a prisoner, straight into her bedroom” (336). As her luck and finances run out, she is reduced to considering outright prostitution although the idea is clearly distasteful to her, but the young man who pursues her, after a quick look into her face, says, “Oh, la la. . . . Ah, non, alors,” and then walks away from her (341). Julia’s loss of beauty prevents her from taking the final step towards prostitution, and she recognizes, “The joke’s on me this time” (341). The novel ends with Julia’s accidental meeting with Mr. MacKenzie at a café where she begs him for a loan which he gladly gives her and then hastily departs (343). An even stricter cautionary tale is presented in director Harry Beaumont’s 1928 film *Our Dancing Daughters* (MGM) in which gold-digging Ann (Anita Page) falls down some stairs to her death, after posing as a good girl long enough to steal away the boyfriend of Diana Medford (Joan Crawford) a good girl who plays the part of a frivolous flapper.

Complicating the negative image of the gold-digger presented by Parker and Rhys is Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, published in 1929, in which Clare Kendry, a woman of mixed race passes as white in order to enjoy the benefits of marriage to a racist, wealthy, white husband. Clare purposely cuts herself off from the African American people with whom she grew up so that she will not be identified as black and thereby lose her lucrative marriage to John Bellew. Clare says to Irene Redfield, a friend from her youth whom she

encounters by chance and with whom she rekindles a friendship because of the isolation she feels due to her lack of contact with her community of origin and her dishonest relationship with her husband: "Money's awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think, 'Rene, that it's even worth the price'" (190). Clare, unlike Irene, does not come from a middle-class background. Her father was a janitor, and after the death of her parents she was raised by two great-aunts who were white and who "treat Clare as if they were the ugly step-sisters in the Cinderella tale . . . [and] echo nineteenth-century paternalist pro-slavery arguments by pronouncing the curse of Ham upon Clare, assigning her a subservient position in the family . . ." (Sullivan 375). Nell Sullivan notes that "Clare confides to Irene that the economic and psychological impact of the aunts' beliefs drove her to discard her black identity and become white. She 'wanted things,' she tells Irene, and clearly she means not only material goods but love and emotional comfort . . ." (375).

The benefits of passing are more complex than simply economic since during the 1920's when the story was written, it was common and legal practice to provide facilities which excluded people of African heritage. Irene's initial meeting with Clare is in a restaurant on the roof of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago, a white only establishment. She does not immediately recognize Clare as her childhood friend or as another black woman, and she fears, "could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (178). There had been rumors, even when Clare and Irene were teens, about Clare's "having been seen at the dinner hour in a fashionable hotel in company with another woman and two men, all of them white. And *dressed!* And there was another which told of her driving in Lincoln Park with a man,

unmistakably white, and evidently rich” (181). Clare’s racial passing is the means by which she gold-digs white men. However, her long period of passing and denying her race and her community of origin lead her to desire reconnection to people of color through Irene and another friend Gertrude. Irene, too, may be guilty of gold-digging although she does so within her own class. She marries Brian, a man who is described as too dark to pass, and “admits that, in marrying Brian, she has sacrificed love and passion for security . . .” (Blackmore 475).

Another element of Larsen’s novel that complicates the gold-digger lore is the possibility that Irene, and perhaps Clare, may also be passing as heterosexual to benefit from connection with men who will provide for them. As Corinne E. Blackmer notes, “Larsen’s novel not only explores a legally fraudulent *interracial* union in the marriage between Clare Kendry and John Bellew, but also subtly delineates the *intraracial* sexual attraction of Irene Redfield for Clare, while the former projects her taboo desires for Clare onto her husband Brian . . . who the text implies might be homosexual [and who] evinces no sexual interest in women” (52). According to Blackmer, “While Clare becomes adept at subverting expectations and eluding capture through selective shape-shifting and camouflage, Irene has a self-divided consciousness both as an African American and a woman, for she believes she can gain security and meaning solely through marriage . . .” (59). What Blackmer refers to as “the racial and sexual masquerades” of Irene and Clare, while complicating the position of the gold-digger in the twenties, also point directly to a crucial aspect of the gold-digger—her performance as something other than that which she is for economic and social gain. Clare performs on many levels—as a woman of a higher social class than the one from which she comes, as a

white woman, and as a heterosexual. Irene performs as heterosexual and, according to Sullivan, as white, “not by adopting a white identity as Clare does, but by adopting white values, including white standards of beauty” (374).

In the end the performances of race and sexuality of Clare and Irene lead to Clare’s tragic ending as Irene pushes her from a window to her death on the pavement below. The cautionary tale in this case, as in the case of Yeziarska’s *Salome of the Tenements*, tells readers not to deny their roots, ethnicity, and race as the cross racial gold-digger is severely punished. However, Clare’s tragedy is also Irene’s. As Blackmer says, “In removing Clare . . . Irene also eliminates the possibility of her own freedom from the shackles of the racial and sexual conventions that imprison her” (63).

While the works of Larsen, Rhys, and Parker all regress to the tragic pattern in which gold-diggers are enmeshed at the turn of the century, they do so with greater sympathy for the characters they create. While the tragic dimensions of gold-digger stories will become much less common during the early years of the 1930’s, sympathetic representations of these women will be a general rule. Even in the case of tragic gold-diggers such as stenographer Flaemmchen (Joan Crawford) in *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, MGM, 1932) the representation will offer an understanding explanation and justification of the reasons why the individual has resorted to gold-digging as a means of survival, and seldom will the gold-digger face the dismal outcomes faced by Clare Kendry or Hazel Morse. By the mid 1930’s, however, stricter enforcement of pre-existing movie production codes and more conservative politics in reaction to the ravages brought about by the Great Depression will lead once again to the containment and punishment of the gold-digger.

Chapter 3

THE HEYDAY AND DECLINE OF THE GOLD-DIGGER—THE 1930'S

*There's a tale of two little orphans
Who were left in their uncle's care . . .
But, oh, the luckless pair
For the uncle, he was a cruel trustee
And he wanted to rob them of gold
So he took them thence to a forest dense
And he left them to die of cold . . .
When fortunately there appeared
A rich old man in a big sedan. . . .
When he saw the girls he cheered . . .
And covered them with useful things
Such as bonds and stocks and Paris fox
And Oriental pearls in strings
And a showcase full of rings. . . .*

Cole Porter, "Two Little Babes in the Wood" (1924)

*I have never envied folks with money,
Millionaires don't get along so well,
I have you but haven't any money,
Still the combination would be swell.*

Harry Warren and Al Dubin, "With Plenty of Money and You (Gold Diggers' Lullaby)" (1936)

Perhaps the limited success of Cole Porter's "Two Little Babes in the Wood"¹ is due to ill timing, since it was first used on the Broadway stage in 1924, several years before the gold-digger reached her height in popularity during the Great Depression.

¹ According to *The Virtual Cole Porter*, "Two Little Babes in the Wood" was originally written for *The Greenwich Follies of 1924* but cut from that show within a month of its opening at the Shubert Theatre in New York City. A shortened version of the song was later used in *Paris* (1928), and it was apparently not recorded until 1935 when a series of Porter songs from the original Broadway production of *Anything Goes* (1934) were released ([wysiwyg://13/http://members.fortunecity.com/edgarpangborn/porter/greenwich.html](http://members.fortunecity.com/edgarpangborn/porter/greenwich.html)).

Although many songs from the Broadway stage of the time did achieve success on the popular music charts, according to Joel Whitburn's *Pop Memories, 1890-1954: The History of American Popular Music*, this one did not; the song never appears in Whitburn's lists of top popular recordings. Despite its relative obscurity, the song captures the mood and spirit of the gold-digger of the early 1930's as a trend developed in which many writers and film-makers desired to explain and sympathize with the plight of the poor, down-trodden, but good-hearted girl who was depicted as someone driven by circumstances to a life as an economic and social mercenary. The desire to see characters sympathetically who only a few years earlier might have been viewed tragically or as bad girls in need of discipline grows out of the obvious social and economic upheaval brought about by the Great Depression. Because the gold-digger's actions are now a part of a broader cultural examination of what it takes to survive, she is no longer the childish, spoiled baby who needs to learn a valuable lesson in American economics—that, as Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger had told us over and over, one must work hard to be rewarded—and social responsibility—that even in breaking with the past one must still respect her elders and the traditions of her family. In the thirties, gold-diggers become wiser and more worldly, and they are no longer driven so much by greed and a desire to be pampered as by need and a desire to feel secure in the knowledge that they will be able to hold onto basic necessities such as food and shelter. The gold-digger of the early thirties has less of a lesson to learn than she has one to teach to the irresponsible rich who are depicted as being out of touch with and unconcerned about the struggles of the working classes, despite the fact that the wealthy suffered economic losses during the Depression, too.

Gold-Diggers and Poor, Rich Buffoons

Robert Bendiner cites a *New Yorker* correspondent in Paris regarding the reversals of fortune faced by Americans stranded in Paris in the early years of the Depression:

“Waiters staked students to a week of breakfasts, butlers presented their mistresses with potted plants as a sign of sympathy, and sewing women appeared after a weekend in the country with gifts of fresh-laid eggs” (33). Dixon Wecter notes that “at the apex of the economic pyramid the number of persons reporting an annual income over a million dollars fell from seventy-five in 1931 to only twenty the next year” (18). This economic upheaval is depicted in the 1932 film *Night After Night* (Archie Mayo, Paramount) as formerly wealthy socialite Geri Healy (Constance Cummings) is forced to gold-dig and eventually is destined to marry gangster Joe Anton (George Raft), a man with little to recommend him culturally except his cash, his high aspirations, and his speakeasy which happens to be located in what was once the Healy family’s luxurious townhouse. Healy’s reversal of fortune is rather like that of Lily Bart, but Healy’s existence within a comic world and in a film that needs to give hope to viewers with little left to lose leads her to the happy ending that eludes Bart. While certainly the fortunes of some wealthy individuals may have decreased, their situation remained luxurious in comparison to the plight of many working class people of the time.

Bendiner questions the logic of those who sympathized with the wealthy as he quotes another Depression-era article from the *Financial Chronicle* and then comments sarcastically on the merit of that journalist’s claims: “‘The wealthy and cultured have all suffered and been compelled to make sacrifices,’ it said. ‘The simple fact is that the

greater the amount of wealth any individual has the greater has been his loss.' Logically sound, it was nevertheless the kind of arithmetic that may well have brought on the new mathematics" (49). Bendiner then goes on to examine the huge economic gap that continued to exist between the wealthy and the working classes. In 1933, he says, "when Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth heiress, received \$45,000,000 for becoming twenty-one years old . . . the pay of Woolworth salesgirls was down to \$11 a week" (51). And while "more and more debutantes were either dispensing with or turning them [debutante balls] into let's-go-proletarian larks," the wealthy were increasingly becoming the target of criticism from politicians and the press (52). As "more than at any other time in American history, a powerful spotlight was trained on their [the wealthy elite's] activities . . ." more attention was also focused on the illegal activity of some of these individuals (49). As Bendiner says, "The wicked ways of the financial elite came almost to be taken for granted by a generation just then reaching the age of awareness" and the result was a growing mistrust of the wealthy at a time when many people were living without basic necessities (54). As movie stars, sports heroes, singers, and aviators became the heroes of the day, the very wealthy continued to lose ground as America's heroes and suddenly found themselves depicted as the villains and buffoons of the Depression. Terry Cooney says that relatively innocuous "'screwball comedies' . . . made the rich seem appealingly idiosyncratic . . . [and] poked fun at social pretension . . ." (81).

This trend toward a distrust of and even hatred toward the rich became a common theme in the films and fiction of the early 1930's, and one result was that the gold-digger could be seen in the most positive light focused on her since Hopwood's 1919 play. The popularity of the gold-digger in the 1920's and the relatively sympathetic presentation of

gold-diggers in film, song, and fiction in the twenties combined with the economic and cultural changes of the early 1930's to provide the most fertile environment in which the gold-digger's case could be stated openly and without fear of punishment. Lawrence F. Hanley stresses that the crisis of the Great Depression was "an eruption of class difference, an explosion of repressed social conflict that threaten[ed] to overwhelm dominant ideological narratives of collective identity and unity" (243). Morris Dickstein notes that

the anarchic comedies of the early 1930s, with their legendary speed, wit, sexiness, and irreverence, showed how our moral limits and social conventions had been undermined by the depression. . . . [I]t is no accident that so many screwball comedies, stage musicals, and Astaire-Rogers films are set in the world of the very rich, for that world had not only the money but also the mobility that was denied to so many during the depression. (237)

Laura Browder also identifies this shift in 1930's culture as she discusses the ways in which radical writers of the time began to identify private life as political as women escaped from the home, at least in fiction, and learned not to depend entirely upon men for support (91-8). Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon also identify the radical shift in 1930's popular and literary culture and note that American workers' theater "accepted the major premises and conventions of popular performance and even used them to communicate their lessons about working class power and politics" (211). As Ethan Mordden says, in the thirties, "[G]old diggers were no longer like the heroine of *The Gold Diggers* [by Hopwood], who starts out fleecing a snob and then falls for him, or like that of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the celebrated Lorelei Lee, who lives off the fat of the grand. Talkie gold diggers stood just this side of having to steal to eat" (161).

In the thirties popular culture became a site in which the needs of previously

underrepresented groups became a primary topic of discussion, and although the underclasses might not always be idealized or placed upon pedestals, they were more often than not presented in a sympathetic light, and representations of the downtrodden who attempted to rise through means previously deemed immoral were often presented during the early years of the depression in ways that attempted to justify and explain the need behind the employment of these means. Even in a film like *Freaks* (Tod Browning, MGM, 1932) in which the gold-digging Venus (Leila Hyams) is eventually shown to be evil and is punished brutally (turned into a half-chicken, half-human member of the freak show gallery), the real focus of the film is on how Hans (Harry Earles), the midget she gold-digs, has been driven to employ other members of the freak circus to destroy her due to his own position as an outsider. And although Mae West's films often presented her lounging in her boudoir with black maids catering to her whims, those maids were not treated with the indifference or abuse other white film characters might have shown their servants. While Ramona Curry says that "West's recurrent juxtaposition with characters cast as racially distinct emphasizes the star's own identity, enhanced through her blondness, as a privileged white woman," she also notes that "[m]ost of the maids have comparatively extended speaking roles in exchanges with the star" (15, 14). While racial boundaries remained intact, West's characters treated their black maids as companions and friends. In addition, Curry sees West's career as not only reflecting the racial stereotypes of the time but also as transgressing racial and sexual boundaries (12-17).

The freedom of movement suggested by West's transgressions is something we often tend to think of as being characteristic of women in the twenties. However, according to several scholars this mobility was something that was more of an actuality in

film in the early years of the thirties. Molly Haskell says, "It was really in the early thirties that the revolutionary twenties' spirit, at least the questioning of marriage and conventional morality, took hold" (45). Mick LaSalle also points out that the actresses who populated the screen in the early thirties were a generation more at ease with their femininity and who took for granted the things that their mothers' generation had fought for: "The suffragists were their parents' generation. They picketed and voted and wrote pamphlets and went to jail so their daughters could drink, smoke, do the Charleston, and have fun. The actresses of the flapper generation . . . reflected the ease and confidence of people who'd come of age in relaxed times" (76). He goes on to quote a statement made by actress Dorothy Mackaill in 1930 as evidence of this relaxation: "We have tremendous vitality of body and complete emancipation of mind. None of the old taboos . . . mean a damn to us. *We don't care*" (76). Mackaill's comments, although perhaps overstated and inapplicable to the average young woman of the time, lend credence to the suggestion that the actresses who became some of the most important women on the screen in the first half of the thirties did not feel confined in the ways that some women of their mothers' generation had and did not feel a need to either uphold the traditions of the past that had confined their mothers or fight to keep those traditions from being imposed upon them. The sense of self-assurance these women brought with them to the screen allowed the early thirties to become

the best era for women's pictures . . . the five years between the point that talkies became widely accepted in 1929 through July of 1934, when the dread and draconian Production Code became the law of Hollywoodland. Before the Code, women on screen took lovers, had babies out of wedlock, got rid of cheating husbands, enjoyed their sexuality, held down professional positions without apologizing for their self-sufficiency, and in general acted the way many of us think women only acted after 1968. (LaSalle 1)

Just as the Depression made heroes out of the poor and villains or buffoons out the wealthy, the same economic disruption helped provide an opportunity in film for the concerns and strength of women to be expressed and illustrated. Loren Baritz also notes that

[t]hroughout the culture of the depression, this rediscovered symbol of the strong woman, also a feature of the earlier pioneers as well as immigrants, helped people to think about the depression, find an emotional anchor and grounds for hope. Her radiance would warm the cold, protect the weak, and guard the only sphere that truly mattered—the home. (142)

While most of the gold-diggers of the films and fiction of the thirties do not fit this image of the strong mother-woman, the protector of home and hearth, they do usually share with her a core strength that helps not only her but those around her to survive in adverse situations. Especially in *Three Broadway Girls* (Lowell Sherman, Atlantic, 1932) and *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, Warner Brothers, 1933) countless examples of women working together to help each other through difficult economic and cultural distress are found.

Hope, Opportunity, and Economic Failure

Not only were the films of the early thirties politically motivated, suggesting an awareness that women needed to look out for each other; accepted ideological purposes were also served by the film industry. Terry A. Cooney notes that “[w]hen economic collapse threatened the American promise, perhaps the strongest response was to reassert

the patterns of established myth” (61). Lea Jacobs comments that the gold-digger film no longer served as a cautionary tale for young women. Instead, in the economic disaster of the Great Depression, the role model of the gold-digger became even more alluring as her “fall is no longer a question of the corruption or debasement of innocence but rather a stroke of good fortune for a poor girl on the make” (67). Cooney notes that in response to the economic collapse of the Depression, “Articles by the score insisted that America was still the land of opportunity” (62). Gold-diggers in the films of the thirties suggest one means of offering hope to Americans by giving them tales of young women who improved their lives by the hard work of getting men to take care of them financially. Cooney notes that “[t]hree of the most successful film musicals of the decade appeared in 1933—*42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Footlight Parade*—all of them offering plenty of singing, dancing, and glittering escapism but also telling stories of people who got a break or had an idea that opened the door to success” (79). Andrew Bergman, in *We’re In the Money: Depression America and Its Films*, says, “Hollywood would help the nation’s fundamental institutions escape unscathed by attempting to keep alive the myth and wonderful fantasy of a mobile and classless society, by focussing on the endless possibilities for individual success . . .” (xvi). One form that this fantasy took was the gold-digger who had grown up in the affluent twenties and reached maturity in the years just after the stock market crash. Looked at in this way, it becomes clear that to some degree gold-diggers in the popular culture of the early thirties helped to uphold the ideological underpinnings of capitalist American myths by illustrating that through persistence, Cinderella might still find and benefit economically from her Prince Charming.

In addition to offering opportunities for women to find strength in numbers and the probably contradictory opportunities to uphold the ideologies that defined women's positions within capitalism as dependents, there was also, in film as in fiction, a need for escape and titillation to take viewers' and readers' minds off of their troubles. In a world in which money was scarce, producers of film and fiction had to come up with new means to sell their product. According to LaSalle, due to the fact that as money grew tighter for most Americans, film attendance dropped, and in order to keep people in movie theaters, studios were "obliged to make movies sexier and more explicit" (77). As Cooney comments, "Moviemakers, like advertisers, reacted to hard times with an intensified competitiveness seldom restrained by the boundaries of good taste, and they delivered products with a tone and content provocative to established sensibilities" (74). Curry also notes this trend as she says, "Heads of studios in the early 1930s recognized not only the spectacle of beautiful female stars, but also the representation of active, even predatory, female sexuality as a commodity that enhanced their products' marketability in a severely depressed economy" (46). Elizabeth Kendall also notes that movie makers had to reshape film not only due to the economic changes brought about by the Depression but also because of the popularity of sound film as "the very sound of speech destroyed the intimacy of silent films" (7). She says,

In early 1933 Warner Brothers revived the movie musical, which had all but disappeared in 1931 and '32, restyling it for Depression audiences with new topical content and new character types. The most vital figure in *42nd Street* (March) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (June) was the precocious gold digger-chorine, impersonated by ingenues Ginger Rogers, Una Merkel, Joan Blondell, or Aline MacMahon with some junior Mae West touches. (35-6)

As a result of the economic and technical changes of the late twenties and early thirties,

the world of the gold-digger in American film also had to change. Pamela Robertson sees the role of the Hollywood musical as being very similar to the role of camp, as it “bridges the gap between high culture and low, without being merely pluralistic” (59). Especially in films such as *The Gold Diggers of 1933* which seem to have at their base a focus on reconciliation, a move toward erasure of such boundaries, along with a wink at the absurdity of the world in which those boundaries are created, the blurring of cultural boundaries, as in the career of Mae West, makes sense.

While the early thirties offered some films that blurred boundaries between levels of culture in an attempt to teach the rich not to remain aloof but to help the poor through the Depression, in the films and fiction of the 1930's less emphasis is placed on the importance of the gold-digger's performance except when it is necessary to dupe the foolish rich into sharing the wealth. An important theme that emerges as crucial during the early thirties is the theme of the noble, proud poor. It is not as important for gold-diggers to act the part of the upper class; it is more important for them to be themselves or play a part in order to teach a lesson about stereotypes about the working classes. As Robertson notes, “In pretending to be gold diggers, the women play upon the trope of female commodification and undermine the viewer's belief in that trope by suggesting that it is only an act” (73). Even when gold-diggers attempted to act “refined” as in many of Jean Harlowe's films, the effect was comic and unconvincing. For example, in *The Girl From Missouri* (Jack Conway, MGM, 1934) Edie Chapman (Harlowe) is obsessed with being a lady and acting refined, but just as Geri Healy (Constance Cummings) sees through Joe Anton's (George Raft) act of refinement in *Night After Night* (1932), Tom Paige, Jr. (Franchot Tone) sees through Edie's act, belittling her cheap imitations of

fashionable clothing, tearing her dress which he knows marks her as cheap within his posh social set. As literary and filmic attempts at more earthy portrayal of a romanticized, admirable working class of the 1930's becomes accepted practice, performance becomes either a poorly played act that does not work or part of deception that the audience is in on as when Carol (Joan Blondell) pretends to be trashier than she really is in order to get even with the snobbish J. Lawrence Bradford (Warren William) in *The Gold Diggers of 1933*. In another example from *Dinner at Eight* (George Cukor, MGM, 1933), Harlowe's Kitty Packard alternates between the rough dialect of a barroom when she is alone with her maid, the affected imitation of the speech of the society matron when she is around people she sees as refined, and the baby doll cooing of the twenties flapper when she is attempting to manipulate her wealthy, businessman husband (Wallace Beery). Her role-playing is shallow and unconvincing, a fact of which the film constantly tries to make the audience aware.

The Gold-Digger as a Tough Broad

Film makers apparently believed that audiences were too savvy to buy impersonations of the rich and too proud to allow unchecked representations of people from the lower classes as simply trash. Baritz notes that "the gangster movies reflected the public's demand for truth and realism in their lives" and that "the unsentimental grittiness of everyday life became a routine subject in film" (161). Apparently, American film viewers wanted to see something akin to their reality, a reassuring familiarity in the

face of unfamiliar economic terrain, “the dirty dishes, street accents, family quarrels, and poverty” of the real world (Baritz 161). As Andrew Bergman notes in his discussion of a scene from *Little Caesar*, “It was a declaration of the gritty realism which would characterize so much of Hollywood’s product during the early years of the Depression” (3). More often than not, the gold-digger talks tough and is a street smart individual. As Kendall says, referring to Ginger Rogers in *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, “Such a devil-may-care juvenile heroine signaled the absorption into the movies of a younger and tougher generation of actresses who had survived the Depression slump in the entertainment business. It seemed right that she should be more knowing and scornful than most other leading ladies who had preceded her” (36). Jacobs says, “Not only is the gold digger calculating and exploitative in her relations with men, she is also sexually knowing, aggressive, and unashamed” (68). The new street-wise image of the gold-digger is in direct contrast to the society women rendered absurd by the realities of the Depression. Perhaps this is why Billie Burke was cast over and over in the role of a bird-like, ineffectual, pretentious society wife in films such as *Dinner at Eight* with her affected speech and her quivering, falsetto voice. Burke’s comic society wife roles were representations of the enemy, the stupid rich. Gold-diggers played by Joan Blondell, Ginger Rogers, and Mae West seldom took on the affected speech of high society, or if they did, it was usually as a part of a joke or trick. More often than not, the gold-digger talked like she had only recently stepped out of a truck stop or barroom. She was real and human; in other words, she was more familiar to working people than the boss’s wife was, at least as played by Billie Burke. Perhaps this is also why when Fay Fortune (Ginger Rogers) affects upper class speech in *The Gold Diggers of 1933* to impress

theatrical director Barney Hopkins (Ned Sparks), he dismisses her and threatens to cut her out of his upcoming show altogether. The gold-digger's upper class act no longer sells, except as comic relief.

This move away from the gold-digger's class act, or acting out the stereotypes of an affluent cultural group, suggests not only that the wealthy are no longer viewed as heroic in the early thirties; it also suggests an attempt to show the lower class's heroism. The gold-digger has lost the fear of exposure and censure she faced in the twenties, and she also often owns up to her roots without remorse. While Baritz points out that Americans during the Great Depression went out of their way to preserve their middle class ideology rather than espousing radical movements and revolution, it is also clear that the growing resentment of the poor for the rich and women for men found a voice in the gold-digger and other stock characters of the time. Bergman believes that the films of the thirties, especially the comedies of the Marx Brothers and W. C. Fields, were anarchic works "that mocked intelligibility . . . [and] reveal[ed] a nation not so much searching for silliness as one capable of sensing the absurdity of the verities and relations that had been treasured before" (33). Some of the absurdities that the gold-digger had already begun to attack by the late twenties were the inequalities between men and women and between those with wealth and those without.

The distrust early social climbers and gold-diggers had for men continued to be true of the gold-digger of the thirties. Marriage often was a joke that was not based on any real affection between the partners involved. During the depression, women and men, like the poor and the rich, were adversaries. As Baritz notes in discussing the single women of the time, "The defeated women of the city learned to be wary and, although a

man might finally be the last resort, to distrust men” (144). As the three gold-digging friends in *Three Broadway Girls/The Greeks Had a Word for Them* (1932) say, “It’s the three of us against the men!” Kendall, in *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930’s*, describes the gold-digger/chorus girl as represented in films such as *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) and *42nd Street* (1933) as a cynical woman who “mocked and resisted the rottenness [of her world] all the time with wisecracks [while keeping] her own decent values squarely intact” (36). The gold-digger in the early thirties was cynical, distrustful, but practical minded and out to protect herself by whatever means might be necessary. Perhaps the best example of the practical minded, cynical woman of the films of the early thirties is Mae West, the sex goddess who walked like a football player and talked like a sailor while remaining thoroughly feminine. Unlike her gold-digging sisters, West has already achieved success in most of her plays and films, and unlike true gold-diggers, West’s characters rarely have to ask for the support of men. Instead, men give her gifts because they are in awe of her. And in some cases, as in her role as Maudie Triplet in *Night After Night*, West wisely invests the wealth given to her by men and uses that wealth to help other women. In this particular film she has invested in a chain of beauty salons and hires the refined but poor and plain spinster, Mabel (Alison Skipworth) to be a hostess in one of her salons after the two spend a drunken night (and most of the next day) together in one of the upstairs bedrooms of Joe Anton’s speakeasy. This is not to say that there were not some weak, teary-eyed gold-diggers in the films of the early thirties. Susanne (Madge Bellamy) in the incredibly dull *Gigolettes of Paris* (Alphonse Martell, Equitable, 1933) attempts to affect a strong facade in order to get revenge on the man who has jilted her (Theodore von Eltz), and her revenge is a

success due to assistance from her gigolo friend and lover Antoine (Gilbert Roland) and a buxom gold-digging co-worker and buddy Paulette (Molly O'Day?), but her portrayal of the gold-digger is more like one of Mary Pickford's good girls than the more interesting and more common characters played by Joan Blondell and Ginger Rogers during the same period.

Social Justification: Why the Gold-Digger Digs Gold

This strength exemplified by Blondell's and Rogers' gold-diggers is not new to the thirties. Certainly some of the brash and brazen flapper gold-diggers of the twenties, although spoiled and immature, showed a type of strength. However, often the strength of the gold-digger in the early thirties grows out of hard work and hard times, a clear exposure to and understanding of life in an economic underworld. One work which offers some insight into this new type of gold-digger is a 1930 autobiography by Peggy Hopkins Joyce, *Men, Marriage, and Me*, which offers a bridge between the gold-digger of the 1920's and the social justification provided by so many depression-era works.

Although *Men, Marriage, and Me* seems to be derived not only from Joyce's life but also from Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the book loses the biting satire of Loos' novel. Both works employ uneducated young women from southern cities as narrators of diaries in which they write down the intimate details of their lives, and both describe elegant European vacations on luxurious ocean liners and the attempts of the protagonists to manipulate many men and make great economic gains in the form of jewels and furs.

Biographer Constance Rosenblum notes that in *Men, Marriage, and Me* “the style was vintage Lorelei, down to the blizzard of exclamation points, capital letters, and forced misspellings, and the text was studded with pungent one-liners regarding the artful handling of the male sex” (206). Like Lorelei Lee, Joyce’s narrator is a young woman who often says more than she intends to, but Joyce’s work seems to employ this technique more as a means of being “cute” than as a criticism of gold-diggers. Even the language of *Men, Marriage, and Me* seems derivative:

Nancy and Edie just kidded him along and he told them he was on the bill at the Colonial and said if they would come he would put on an extra-special Act for them, but he didn’t hardly notice me or he Pretended not to. And I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want Nancy or Edie to know what I was thinking, but *right then* I knew, here was my chance to be an Actress. (12)

Long, rambling sentences recall passages from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as do the high aspirations of the protagonist and her occasionally bizarre patterns of thought. However, Joyce reduces the number of more obvious writing errors that Loos uses to expose the foolishness of her heroine, thereby immediately attempting to establish a more sympathetic character who is not intended to come across as a buffoon but rather the last of the flappers, a naive and chattering young woman out to raise her status by association with men of means.

In addition, Joyce’s origins do not remain mysterious as Lorelei Lee’s do. While we know that Lorelei has attempted to murder a man who tried to take advantage of her and a friendly judge has allowed her to keep her freedom despite her actions, we really do not learn much about Lorelei’s early life and as a result we do not know much about her motivation for becoming a gold-digger. In fact, it seems as if Loos makes Lee’s origins mysterious to suggest that there is something unsavory about her; she should not be

trusted. Joyce, on the other hand, provides more insight into her heroine's early life.

When her mother becomes ill, the narrator begins to reminisce about her childhood in Norfolk, Virginia. She describes her desire to have nice things when she was a child:

I always loved pretty clothes and jewelry. I had so few clothes when I was a child and always used to long for them. I would walk down the streets of Norfolk where the stores were and look in the windows at the dresses and hats and silk underthings and long for them, and feel sad because I had only a cotton chemise and the same dress I always wore on weekdays. And then I would daydream and see myself dressed in the prettiest clothes there and pretend the glass in the show windows was a mirror and that the models with the silk dresses on were me looking back at me. (190)

Not only does she describe the limited means in which she lived; she also describes how she was rewarded for her beauty even as a child: "Perhaps I was a little spoiled by my mother and grandmother. I was a pretty child and everybody who came to see us fussed over me and said how pretty I was. I found when I was very young that I could get candy out of people by smiling at them" (189). In addition to presenting herself sympathetically by showing concern for her ailing mother, Joyce also attempts to gain her audience's affection by trying to dispel the idea that she is more selfish than other women and that she only likes wealthy men. She says, "I suppose I have always come first with myself. But that is only saying that I am human after all, like any other woman" (191). In the next paragraph she continues, "It has been said of me that I care only for rich men. That isn't true. Some of my best friends have been poor. Some of the finest men and women I have known have no money at all to speak of" (191).

What makes Joyce most sympathetic is her introspection, something her counterpart Lorelei Lee lacks. She goes on to question whether pretty clothes and jewelry really make her happy and says, "I suppose I am vain. And I have been selfish lots of

times. Yet God knows I help plenty of people out when they are in trouble. I can't be all wrong. Chance made me the sort of person I am and I suppose I have been spoiled by too much attention. But I have a heart and feelings as well as anybody" (192). In the beginning of her next entry, Joyce emphasizes her own point as she says, "Mother is better. I have bought her a house and arranged things so that she will never be in want any more" (193). While Lorelei Lee never spends much time worrying about anyone's well-being but her own, Joyce at least attempts to show that she has concern for someone besides herself, and she also attempts to explain why she has become the gold-digger she is. In defense of Joyce's memoir, Rosenblum says,

A great deal of her saga only bore a glancing relationship to the truth. . . . But that was no surprise, coming as the book did from an individual who was so much a creature of her own invention, whose life was such an artful blend of fact and fancy. *Men, Marriage and Me* was a masterful concoction, self-serving, savvy, and thoroughly fun. And in truth, it took no more liberties with the truth than most such creations. (207)

What Joyce lacks in talent and intellect when compared to Loos, she perhaps makes up for in sincerity.

A fictional work from 1933 also follows a similar pattern of justification and explanation for the development of the gold-digger, and like Joyce, Mazie Petropolis in John Held, Jr.'s *Crosstown: the Story of a Jazz Age Golddigger*, ends successfully married. Held's work is a combination of political justification and titillating sex novel which traces, with enough suffering and stoic endurance as might befit an Upton Sinclair political expose, Mazie's movement from a working class tenement child of an alcoholic, abusive father, through experiences as a prostitute, taxi dancer, and showgirl to her final happy-ever-after marriage and life in a penthouse. During the course of the novel,

Mazie's father and her employer rape her, and in exchange for sex she is kept first by a jealous and abusive former small time gang leader who lost his legs in a subway accident, and later by a Chinese student named Walter who abandons her. Finally she finds success as a chorus girl and later as an actress. After achieving stardom, however, she longs to find her poverty stricken family and share her wealth with them. Unfortunately, she finds that her brother has been sentenced to the death penalty for murder and that her mother is dead. Her latest lover Parker, also her press agent, needs money but refuses to take any from her. This gold-digger attempts to help others who are in need as she visits her brother in jail and attempts, too late, to reestablish contact with her estranged mother and as she offers to help out her financially strapped lover. Trauma after trauma is dumped on poor Mazie; Parker throws her out of his apartment saying he refuses to be her gigolo, and her dog is shot by mistake when it escapes the theater and is mistaken for a mad dog. Finally, Mazie marries a newspaper artist for love, and coincidentally his father dies and leaves him the family fortune. Mazie decides to leave the stage and live happily ever after as Mrs. Michael Houghton in a penthouse in New York City. Michael refuses to hear of Mazie's sordid past and says, "I asked you to marry me because I loved you, and that's all that matters, isn't it? All I want to know about you is that you are the most beautiful, wonderful, loveliest, sweetest, glorious woman in the world" (209). Thus, the almost semi-pornographic Horatio Alger story is completed by its fairy tale happy ending.

The 1934 film *The Girl From Missouri* also follows the pattern of identifying a young woman from the lower classes who resorts to gold-digging because of her less than advantageous beginnings. The movie begins with Edie Chapman (Jean Harlow) running away from home with her friend Kitty (Patsy Kelly) in order to avoid the fate of her

mother who, along with Edie's stepfather, runs "Mrs. Chapman's Hot Spot" which offers the "Best Beer in Missouri" according to the establishment's sign. Edie is expected to work in the bar enticing gentlemen to drink more and allowing them to flirt with her. While she is preparing to leave, her stepfather George (William "Stage" Boyd) comes into her room and scolds her for not being out in the bar "to entertain the customers" and tells her to "hustle out" into the bar where patrons want to dance even though he had previously told Edie she could have the night off. She is a forced taxi-dancer in her mother's saloon and she knows nothing good can come of such a life. She refuses a life she believes will lead to prostitution and insists on marrying a wealthy man while maintaining her decent standards and her virginity, the only things of which she is sole owner. After George leaves her room, Edie escapes through a window, but before she leaves she wants to say goodbye to her mother. She looks through a window with tears in her eyes and sees her thick-figured mother, dressed in an ill-fitting, tight satin dress with a flower in her hair and garish makeup on her face and whispers to the window glass, "Goodbye, Mom." Although she will miss her mother, Edie does not want to become her mother and must bid her farewell.

Getting Away With It: Success and the Gold-Digger

While *The Girl From Missouri*, like *Crosstown* and *Men, Marriage, and Me*, attempt to win sympathy for their gold-digging heroines by commenting on the struggles they faced in early life, in their attempts to present success stories, many of the films of

the early thirties strayed from the theme of justifying and explaining the motivations of the gold-digger. However, few films were successful in punishing the gold-digger. In *Red-Headed Woman* (Jack Conway, MGM, 1932), the gold-digger remains unpunished although it is perhaps difficult to justify her actions. Curry says *Red-Headed Woman* “antagonized the reform lobby . . .” because it starred “Jean Harlow as a woman who makes her fortune through a series of affairs with rich men . . . [and because it] makes light of the Harlow character’s actions and has a happy ending . . .” (45). Jacobs also notes that the film became a target for censorship reformists who compared the gold-digger played by Harlow to the glorified gangsters of films in the early thirties and because Harlow’s character gets away with her schemes (18). Gold-digging Lil Andrews (Jean Harlow) seduces her employer William Legendre, Jr. (Chester Morris) away from his wife and marries him. Her real lover, however, is their chauffeur Albert (Charles Boyer), and when Legendre learns of the affair, he goes back to his first wife Irene (Leila Hyams), and Lil shoots him in a fit of rage. He refuses to press charges, and two years later, Legendre sees her in Paris with her latest sugar daddy, a wealthy Parisian. The final image of the film is Lil and her sugar daddy in the back seat of a limousine driven by Albert. Despite her failure to keep Legendre, this unsavory gold-digger does not fail and is not punished.

Three Broadway Girls (also known as *The Greeks Had a Word for Them/It*) gives little explanation of the motivations behind the actions of its gold-diggers. Yet for the most part, the film provides a sympathetic, or at least unpunished representation of the type, in large part due to the fact that, according to Jacobs, “Because it was a farce, *The Greeks Had a Word for Them* did not allow for the tragic endings or moral didacticism

which censors preferred” (62). Not only does the film fail to punish its gold-digging heroines; it even begins to suggest the struggles its young women heroines face. The film involves three gold-digging friends; each embodies her own level and kind of gold-digging. An examination of each of the three characters helps to illuminate the types of gold-diggers who make a career out of “working men.” Jean Lawrence (Ina Claire) is a hardened gold-digger who gold-digs just about every man with whom she comes in contact and consistently tries to steal the men of her two friends, Schatzi (Joan Blondell) and Polaire (Madge Evans). While in Paris Jean has had a run of bad luck in the form of her fiancé’s wife who shows up and promptly buys Jean a ticket on the *Isle de France* back to the United States. She leaves with the clothes on her back and nothing more. On the ship, Jean cannot pay her check for \$43 worth of drinks, so she vamps a gentleman into paying for them for her, flashing her eyes and her smile at him across the room and claiming to have seen him somewhere before, a strategy she employs on nearly every man she meets. She says, “I couldn’t forget meeting a good looking man like you.” She continues to lie to the man, explaining that her maid must have packed her check book and that she cannot pay her check, to which he responds, “You must allow me. . . .” “Oh, no, I couldn’t, really,” she responds, and then asks for \$60 so that she can tip the waiter.

Jean’s mercenary behavior is also clear in her interactions with Polaire after she returns to the U. S. She spies Polaire’s gold comb, claims it as hers, and demands to have it back. Polaire says, “You gave it to me!” Jean says, “I lent it to you.” Polaire responds, “You gave it to me for Christmas!” Jean replies, “I lent it to you for Christmas.” After Schatzi imposes and makes peace between her two friends, the three go out with Polaire’s beau, Dey Emery (David Manners), and another man. Jean attempts to sit next to Dey,

but Polaire says, "That's my seat." The other gentleman is Boris Feldman (Lowell Sherman), and typical of the gold-digger of the thirties, Jean finds this sophisticated, classical pianist dull until Dey tells her he gets "paid \$2500 every time he plays." Jean, suddenly more interested, asks, "How often do you play?" He tells her that he plays three to four times a week, and after she does some quick figuring, she says, "Well, I'm not too proud to apologize," and she sits back down at the table. Later when Schatzi says she needs to go home because she has to be up for a golf lesson at nine the next morning, Polaire asks the group if they can imagine why anyone would need to be up so early, and Jean responds, "Yes, if they've gotta get home." This statement clearly identifies Jean as one who, unlike Kendall's claim, does not have "decent values" that are "squarely intact" (36). When Feldman shows greater interest in Polaire than in Jean, Jean responds with the anger of a prospector whose claim has been stolen and refers to Feldman as her "personal property." She quickly sets out to steal Feldman back, slipping off her dress and putting on a fur coat, which conveniently falls open when she is alone with Feldman.

When Schatzi's elderly benefactor, a former beau of Jean's, dies, a recorded will warns his executors "against the scheming of the one called Jean." Jean's mercenary behavior is clearest when she frames Polaire so that it looks to Dey and his father as if Polaire has stolen Jean's pearls. This frame-up breaks the engagement of the two, and Jean flirts her way into the good graces of Justin Emery (Phillips Smalley), Dey's father by claiming that she has seen him somewhere before and by using the same line on him that she uses on all her victims: "You are good looking, you know." Jean and Justin end up on the verge of marriage, but Jean is unhappy with the prospect and tells Polaire and Schatzi, "I'm gonna get married and be stuck on an island with nothing on it but quail.

Why can't I have some fun? I'm still young. I'm still beautiful. I have everything. Why must I give up all my good times for that old fluff?" Again, Jean shows herself to be the typical unreformed twenties gold-digger who has not yet learned her lesson (and what is often assumed to be the lesson of the Great Depression), demanding good times over security and expecting her desires to be fulfilled simply because she knows she can use her physical appearance to get what she wants. In the end, she runs away to Paris with Polaire and Schatzi leaving the groom and the wedding guests at the altar. What is perhaps most telling is that despite her selfishness and interference in the affairs of her friends Polaire and Schatzi, Jean is forgiven by them, and the three continue to work together "against the men." This unity of women, even those who are sometimes in competition for men, suggests that even when women are selfish and interfere in the relationships of their associates, they are still more trustworthy than men.

The second of the three gold-diggers in *Three Broadway Girls* is Schatzi, a less hardened gold-digger who has hooked up with Pops, an elderly sugar daddy who dies by the end of the film leaving her the means to survive comfortably. On one level, she seems to be the same mercenary, anything-for-a-buck kind of girl that Jean is. When questioned about her relationship with Pops, Schatzi replies, "He's my fiancé—not that we're engaged or anything like that." The term fiancé is a cover, a term used to gloss over the financially based reality of the relationship. However, Schatzi's gold-digging tends to be much more practical than Jean's. Like Jean's gold-digging to pay her tab on shipboard, Schatzi's act of selling the orchids also suggests a level of desperation that is all too common in films of the early thirties. When Pops sends her orchids, she and Polaire make arrangements to sell them to a florist since cash is much more practical than

expensive flowers. Not only is she practical, she is also the peace-maker of the group, smoothing over the conflicts that arise because of the extreme differences between Jean and Polaire. At one point, the two are fighting, and Schatzi tells them to stop because “it ain’t dignified.” This comment offers a typical but incongruous mixture of the slang of the Depression-era gold-digger and her recognition of the value of being refined. Schatzi’s peace-making, good-hearted gold-digger also comes to the rescue when Jean attempts to break up Polaire and Dey; it is Schatzi who comes to the aid of her friend and attempts to bring the truth to light. At another point, Schatzi attempts to end a drinking party because she has to be up at nine the next morning for a golf lesson, which suggests a desire on her part to improve herself, unlike her more shallow friend Jean or her more romantic friend Polaire. Schatzi is the gold-digger with the heart of gold who, upon learning of the death of Pops, cries and when asked why, says she guesses she liked him more than she realized.

Polaire, like the gold-diggers of the twenties, really is a good girl who does not care all that much for money but instead simply wants to be with the man she loves, Dey Emery. Although she assists Schatzi in selling the orchids sent to her by Pops and arranges for Dey to bring a suitable (i.e. rich and generous) gentleman for Jean along on a night out on the town, Polaire has more romantic aspirations and is probably not much more practical than Jean. When Boris Feldman offers to help Polaire become rich and famous as a pianist in exchange for her companionship (and, it is implied, sexual favors), she responds, “I don’t want to be famous and I don’t have to be rich.” She gives in to Feldman’s offer, however, because she believes she is bad for Dey, the man she loves, and as a famous pianist, she might be able to provide for herself: “I’m bad for him but I

may be of some use to myself.” While her willingness to “be of some use” to herself seems practical and admirable, her desire to protect Dey seems on one hand to be a foolish act of martyrdom and on the other hand a realistic assessment of a difficult class boundary. She assumes Dey’s father does not approve of her or her friends, and she knows that with friends like Jean, his disapproval is probably merited. However, when she is taken to meet Dey’s father, it becomes clear that he is not nearly as narrow-minded as Polaire assumes. He accepts her and gives his blessing to her marriage to Dey, but the marriage plans are undermined by Jean’s lies. Although he has been generous and understanding with Polaire, Justin Emery is clearly shown to be the rich fool who, like Mencken in Anita Loos’s account of the origins of Lorelei Lee, is easily guided away from his high ideals by a pretty blonde. Typical of the gold-digger’s plot, however, Polaire ends up with her wealthy man, despite her claims at indifference to wealth. As she and Schatzi whisk Jean away from her wedding and onto a ship headed for France, Dey follows, and the final scene of the film shows Dey and Polaire together and happy.

Depression Era Women and *The Gold Diggers of 1933*

The Gold Diggers of 1933, the third film based on Hopwood’s 1919 play—after *The Gold Diggers* (1923) and *The Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929)—also employs these three distinct types of gold-digger, but it focuses more directly on the desperate plight of young women during the Depression. Polly Parker (Ruby Keeler) is the romantic who really is not overtly interested in men for their money, since she falls for Brad before she

knows he is wealthy and continues to be enamored with him when she believes he may be a bank robber. Fay Fortune (Ginger Rogers) is the mercenary who tries several times to steal the wealthy prey of her friend Trixie Lorraine (Aline MacMahon). Carol (Joan Blondell) is once again cast as the middle-of-the-road, practical-minded young woman who only employs the tactics of the gold-digger to teach an arrogant, wealthy man a lesson and to help her friend Polly win the man she truly loves. She is also the one who, Arthur Hove says, has “real idealistic underpinning . . . largely built on her feeling that people should be judged for what they are, not on the basis of their family pedigrees” (30). Trixie is a bit more problematic, falling somewhere in between the Joan Blondell and Ginger Rogers characters—a bit more mercenary than Blondell but less overtly a huntress than Rogers. Linda Mizejewski notes that Trixie is also more problematic because she is the least conventionally attractive of the women in the film, and her cross-dressed role in a police uniform in the “Pettin’ in the Park” number “could easily be an inscription of the mannish and possibly lesbian career woman, the embodiment of the ‘unnatural’ place of woman in the workforce” (188).

Shortly after the film begins, the sheriff’s department has sent its deputies to close down a show that is scheduled to open the next evening and impound the sets and costumes to pay the debts of the show’s producers. Linda Mizejewski notes that this is one of the ways the film makes itself pertinent to real viewers of the time: “The 1933 film version of *Gold Diggers* foregrounds issues of money and employment by specifically citing the depression and its impact on the theater . . .” (184). As one deputy tears the giant coins from the front and back of Fay Fortune’s shorts, she tries to cover herself with her hands and says, “You could at least leave me cab fare!” Not only does this

confrontation suggest forced exposure of the young woman's body at the hands of an uncaring authority, but it also suggests the practicality of the gold-digger whose main concern is that she is able to clothe herself and gain sufficient funds for basic necessities such as transportation. When these young women learn that Barney (Ned Sparks) is about to open another show, they decide that only one of them can go talk him into giving them all parts in the show since, as Trixie (Aline MacMahon) says, "We haven't got enough decent clothes to wrap around one of us." The girls draw straws to see who gets to go talk to Barney, and Carol wins. Shortly afterward she calls her friends in their shared apartment to let them know she is on her way up with Barney. She is weeping, desperate for work and excited at the prospect to earn an honest living. Her desperation and weeping are merited; back in the apartment, the young women have been reduced to stealing the neighbor's milk so they can have food, hocking whatever valuables they had, and avoiding the landlady's demands for back rent. To ease their guilt over the stolen milk, Trixie says, "That's alright. The dairy company stole it from the cow."

Upon learning that a new show is in the works, Polly Parker comments that it will be nice to "have real jobs and earn real money." The desperate desire of Polly and Carol to find work was typical of women's roles in film during the early years of the Depression. As Haskell notes, "The 'working woman' (fulfilling also a demand, created by the Depression, for a more down-to-earth heroine) was more at ease pursuing a career, whether for its own sake or as a pretext for finding a husband, than languishing in a love nest" (92). The film continues to manipulate its audience into sympathizing with these young women as it "harshly contrasts these utopian theatrical numbers ["We're in the Money"] with the grim economic realities of theatrical workers, the chorines who do not

get paid when the show closes down” (Mizejewski 185). When she learns that Barney has gotten their hopes up only to confess that he has not found funding for the new show, Carol says to him, “What about these girls? They’ve given up jobs just because you said....” The girls have given up poorly paying jobs in hopes that they might be in a successful show and earn a real living. Later, when Brad Roberts, who is really the wealthy Robert Treat Bradford (Dick Powell), refuses to appear in and save the show when it seems doomed due to the male lead’s bad back, Trixie says to him, “You can’t let them down! You can’t! If you do, well God knows what’ll happen to those kids. They’ll have to do things I wouldn’t want on my conscience.” What they will have to do is resort to prostitution, as is suggested by Joan Blondell’s good-hearted prostitute character in the “Forgotten Man” sequence later in the film. Just as Hopwood works to get his audience to sympathize with his gold-diggers, the film also works to get the audience on the side of these poor, young women. True to the gold-digger text of the early thirties, Carol gives insight into her humble past as she describes herself to J. Lawrence Bradford (Warren William), who she believes thinks she is too lowly for the likes of him and his brother Robert/Brad. She proudly and defiantly describes herself as “Carol, daughter of a Brooklyn saloon keeper and a woman who took in laundry.”

Gold Diggers of 1933 is also typical of the films of the first half of the thirties in its representation of the wealthy. When J. Lawrence Bradford learns that his brother has not only written songs for a Broadway show but that he has also performed in the show and plans to marry a common showgirl, Polly Parker, he is shocked. In a conversation between him and the family lawyer Fanuel “Fanny” Peabody (Guy Kibbee), Peabody tells him that when he was young he “learned the bitter truth that all women of the theater

were chiselers, parasites, or as we call them, gold diggers.” Based on the assumption that all showgirls are harlots who are out to rob weak-willed men, the two set out to break up Brad and Polly. However, true to the standards of the early thirties, the women work together to outwit these arrogant, foolish, wealthy men. Carol and Trixie play the role of gold-diggers to an extreme, camping up the image, and take J. Lawrence and Peabody out drinking and trick them into buying them expensive gifts. Lori Landay describes the kind of performance Carol and Trixie employ when she says, “[W]omen can masquerade—take on stereotypes and use them to their advantage to get what they need within the culture” (78). And as is often the case in the early thirties, the audience not only is aware of the stereotypes used by Carol and Trixie but is also in on the trick. In the end the trick works and is then exposed as a trick, but all comes out well in the end. Brad marries Polly, Carol marries J. Lawrence, and Peabody marries Trixie.

As Hove notes, “The moral of the story is that chorus girls really do have hearts of gold; they are not just floozies whose major ambition is to acquire as much as they can in the shortest time possible” (11). While the film has its happy ending and the gold-diggers have taught a valuable lesson to the wealthy men, “the narrative and staging of *The Gold Diggers of 1933* suggest straightforwardly that the only reliable work for women is sex—illegally, as prostitution, or legally as marriage. Gold digging, conveniently enough, refers to both” (Hove 184). The success of the film’s challenge to class boundaries may be undermined by its final surrender to upholding the institution of marriage, especially in light of the priggish gents to whom Carol and Trixie end up married. Haskell also notes that gold-diggers in films such as *Gold Diggers of 1933* “set out to make their way in a man’s world but on their own terms, and, after preliminary success, usually abandoned

these terms when the right man came along” (145). While it is clear that Brad and Polly love each other in that goony-eyed, romantic way that was so popular in thirties films, and while the film tries to render plausible the idea that Carol and J. Lawrence have somehow fallen for each other despite their initial distrust for each other, it seems likely that Trixie’s relationship with Peabody is less romantically driven. She wants him for his money and recognizes that she is not as attractive as her more petite friends and may not be able to attract a more desirable wealthy man, and he wants her because no other woman pays much attention to him—pompous, aging, plump, and bald as he is. The arrangement seems both mercenary and practical. As Hove notes, “[T]heir relationship is based on a trade-off—financial security for Trixie in return for periodic doting attention to Peabody” (30).

Robertson makes a convincing argument claiming that there is more opportunity for the audience to identify with the women in *Gold Diggers of 1933* than the men, claiming that the film “uses opening night to propel the second half of the narrative, the gold-digging scheme, in which Carol and Trixie function as our main points of identification, the principal organizers of our vision” (72). She also claims that Barney’s vision of “The Forgotten Man” sequence “delegates men to the role of mass spectacle and grants woman both voice and empowered vision; the forgotten men will be produced and thus remembered by Carol’s ‘wailing’ song” (72). In addition, she points out that Brad “is hardly in charge. He obtains money from inherited, not earned wealth. When he expresses his desire to marry Polly, he loses control over that money to his brother, over whom the women take charge” (71). While this view of the film does suggest the possibility that the film allows great opportunity for identification with female characters

and performers, it also seems to overlook some important facets of the character of Brad. In this film, the duping of the wealthy gents is undermined by the fact that Brad's character also provides a wealthy individual who does not look down on show girls just because of their profession or their poverty. Brad has chosen to live in the same building as the young women do, simply to escape his family's snobbery. He is also the key to the success of the show and the savior of the women who have given up jobs to be in it. In short, Brad is the handsome prince who comes to the rescue not only of his maiden Polly but also her friends and everyone else connected to the show. Barney, when he tries to convince Brad to be in the show, tells him, "You're different. You've got class." Here membership in a high economic class is associated with greater social cachet, reinforcing theories of cultural capital defined by Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu. However, this film deconstructs stereotypes about the poor and the rich. Polly and Trixie assume that Brad is a thief when he mysteriously comes up with \$15,000 cash to save the show. Not only is he not a thief; Brad is a generous person who risks his own inheritance to save the show that the rest of the cast and crew depend on for sustenance. J. Lawrence Bradford and Peabody assume Polly and her friends are gold-diggers just because they are actresses. In the end, both stereotypes are disrupted as this depression-era wish fulfillment fantasy is played out. Gee, wouldn't it be swell if the depression could be corrected so easily and amiably by wealthy and poor people working and playing together? The film suggests that rich and poor have a good deal to learn from each other, and that, working together, the rich and poor might make everything turn out alright.

Putting the Gold-Digger Back in Her Place: the Second Half of the 1930's

While films such as *Three Broadway Girls* and *The Gold Diggers of 1933* glorified the admirable gold-digger, and *Red-Headed Woman* at least left her unpunished, the films of the second half of the thirties tended to re-vilify her or show her to be a virginal girl whose economic situation leads her to seek marriage to and support from wealthy men. It is possible that *The Girl From Missouri*'s protection of the purity of young women and depiction of pre-marital sex as destructive may be due in part to more stringent enforcement of Hollywood censorship codes which were already in place. As LaSalle notes, "[P]re-Code films . . . unleashed a trend toward sophistication in women's pictures that would continue unabated until rigid censorship ended the party in mid-1934" (12). The possibility that *The Girl From Missouri*'s staunch protection of virginity and the institution of marriage is increased since this screenplay by Anita Loos seems out of character for the author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Red-Headed Woman*. *The Girl From Missouri* is a purified revision of the basic storyline Loos created in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* a decade earlier, right down to the blonde heroine's brunette buddy who is constantly attracted to lifeguards, butlers, and other n'er-do-wells who have little economically to recommend them and upon whom Harlowe's Kitty Chapman looks down. In *The Girl From Missouri* the heroine becomes a much nicer girl than Lorelei Lee ever could have been. In addition, the all-too-convenient change of heart that T. R. Paige (Lionel Barrymore) has in the last moments of the movie, giving his blessing to his son's marriage to a gold-digger who had earlier attempted to snag him, and whose reputation he had attempted to destroy so his son would lose interest, seems so out of

place that it must have either been tacked on to satisfy censors or else it was simply very poorly conceived.

One notable exception to the claim that stricter enforcement of Hollywood's Production Code drove film makers to tame women and represent marriage as a happy ideal and sex as something only permitted within the legal bounds of marriage is found in a film that is usually not given credit for its subversions of accepted standards of decency. Little critical attention is paid to *The Gold Diggers of 1935* (Busby Berkeley, Warner Brothers, 1935). *The Gold Diggers of 1935* seems to be a comic response to the tragic *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, MGM, 1932). In *Grand Hotel*, desperate individuals, many formerly wealthy people facing financial ruin because of the economic upheaval of the Depression, converge upon an exclusive hotel in Berlin and attempt to gold-dig each other. The film depicts wealthy businessman General Director Preysling (Wallace Beery) as an unscrupulous, uncaring dictator who gains wealth at the expense of the health and happiness of his workers and by swindling his business associates. Working class individuals such as the dying clerk Otto Kringelein (Lionel Barrymore), the stenographer turned prostitute Flaemmchen (Joan Crawford), and a kind but bankrupt aristocrat turned gambler and thief, The Baron (John Barrymore), are presented as sympathetic characters driven by desperation. Kringelein, for instance, insists that he is as important as his former boss, Preysling, because he can afford to pay for a room at this expensive hotel with his meager life savings. *Grand Hotel* ends with the murder of the Baron, the arrest of Preysling, and the bittersweet rise of Kringelein, bitter because he is dying and will not have time to enjoy his newfound wealth and his new relationship as the keeper of Flaemmchen, Preysling's former stenographer and mistress. The film is tragic right down

to the dead Baron's dog being literally swept out of the hotel along with the trash the morning after his murder.

Like *Grand Hotel*, *The Gold Diggers of 1935* takes place in a luxurious and very expensive hotel and ends with young women, like Flaemmchen, being passed from one man to the next. *The Gold Diggers of 1935* ends in the love-based marriage of struggling student Dick Curtis (Dick Powell) to wealthy young woman Ann Prentiss (Gloria Stuart), a marriage ostensibly not made for money; it also ends with a marriage for money between that student's former fiancé Arline Davis (Dorothy Dare) and his bride's wealthy playboy brother Humbolt Prentiss (Frank McHugh). Also thrown in for good measure is a case of entrapment and blackmail of wealthy buffoon T. Mosley Thorpe (Hugh Herbert) by his former stenographer Betty Hawes (Glenda Farrell). Like Preysling's in *Grand Hotel*, Thorpe's reputation is destroyed by the shadow of a crime he ostensibly committed while staying in the hotel. However, while Preysling actually did kill the Baron, Thorpe has been framed, although it is doubtful that many viewers would sympathize with him.

The film begins with the unpaid employees of the Wentworth Plaza Hotel hearing a lecture from hotel manager Louis Lamson (Grant Mitchell) regarding their positions without salary because, he says, "I could never begin to pay you what you will earn in honorariums." This lecture is followed by a series of talks from department supervisors explaining very definitely the percentage of tips each will take from those they supervise, sometimes reserving the right to take all of the tips if they so choose. The film sets up all of its employees as mercenaries who are there to take advantage of contact with the hotel's very wealthy clientele and each other. The height of the mercenary behavior in this film is reached when Nicolai Nicoleff (Adolphe Menjou), the man hired to direct the

benefit show staged within the film, attempts to ingratiate himself with the wealthy tightwad Mrs. Matilda Prentiss (Alice Brady) by sending her an expensive silver dish as a gift and billing the dish to Mrs. Prentiss's own hotel account. Except for the wealthy patrons of the hotel, everyone in the hotel gold-digs somebody, including the hotel's manager who always insists he gets a cut of whatever anyone else who works there gets from its patrons.

Instead of protecting the institution of marriage, the film depicts divorce and broken engagements as commonplace events that should not cause any concern. Humbolt Prentiss has been married and divorced four times to what his mother describes as "four horrible chorus girls" who carry "the honorable name of Prentiss." She also discloses that she has been forced to pay each of those former wives \$100,000 in divorce settlements. When asked how he can joke about his multiple marriages to beautiful gold-diggers, Humbolt replies to his mother, "I joke about it because I enjoy it." To Humbolt, marriage and divorce are games, and beautiful women are a hobby. His marriage to Arline Davis, Dick Curtis's fiancé, is taken on very casually with the full expectation that when the relationship is no longer fun, his mother will also give her \$100,000. While Arline and Dick are seen in the beginning of the film performing signs which indicate a romantic relationship, not based on economic gain, as they blow kisses and make eyes at each other, their engagement is easily broken with a friendly handshake as Dick moves on to Mrs. Prentiss's daughter, Humbolt's sister Ann. Dick's relationship with Ann begins when Mrs. Prentiss, wanting to keep a protective eye on her daughter, hires Dick as her paid escort. Ann has been forced by her mother into an engagement with T. Mosley Thorpe whom Ann abhors, and she refuses to do as her mother tells her and insists on

marrying Dick, the gigolo her mother has provided for her. Mrs. Prentiss only consents to her daughter's marriage to Dick because he is a medical student and having a doctor in the family will potentially save her money on future medical bills and because Thorpe is entrapped and blackmailed for breach of promise by his stenographer, Betty. Betty's entrapment of Thorpe arises because she is able to talk him into writing a love song and autographing it for her. She then takes the typed manuscript and turns it into a love letter and proposal, signed by Thorpe, and as a telegram from her lawyers informs us, she has an airtight case. The film ends with the buffoonish Mrs. Prentiss and T. Mosley Thorpe beaten. Thorpe runs away from the hotel, the center of scandal, scattering his most precious possessions—a collection of outdated and useless snuffboxes—on the street, and Mrs. Prentiss tries to make the best of what she considers her bad situation and look for the bright side of her daughter's marriage to the future Dr. Dick Curtis.

While none of the gold-diggers are in any way punished in the plot of this film, there is one musical sequence which won great critical acclaim and which disrupts the otherwise nonchalant attitude toward conventional morality. The "Lullaby of Broadway" sequence, performed by Winifred Shaw and choreographed by Busby Berkeley, won the year's Academy Award for Best Song and was "recognized by film critic Charles Champlin as one of the 'most spectacular of all the great production numbers'" (*Gold Diggers of 1935* video jacket notes). In this sequence Shaw portrays a "Broadway baby" who goes out carousing with men all night and sleeps in the daytime while her less fortunate and less beautiful working class comrades toil away in factories, sweeping floors, and performing other menial tasks for the benefit of others. In the sequence, Shaw is not only seen necking with her companion Dick Powell in a car, she is also passed

around from man to man on the dance floor. Shortly afterward she is chased by all the inhabitants of this crowd of dancers, laughing and dancing all the while, until she is accidentally pushed from a skyscraper balcony, presumably to her death. Near the beginning of the sequence, as she leaves her room for a night of carousing, we see her feeding a kitten, a symbol of innocence and need, outside her door. After she falls from the balcony, the kitten is shown sitting by her door waiting for food, but there is nobody there to feed it. Not only has she suffered for her debauched life, but innocent others will also pay. This image of the unfed kitten as suffering innocence forced to pay for the sins of others also recalls the image of the Dachshund swept out the door at the end of *Grand Hotel* although in this case the connection is perhaps just as tragic and as such, completely out of character for *Gold Diggers of 1935*.

In a sense, the “Lullaby of Broadway” sequence of *Gold Diggers of 1935* acts as a response to the rest of the film, and Winifred Shaw acts as a foil for the rest of the gold-digging characters in the film. She provides the cautionary tale that the rest of the film fails to offer. It is most interesting to note that the one section of the film that received the greatest critical praise and continues to be applauded for its artistic achievement is also the one segment that is most moralistic in its content, a fact that suggests critical and perhaps public desire was and perhaps still is more in favor of films which uphold a system of morality that protects the institution of marriage and shuns non-marital relationships. Clearly public institutions such as the Legion of Decency were outraged by films that celebrated premarital or extramarital sex, that did not uphold marriage, and that failed to punish crime. After the mid thirties, inside and outside the world of film, these institutions gained more influence and changed the way gold-diggers were represented.

One of the last of the gold-digger films spawned by Avery Hopwood's play, *The Gold Diggers of 1937* (Lloyd Bacon, Warner Brothers, 1936) illustrates the change that takes place in the representation of gold-diggers by the second half of the thirties. The film begins at a conference of insurance salesmen with insurance company executive Andy Callahan (Wm. Davidson) claiming that there is no Depression and urging his salesmen to go out and sell insurance. Juxtaposed next to this scene of encouragement is a scene in which a group of chorus girls are waiting to board a train after another show flops. While the men have secure jobs, the women's jobs are subject to the whims of public taste and the artistic vision (or lack thereof) of their male directors and producers. Verna (Iris Adrian), one of these young women enters wearing furs and tells the others she is not returning with them. Genevieve Larkin (Glenda Farrell) explains to the others that "six months ago she [Verna] was working for a seamstress. Now she's engaged to a broker." Genevieve goes on to say, "She's got the right idea" and declares that she will also get her man. The other women briefly debate whether or not it is right to gold-dig, one claiming there is nothing wrong with taking presents from a man but that one does not have to be a gold-digger to do so. One of the women, however, holds out. Norma Perry (Joan Blondell) wants to get a job and clearly disapproves of gold-digging. Later in the film, she asks her romantic lead Rosmer Peak (Dick Powell), "Where there's love, is money necessary?" He responds to her query by breaking into the song "With Plenty of Money and You (Gold Diggers' Lullaby)" singing that money is "the root of all evil, of strife and upheaval . . ." but then continuing, "life could be sunny with plenty of money and you." Clearly greed is considered a negative thing in this film, but money is also a necessary evil and something that just might make life more pleasant.

The young women of the chorus who are on the train at the beginning of the film recognize the necessity of money precisely because they lack money. As in the beginning of *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, the film begins with a show that closes and the difficult situation faced by the women of the chorus now that their paychecks have been cut off. It happens that the insurance salesmen from the convention are taking the same train that the actresses are boarding, and most of the young women go after the insurance men, seeing them as meal tickets. Genevieve and Norma refuse, however. Genevieve has higher aspirations and heads to the part of the train where the wealthier passengers are, and Norma remains in her own seat, determined to maintain her dignity and not be a gold-digger. While Genevieve tries to get the attention of the rich old men in first class, the insurance salesmen realize there are not enough actresses for all of them and go in search of others. Norma finds herself the target of those insurance men, and as they chase her through the train, she takes refuge in a men's washroom where Rosmer Peak is shaving. He is one of the insurance salesmen who is not out chasing chorus girls, and the two immediately take a liking to each other. When he learns that Norma wants to earn an honest living, Peak agrees to get her a job at the insurance company.

Meanwhile, back in first class, Genevieve hits it off with Morty Wethered (Osgood Perkins), and he agrees to get the money to put on a show for her, since he is one of three partners who run the Hobart Theater. When Wethered and his partner Hugo (Chas. D. Brown) realize that they do not have enough money to put on another show due to the fact that they have gambled on the stock market with company funds and are on the verge of bankruptcy, they decide to take out a life insurance policy on their third and elder partner J. J. Hobart (Victor Moore) who they believe is about to die anyway. Hobart, a

whiney, bachelor hypochondriac, does not know that his theater is near bankruptcy due to his partners' poor investments. Genevieve convinces Wethered and Hugo to call the insurance company where their friend and former fellow chorus girl Norma now works, and Rosmer sells a policy to Hobart worth one million dollars to Wethered and Hugo. Callahan assigns Rosmer the job of keeping Hobart alive so that the company will not have to pay out the million dollars while Wethered and Hugo employ Genevieve to wear Hobart out so that he will die. Here is the potential for the film to become a rather gruesome comedy about murder for money, but this potential is not fulfilled.

Instead, Genevieve grows fond of Hobart who has become healthier and less whiney under the influence of Rosmer. As she falls in love with her unlikely beau, she reforms and double-crosses Wethered and Hugo, telling Hobart about their plot, including her own part in it, thereby risking her own position in his good graces. However, when she tells him he is broke, he collapses. While he is in the hospital on the verge of death, Wethered and Hugo plan to cancel the show that is already in rehearsal, but Rosmer decides to make sure the show goes on so that he can rebuild Hobart's finances and give the sick man something to live for while also saving his insurance company a million dollars. Rosmer, Genevieve, and Norma arrive at the theater just in time to throw Wethered and Hugo out and save the show and Hobart's life. In order to get the money to put on the show, the entire cast and chorus, who depend on the show's success for income, gold-dig everyone they know in a montage of quick scenes that provide the only instances of unreformed or unpunished gold-digging in the film. Rosmer gets Callahan to put up \$10,000 of the insurance company's money. Genevieve and her friends gold-dig an old man by playing on his vanity. One woman from the chorus even threatens her

lover by telling him that she will show up for dinner that night with him and his wife if he does not put up \$10,000 for the show. Another sells her lover's car for money to finance the show. While this film does offer examples of unrepentant, unpunished gold-digging in this brief sequence, it is gold-digging with a twist. All of these individuals are gold-digging for someone other than themselves. They are working for the good of the theatrical community in which they work and to save the life of the now kind-hearted and lovable Hobart. While this new style of gold-digging may seem noble, it also loses the punch of earlier gold-digging mercenaries. Hobart's recovery and marriage to Genevieve, the reformed gold-digger who gets her man anyway, does recall gold-diggers of the cautionary novels of the twenties, but after the films of the early thirties, this ending seems bland.

Condemning *The Women*: Clare Boothe and Society Wives

Changes in the representation of gold-diggers are not only to be found in the films of the latter half of the thirties, however. These changes are part of broader cultural shifts in attitude toward the gold-digger. In Clare Boothe's 1936 play, *The Women*, gold-diggers are the object of scorn and ultimately lose their benefactors even while the play also presents society women as vicious and spiteful, cat-like creatures, thereby upholding the negative representations of the wealthy so common during the early thirties. Mordden describes the behavior of one of these society bitches in the film version of *The Women* (George Cukor, MGM, 1939): "Sylvia spends half the story breaking up a loving family

and the other half gloating over the ruins” (167). However, despite the rough treatment of society women, gold-diggers fare even worse. Near the end of the play, in a powder room at an expensive nightclub, a young woman says to her companion, “So I told him, ‘I had a great career until you made me give up the stage, you lunkhead. For what? A couple of cheesy diamond bracelets? A lousy car, which every time it breaks down you got to have the parts shipped over from Italy’” (84). This young woman seems to have learned that gold-digging, like the Italian car, is impractical as she mourns her lost career and the possibility that she might have been able to provide for herself. Early in the play Sylvia describes a young woman who is the mistress of her friend Mary’s husband: “She’s a friend of this manicurist. Oh, it wouldn’t be so bad if Stephen had picked someone in his own class. But a blond floosie!” Crystal Allen was working at a perfume counter in an exclusive department store when she met Stephen Haines, and Olga, a manicurist in a posh salon, describes Crystal’s predatory seductiveness:

So this gentleman walks up to the counter. He was the serious type, nice-looking, but kind of thin on top. Well, Crystal nabs him. ‘I want some perfume,’ he says. ‘May I ask what type of woman for?’ Crystal says, very ritzy. That didn’t mean a thing. She was going to sell him Summer Rain, our feature, anyway. ‘Is she young?’ Crystal says. ‘No,’ he says, sort of embarrassed. ‘Is she the glamorous type?’ Crystal says. ‘No, thank God,’ he says. ‘Thank God?’ Crystal says and bats her eyes. She’s got those eyes which run up and down a man like a searchlight. Well, she puts perfume on her palm and in the crook of her arm for him to smell. So he got to smelling around and I guess he liked it. (19)

Later, in a confrontation with Mary, Crystal clearly identifies herself as a hardened woman who has no real interest in Stephen. When Mary insists that Stephen couldn’t love a woman like Crystal, Crystal responds that “[h]e’s doing the best he can under the circumstances” and goes on to criticize Mary for being so upset when she has the better situation: “What have you got to kick about? You’ve got everything that matters. The

name, the position, the money--“ (35). Clearly Crystal is only interested in bettering her social and economic position through Stephen Haines. This becomes especially clear in the third act when Crystal, lounging in her bathtub after having wooed Stephen away from Mary into an unhappy second marriage, has a phone conversation with her male equivalent, Buck, who is also her lover. Buck has married a many times divorced former gold-digger, the Countess De Lage whose divorces typically arise from her gold-digging husbands’ attempts at murdering her. When Mary learns of Buck and Crystal’s affair, she uses the information to get Stephen back, and by the end of the play it is likely that the two will be reunited.

Adding to this sense that the play upholds the institution of marriage is the presence of Mary’s mother, Mrs. Morehead, and her commentary on Mary’s situation when she learns of her husband’s indiscretions with Crystal. She encourages her daughter to ignore her husband’s affair and tells Mary that she faced the same situation twenty years earlier and says, “I had a wise mother, too. Listen, dear, this is not a new story. It comes to most wives” (26). While it is not clear that Mrs. Morehead’s approach is necessarily the one with which we are to agree, she is a sympathetic voice who cautions her daughter not to confide in her girl friends because “they’ll see to it, in the name of friendship, that you lose your husband and your home. I’m an old woman, dear, and I know my sex” (27). It turns out that Mrs. Morehead’s wise prophecy comes true, for when Mary does listen to and confide in her catty friends, she ends up divorced. In the opening credits of the film, each of the actress’s faces fade into the face of an animal to which that character is compared. Mrs. Morehead’s face becomes the face of an owl, an animal long associated with wisdom, while Crystal’s face fades into that of a leopard and

Sylvia's into that of a black cat, both predators, the latter associated with bad luck. The representation of Mrs. Morehead as a wise prophet, coupled with the fact that Mary does end up taking her husband back, suggests that Mrs. Morehead's voice is one the playwright intends her audience to consider with some respect. As Mrs. Morehead tells her daughter, "[R]emember, dear, it's being together at the *end* that really matters" (27).

Despite the fact that the play takes a negative slant on gold-digging, the film version of *The Women* (1939) makes the failure of the gold-digger and the protection of the institution of marriage more explicit. When Mary (Norma Shearer) exposes Crystal's (Joan Crawford) affair with Buck, another of the women in the washroom, Edith (Phyllis Povah), tells Crystal to concentrate on her alimony. Sylvia (Rosalind Russell) responds, "With what Stephen can get on you, he won't have to give you a dime." Crystal admits the affair and says she does not need Stephen's money since she has Buck. However, the Countess (Mary Boland) tells the group that Buck is not financially independent. His radio career is dependent on a company the Countess owns and therefore, Buck's gold-digging will not pay off, and Crystal's alternate mode of wealth is also cut off. Crystal knows she is beaten, and says, "Well, girls, looks like it's back to the perfume counter for me. By the way, there's a name for you ladies, but it isn't used in polite society—outside a kennel." This comment from the failed gold-digger Crystal allows one final jab at the society women who are also criticized. Unlike *Red-Headed Woman* in which we see the gold-digger move onto another sugar daddy when she fails with the first, in *The Women* we can only surmise what Crystal's next step may be. The film ends before she can continue to gold-dig, thereby preserving the sense that she will be punished with her old life as a shop girl. The film upholds the traditional family and the institution of marriage

more explicitly than Boothe's play as Peggy (Joan Fontaine) enters the washroom and tells Mary that Stephen wants to see her unlike in the play in which a messenger comes into the washroom to say Stephen is waiting for his wife and Mary assumes he means her. The final image of the film is Mary walking out into the restaurant, presumably toward her former and future husband, Stephen, with her arms outstretched.

That *The Women* represents gold-diggers and society women negatively is somewhat perplexing, considering Boothe's own background as a woman of relatively humble origins who more than once married men of wealth and status. As biographer Sylvia Jukes Morris says, "Clare's mother had always encouraged her [Clare's] drive and taught her how to dissemble and manipulate men" (4). Boothe, the illegitimate child of Anna Clara Schneider, a socially ambitious woman who had "a taste for jewelry and fine clothes . . . [and who] even in times of privation . . . managed to deck herself with furs and feathers" (Morris 30) and William Franklin Boothe, was encouraged by her mother to seek out the wealthy as companions. During her lifetime, she married several wealthy men, including George Tuttle Brokaw, "an alcoholic millionaire more than twice her age" and Henry Luce, the founder of *Life* magazine (Morris 15, 4, 5). Various elements within the play bear at least some relationship to Boothe's own life, such as her Reno divorce from Brokaw and her reduction in living expenses that came with divorce (Morris 154-5). With the stricter enforcement of Production Codes in the late thirties, it perhaps makes sense that the film takes a much more definite stand in protecting the institution of marriage. Morris notes that the screenplay, which F. Scott Fitzgerald and Anita Loos both played some part in creating, had "some eighty of Clare's risqué lines . . ." that the Hays Office insisted must be cut (366). But the play itself seems nearly as negative

regarding women presumably like Boothe herself. Morris claims that the character of Nancy in *The Women*, an unmarried writer who openly criticizes the behavior of the other women in the play, “was, according to backstage rumor, Clare’s alter ego” (7). This may suggest that Boothe was frustrated not only with the women she found in society but with the means she herself was trained and driven to employ in order to better her position. Morris notes that Boothe “had hoped for a place on the staff of *Life* . . .” after her marriage to Luce but that she was “[e]nraged by their masculine bias, and the gender in which she felt imprisoned . . .” and removed herself from that magazine’s staff as a result (5).

Hints at this frustration with women’s limited options are found throughout the play *The Women*. Early in the play, Boothe’s characters discuss women’s dependence upon their appearance in order to keep men, the people who women depend on to get ahead in society and in economics. Nancy says, “There’s only one tragedy for a woman” (17). Mary responds, “Growing old?” (17). Nancy says, “Losing her man,” to which Mary retorts, “That’s why we’re all so afraid of growing old” (17). Little Mary, the daughter of Stephen and Mary Haines, also offers a sympathetic, frustrated commentary on the women represented in the play. She says to her mother, “I don’t want to be a little girl. I hate girls! They’re so silly. . . . Oh, Mother, what *fun* is there to be a lady? What can a lady do?” (23). Mary responds, “These days, darling, ladies do all the things men do. They fly aeroplanes across the ocean, they go into politics and business—“ (24). Little Mary interrupts, “You don’t, Mother,” and asks, “What do you do, Mother?” (24-5). Mary says, “Take care of you and Stevie and Dad,” but Little Mary sees through this lie, too, and says, “You don’t, Mother. Miss Fordyce and the servants do” (25).

This criticism is at the heart of *The Women*. What do the society ladies in this play have to do except gossip and try to destroy the relationships and lives of those around them? Most seem to have no other purpose. While Boothe does not seem to have much sympathy for the women she creates, the play is filled with bored and bitter women who are probably not nearly as aware of the source of their bitterness as Little Mary seems to be. It seems as if the purpose of the play might be to ask women to think about where their bitterness comes from. The play offers criticism from working class women regarding the spoiled, bored, upper-class women they take care of. In one scene, an exercise instructress is trying to get Sylvia to do her workout, and Sylvia is more interested in gossiping. Sylvia says to the instructress, "You talk like a horse-trainer" (40). The instructress quips, "Well, Mrs. Fowler, you're getting warm," and walks out of the room (40). Another working woman, Lucy, who runs the hotel in Reno where the women in the play go to get their divorces, engages in a discussion with Peggy, one of the women there to get a divorce decree. Peggy asks if Lucy feels sorry for the women who come there, and Lucy responds, "You feel plenty sorry enough for yourselves" (57). As their conversation continues, Peggy goes on to suggest that Lucy must be very happy because she has children. Lucy responds, "Lord, ma'am, I stopped thinking about being happy years ago. . . . Ain't had the time. With the kids and all. And the old man such a demon when he's drinking—Them big, strong, red-headed men. They're fierce" (57). Peggy responds, "Oh, Lucy, he beats you? How terrible!" Lucy retorts, "Ain't it? When you think what a lot of women in this hotel need a beating worse than me" (57). One of Stephen Haines' secretaries, Miss Trimmerback, asks her co-worker, Miss Watts, "Gee, don't you feel sorry for Mrs. Haines?" (49). Miss Watts replies, "I don't feel sorry for

any woman who thinks the world owes her breakfast in bed” (49). One of the Haines’ servants, Maggie, says to another servant, Jane, who feels sorry for Mary and the fact that she and Stephen are getting divorced, “She’s indulging a pride she ain’t entitled to. Marriage is a business of taking care of a man and rearing his children. It ain’t meant to be no perpetual honeymoon. How long would any husband last if he was supposed to go on acting forever like a red-hot Clark Gable? What’s the difference if he don’t love her?” (46). All of these women resent the self-indulgence and privilege of the spoiled women they serve. Even the actress who played the role of Mary Haines in the film did not like the character according to LaSalle who claims that *The Women* was a film Norma Shearer did not want to make and that she considered her character Mary Haines “too noble” (224).

These seemingly hardened responses to Mary Haines from women who have to make their own living reinforces the disdain of the poorer classes for the wealthy represented in so much of the popular culture of the decade. Comments condemning Mary’s foolishness in giving up a lucrative marriage just because her husband is having an affair also point out the limited options of many women in the thirties and the frustrations those women felt because of those limitations. The comments of Lucy, Miss Watts, and Maggie, especially, suggest that working women have very little sympathy for the pampered women of Mary’s social circle. Marriage is what women do, and women who get rich husbands should not complain about their husbands’ indiscretions. Lucy stays with her man even though he beats her, and she no longer even thinks about being happy. While the play and film uphold the institution of marriage, they do not defend marriage on the grounds of any romantic notions; instead, marriage is a legally sanctioned

economic arrangement, and women who have made good marriages, by gold-digging or not, need not expect sympathy from the less fortunate women who work for them.

The negative slant on gold-digging that is presented in *The Women* is part of a much broader disdain for this type of character that was becoming common by the late thirties. Haskell succinctly explains the transformation and recontainment that takes place in the representation of women in films during the thirties: “It is the difference between Ginger Rogers having sex without children—*Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Upper World* (1934)—and Ginger Rogers having children without sex—*Bachelor Mother* (1939)” (91). So strong was the condemnation of gold-diggers that in 1939, the state of California outlawed certain legal practices that were deemed part of the gold-digger’s bag of tricks. On May 13, 1939 *The San Francisco Examiner* reported the following:

Bad news for “gold-diggers” was written into the statute books of California today. Governor Culbert L. Olson signed two bills, introduced by Assemblyman Gardiner Johnson of Alameda County and Jeanette Daley of San Diego, to outlaw court actions for breach of promise, seduction of a person over legal age, or alientation [*sic*]of affections. . . . Also in the new law is provision that if either party to a contemplated marriage gives a present of money, jewelry or property to the other—and the marriage does not take place—a court action may be instituted to recover the value of the gift. (1-2)

With this new law in place, and with the stricter enforcement of Hollywood’s Production Codes, the stage was set for the weakening of the gold-digger as an icon of American culture. While she has never disappeared from the American scene completely, she has never been as vital as an icon since the thirties. The following chapter will trace the downfall of this now criminal type through the forties and into the fifties when nostalgia for the type produced a number of new, sympathetic, but watered down gold-diggers.

Chapter 4

CRIMINALS AND SEXUAL BABIES: THE GOLD-DIGGER IN THE 1940'S AND 1950'S

*Hey! Listen to my story 'bout a gal named . . . Lazy Daisy Mae—
Her disposition is rather sweet and charming;
At times alarming. So they say.
She had a man rich, tall, dark, handsome
large and strong to whom she used to sing this song:
Hey! DADDY! I want a di'mond ring, bracelets, ev'rything DADDY!
You ought-a get the best for me—*

Bob Troup, "Daddy" (1941)

By the early forties, the gold-digger had lost the innocence of similar women of the twenties as well as the social justification behind the actions of those ambitious women of the early years of the Depression. The gold-digger of the forties was often perceived as simply selfish, and as Bob Troup's song "Daddy" suggests, she was lazy and "at times alarming" (3). As Janey Place notes in "Women in Film Noir," "The independence of film noir women is often visually represented as self-absorbed narcissism: the woman gazes at her own reflection in the mirror, ignoring the man she will use to achieve her goals" (57). Daisy Mae does not try to justify her claims that her "Daddy . . . ought-a get the best for" her (Troup 4). Instead, the self-absorbed Daisy Mae assumes she deserves jewelry, furs, champagne, cars, and whatever suits her fancy at any given moment, and the song ends with her once again claiming her right to what his money can buy for her. Daddy remains nameless throughout the song, an entity simply to be used for Daisy Mae's selfish gain.

The song's unwillingness to give Daddy a character beyond that defined by his money also points toward another issue in dealing with gold-diggers in the forties. Sylvia

Harvey, in "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir," says,

The value of women on the market of social exchange has been to a large extent determined by the position of women within the structure of the family. . . . In the free labour that it requires the mother to perform in raising the child, the family serves to legitimate a whole series of practises that oppress women. Moreover, in its hierarchical structure, with the father as the head, the mother as subservient, and the children as totally dependent, it offers us a legitimate model or metaphor for a hierarchical and authoritarian society. (36-7)

Like Gloria in Beatrice Burton's *The Flapper Wife*, Lazy Daisy Mae seems at least tacitly aware that the role of wife and mother is not for her, that to be such a person means to be not only subservient but also desexualized. As Harvey says, "the family at the same time legitimates and *conceals* sexuality. . . . mothers and fathers are seldom represented as sexual partners, especially in those movies of the 40s and 50s when censorship demanded that only bedrooms with separate beds were to be shown" (37). The now criminalized (at least in California) gold-digger, on the other hand, was all about sex. Daisy Mae, represented in a drawing on the cover of the sheet music for the song, is a thin and young woman reclining with her arms behind her head and wearing a gown with a low cut neckline. The gown is sheer enough that one can see the outline of her breasts, legs, and buttocks through the fabric. Clearly, this artist's rendering of Daisy Mae presents her as a sexual being, not a wife and mother. Yet in the song itself, Daisy Mae takes on the position of the child to her "Daddy," not unlike similar popular representations of gold-diggers before and after the 1940's. In recognizing her dependence upon the father for her subsistence, Daisy Mae emphasizes the parent/child nature of the relationship, thereby refusing the sanctified, sexless role of housewife. At the same time, Daisy Mae also suggests that the sugar daddy/baby relationship is an indication of a pedophilic, incestuous desire. The pseudo-family represented in the sugar daddy/baby relationship is

a perverse one. In this disturbing picture of the sexual and romantic father/daughter relationship, Daisy Mae seems “actively involved in the violent assault on the conventional values of family life” (Harvey 43). While on one hand Daisy Mae is a self-absorbed mercenary taking advantage of a personality-less man, another view of her suggests that she is out to disrupt the strictly defined moral boundaries which confine her. And unlike Burton’s “jazz bride,” Daisy Mae is not reformed.

This selfish, unreformed baby is typical of the comic gold-digger in songs of the forties and fifties. In popular songs after World War II, the gold-digger appears occasionally, in the form of comic, novelty songs such as a number of late forties comic songs by Dorothy Shay, “the Park Avenue Hillbilly.” One such song is “Agnes Clung,” a story about a young woman who developed a wink when she drank liquor. The wink was often interpreted as a come-on by men, and while Agnes didn’t “learn the value of her wink” back home in the country, “in the city she got wise, and now Agnes does her drinkin’ in a mink.” The gold-digger also appears in the fifties in Pearl Bailey’s “Five Pound Box of Money” and “Solid Gold Cadillac” as well as Eartha Kitt’s “Santa Baby.” “Five Pound Box of Money” and “Santa Baby” both beg Santa Claus for expensive gifts and cash, making Jolly Old St. Nick the ultimate sugar daddy. Kitt’s performance persona, like her gold-digging sisters, uses ample sexual suggestion in her voice and the lyrics of the song, referring to Santa as “baby,” “honey,” and “cutie” and begging him to “come and trim [her] Christmas tree.” Kitt’s gold-digger is at once selfish mercenary and childish sexpot. Bailey’s persona is less sexual and more practical, emphasizing the difficulty of getting by and the need for cash to survive, as she says, “I don’t want the whole money tree. What good is that big thing to me? You keep the branches, keep the

trunk and the root, 'cause all that I want is just a little bit of the fruit." Despite Bailey's rare glimpse into the economic reasoning behind a gold-digger's endeavors, more often than not the gold-digger of the forties and fifties tends to be a selfish mercenary, a cold-hearted destructive femme fatale, or a childish sexpot who is at the mercy of the men around her. As censorship closes many of the opportunities available to popular culture's gold-diggers in post-Depression America, and as the war created a cultural panic over perceived threats to entrenched gender role divisions, the gold-digger's image becomes more and more negative.

Women in the Workforce and Hollywood's Reaction

Lori Landay, in *Madcaps, Screwballs, & Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*, notes that the popular culture of the early forties worked to negotiate the conflicted place of women in wartime America. She says, "By 1941, when *The Lady Eve* was released, the economic crisis of the Depression was on the cusp of being eclipsed by the economy-saving war effort" (138). While the United States' active involvement in World War II did not begin until the end of 1941, Landay recognizes that American involvement began before the actual declaration of war on December 8th of that year. As more and more men were drafted into the armed services, more and more women went into the workforce. Frank Krutnik, in *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, and Masculinity*, notes the ways in which this temporary change in gender roles caused confusion that American culture producers sought to reconcile. He says,

The USA's entry into World War II . . . set in motion a rapid process of cultural mobilisation, a wide-scale shift from a rather nervous ideology of isolationism to one of commitment and community. . . . an agenda was promoted of national unity, purpose and struggle which sought to displace the divisions of class, race and sexual inequality which had been openly addressed in the prewar era. With the mass drafting of men into the armed services, one of the consequences of the wartime expansion of the national economy was that women were overtly encouraged, as part of their 'patriotic duty', to enter the workforce rather than devoting themselves exclusively to home and family. During the war years, the female labor force increased by 6.5 million (or 57 per cent), and by 1945 there were almost 20 million women workers in the USA. The new prominence of women in the economic realm was matched by a wide-scale and rapid redefinition of their place within culture. These changes set in motion a temporary confusion in regard to traditional conceptions of sexual role and sexual identity, for both men and women. . . . (57)

In their efforts to attempt to reconcile the confusion brought about by these rapid changes in the work force, Krutnik says that Hollywood film makers found "the problems generated by women who sought economic and social advancement by using their sexuality as a bargaining tool . . . problematic in the wartime period" (58). The kinds of gold-diggers found in the films of the early thirties somehow no longer seemed to fit the contemporary needs of the culture: "the 'screwball' emphases upon frivolity and eccentric non-conformism were less tenable in a context where individuality was to be subjugated to 'the cause' . . ." (Krutnik 58). Landay also recognizes this cultural confusion and attempts by Hollywood film makers to reconcile the characters common to earlier films with contemporary cultural needs. She says,

The war polarized gender roles—men as 'protectors' and women as the 'protected'—at the same time that women's war work challenged traditional notions of women's employment (especially of older and married women). As women's economic independence increased, so did the 'backlash' images of unhappiness caused by female autonomy and misogynist fears of female power. . . . Anxieties about woman's place and female power reflected and perpetuated the contradictions of the ideology of gender which simultaneously acknowledged and tried to contain women's participation in the 'total war' society of the early forties. (138)

While the reality of women in the workforce generated cultural confusion in the early forties, the films of the period attempt to put women back in a place of subservience but only with partial success. All too common in the films of the forties we find women who make emotional pleas to be “normal” married women, such as Anna Holm (Joan Crawford), a blackmailer and potential murderer miraculously transformed into a loving governess and wannabe wife, in *A Woman's Face* (George Cukor, MGM, 1941): “I want to get married. I’ve always wanted to get married. I want to have a home and children. I want to go to market and cheat the grocer and fight with the landlord. I want to be part of the human race. I want to belong.” Being human is equal to being a wife, an all-too typical message in films of the forties and fifties. If one is not married, one is not human. Yet Anna Holm never marries in the film, and when we last see her, she is on her way to hear the judge’s verdict in her own trial for murder. Some women, even after a change of heart, cannot be reclaimed.

During and after World War II, the gold-digger continues to be present in popular culture; however, she has become much more complex and usually much more destructive. Film noir femmes fatales who are also gold-diggers take on a more sinister appearance than their often light-hearted counterparts in the twenties and thirties. Landay notes that “most wartime popular culture presented femininity as heroic, self-sacrificing, and good” (147). A good example of this heroic woman is found in Greer Garson’s performance as Suzie Parkington in *Mrs. Parkington* (Tay Garnett, MGM, 1944). While Suzie does marry a rich man, Major August Parkington (Walter Pidgeon), and enjoys a life of luxury, she does not marry him for his money. She marries him because he insists that she do so. He pities her after her mother dies in an explosion in his unsafe mine.

Being a naive young girl in shock and in mourning at the time, Suzie goes along with his plan, but as their relationship grows, she also grows and develops the grit and wisdom to stand up to her unscrupulous but romantic and often doting husband. Suzie Parkington is not a gold-digger but a wise and strong good girl whose children grow up to be mercenaries, waiting for her to die so they can have her money, only to find that the family fortune has to be sacrificed to keep one of the no-good children out of jail. In another perhaps less inspirational film of the same period, *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, First National, 1945), a money-hungry child is also important, but this film is more true to the femme fatale of the forties. While Mildred (Joan Crawford) is a strong and ambitious woman who will resort to many questionable tactics to gain money and success as a restaurant owner, her daughter Veda (Ann Blyth) is the product of her mother's struggles, an equally ambitious child who is spoiled and unwilling to work to improve her situation. Unlike Mrs. Parkington, who tames her husband, outlives him, and is able to see her spoiled children forced to find a way to provide for themselves, Mildred Pierce is not able to save or offer potential reform for Veda, who is punished for murdering her mother's husband who is also her own lover. While Mrs. Parkington, good girl through and through, shows her eternal strength of character as a survivor who will continue in her moral certainty, the less scrupulous Mildred Pierce is stripped of her power and sees all she has worked for destroyed by the end of the film. As Pam Cook says, in "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*,"

The paternalistic detective, who has secretly always controlled the progress of the narrative because of his foreknowledge of the truth, dispels duplicity by throwing light upon the scene: his assertion of Truth is supported symbolically when he opens the blinds to let in the dawn—light is the masculine principle which heralds the dawn of patriarchal culture and the defeat of matriarchy. This defeat is accomplished by the forcible and final separation of Mildred and Veda, thus

making it possible for Mildred to live with Bert in a “normal” couple relationship. She is returned to point zero, completely stripped, rehabilitated. (74)

Mildred Pierce’s inability to maintain her power by the end of the movie is related directly to the ambiguity of her own character as a femme fatale. Because she is not simply a good girl, Pierce’s power must be contained by the end of the film, and her ambition must be punished.

The Anti-Gold-Diggers of 1940

While film noir produced countless examples of gold-digging women who destroyed themselves and those around them, several films of the early forties produced images of women who were accused of gold-digging wrongly, and who fought the image of the gold-digger, thereby exposing how negatively she had come to be viewed by the beginning of the forties. Janey Place notes that while the femme fatale was common in films of the forties,

The opposite female archetype is also found in film noir: woman as redeemer. She offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities. She gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he comes back to her) and is generally visually passive and static. (60)

One important site in which anti-gold-digging good girls can be found is in several films produced in 1940: *Kitty Foyle*, *Primrose Path*, and *Irene*. These films tend not to have the seductive femme fatales who will flourish in film noir, but they do have characters who seem very much like the dull, innocent sweethearts who provide foils for those seductresses.

Kitty Foyle (Sam Wood, RKA, 1940) is a film about working women that assumes women have gained the equality fought for by suffragists, but that women are suffering because of the gains made by early feminists. Early in her life, Kitty (Ginger Rogers) was fascinated by the society pages and the Cinderella stories she read there. Her father Tom (Ernest Cossart) tells her those stories are “the ruination of more girls . . .” and then he asks, “Do you think he [the wealthy prince] wants to go on forever hearing about those ashes she was sitting in?” Like the practical young gold-digger in *The Women* who mourned having given up her stage career for some jewelry and a car, Kitty’s father offers a practical criticism as he notes that there is a big cultural gap between a young poor woman’s experience and the experiences of her wealthy sugar daddy, a theme often repeated as in *The Prince and the Show Girl* (1957) and other films of the forties and fifties. Kitty Foyle, like many of the young women in films of the early forties, although tempted by stories of gold-diggers’ success, becomes an anti-gold-digger. She falls in love with the wealthy Wynnewood Strafford VI (Dennis Morgan), a member of Philadelphia’s established social elite, and they marry, but Kitty realizes she can never be happy in Philadelphia society. When she learns that if he moves to New York and refuses to maintain his place in Philadelphia’s upper crust, he will be disinherited, she says, “So Wynne isn’t rich anymore! So what is that to me? I didn’t marry Wynne for his money. I married a man, not an institution or a trust fund or a bank.” When it becomes clear to her that Wynne is unwilling to give up his wealth and live a simpler life with her in New York, she walks out, and the two eventually divorce. In the meantime, she has met Mark (James Craig), a young, idealistic doctor, back in New York, and he has fallen in love with her. By the end of the film, Wynne begs Kitty

to run away to South America as his mistress and not his wife. Kitty decides to marry Mark instead and work with him in a children's hospital. She will not be wealthy, but she will be married. Unlike the young women who resist the label of gold-diggers in the previous two decades but who ironically end up married to their wealthy gentlemen of choice, Kitty Foyle chooses instead to stay with her idealistic doctor. She is a true anti-gold-digger, not simply a gold-digger who resists being labeled as such.

In *Primrose Path* (Gregory La Cava, RKP, 1940) Ellie May Adams (Ginger Rogers) is the product of what today would be called a dysfunctional family. Her father Homer (Miles Mander), although a college graduate, is an ineffectual drunkard who does not provide for the family. Her grandmother (Queenie Vassar) has become hardened and scheming and wants to force Ellie May into prostitution. Ellie May's mother Mamie (Marjorie Rambeau) has become a prostitute to provide for her family. Ellie May's younger sister Honey Belle (Joan Carroll) is learning the lessons of her mother and grandmother well and expects gifts whenever her mother comes home after days and nights out with her sugar daddies. In other words, Honey Belle has learned to connect men with financial gain and pricey gifts. When Ellie May meets and marries Ed Wallace (Joel McCrae), a middle class man who helps keep up his father's (Henry Travers) modest family owned restaurant, Honey Belle expects him to bring gifts to her and does not like him when he does not. Ellie May has accidentally met and fallen in love with Ed, but at her parents' advice, she has not told him about her family. Unfortunately, when she takes Ed to meet her parents, all the sordid details of their lives come out, and Ed leaves Ellie May. It is unimportant to Ed that Ellie May's mother is a good-hearted woman, driven to a life of prostitution by circumstances. He is concerned only with the

fact that his wife has withheld the truth about her family from him.

After Ed leaves Ellie May, she and her family's situation becomes more desperate. Unlike Mazie in John Held, Jr.'s novel *Crosstown*, however, in *Primrose Path* there is no happy ending. Ellie May's mother, the woman who lives through hell and resorts to any means necessary to survive, dies. In Hollywood in 1940, the reasons for her fall to adultery and prostitution are not enough; she must be punished. After Ed leaves, Ellie May's drunken father shoots her mother, leaving the family without support. Ellie May tries to find respectable work, but when she cannot, she gets her mother's friend Thelma (Vivienne Osborn) to help her get started in the business of prostitution. On Ellie May's first night out as an aspiring hooker, her first customer is Mr. Hawkins (Gene Morgan), a benevolent client of her mother's who helps her set things right with Ed. The film ends with Ellie May, saved just in the nick of time from becoming a fallen woman, as the once again happy wife of her successful middle-class restaurant owner. She is not rich; she will not be rich; but she is not a gold-digger. The film's message suggests that the path to happiness is found in upholding commonly accepted moral standards and not giving in to pressure to forgo them.

Another anti-gold-digger is found in a romantic comedy from the same year. In *Irene* (Herbert Wilcox, RKO, 1940) Irish immigrant Irene O'Dare (Anna Neagle) is accused of being kept by a wealthy society man, but she does not know that he is paying her bills. In addition, the gifts she receives are not given to her because she solicits them or seduces anyone into giving them to her. Instead, she wants to work her way to the top based on her own honest abilities, and she assumes the gifts are only being given to her so that she can do her job properly. However, Don Marshall (Ray Milland) is attracted to

her and intervenes without her knowledge to better her social and economic position and to get her a job in a place where he knows he will have continued access to her company.

While Irene does want to get ahead, she is not actively trying to land a high paying job or a wealthy husband. Instead, she has a job working for an upholsterer. When Don first meets her by accident as she measures cushions for his mother's chairs, he decides he likes what he sees and arranges for Irene to get a job modeling dresses at Madame Lucille's, an expensive boutique. He does not tell her that Madame Lucille is a fictional creation; he is the owner of the shop. While he is away on vacation, Mr. Smith (Roland Young), the manager of Madame Lucille's, comes up with a plan to drum up business. Because several of the wealthy elite have mistaken Irene for a member of an aristocratic Irish family, Smith decides to play on this image by paying for a Park Avenue penthouse and providing expensive gowns for Irene. Since she is very popular among the wealthy, they will want to dress like her, so the expense should be worth it to Madame Lucille's. However, a gossip columnist publishes a notice insinuating that Don is keeping Irene. It is true; they cannot lie. But Irene is shocked and horrified to learn that she has been a kept woman all along. By the end of the film, however, Irene and Don end up on their way to the altar, and marriage will right all the wrongs and misunderstandings of this comedy of errors. *Irene* is in the tradition of anti-gold-diggers of the twenties as she ends up with her wealthy husband, presumably by accident.

The Femme Fatale Gold-Digger

While Lori Landay notes that most forties movie women, like Irene O'Dare, Ellie May Adams, and Kitty Foyle, were good and heroic, she also notes the "destructiveness of the female trickster" in early forties films in the form of the femme fatale (137). E. Ann Kaplan also notices this shift as she says, "Since the *femme fatale* was often evil and deliberately used her sexuality to draw the hero into the enemy's hands, the films were in one sense a message to men to stay away from these sexy women—to settle for the home-girl" (10). Sylvia Harvey also notes that "the two most common types of women in film noir are the exciting, childless whores, or the boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts" (38). Molly Haskell also comments on the two dominating archetypes in the films of the forties, as she says, "For every hard-boiled dame there was a soft-boiled sweetheart, and for every tarnished angel an untarnished one" (193). Janey Place goes further to recognize, however, that the femme fatale was more interesting than her sweet and forgiving counterpart: "The dark woman of film noir had something her innocent sister lacked: access to her own sexuality (and thus to men's) and the power that this access unlocked" (48). By the early forties, the real gold-digger resides almost exclusively in the first category, the exciting, childless whore who is destined to lead men into enemy hands and often destroy him and/or herself in the process.

Despite her destructiveness, however, as Place suggests, very often the femme fatale of the forties was, in her wisdom and seductiveness not only a more sinister, criminalized version of the gold-digger of the early thirties; she was also more in control of her sexuality despite the fact that she is more often than not destroyed by the end of the

film in which she exists. Frank Krutnik comments that

The glamorous *noir femmes fatales* tend to be women who seek to advance themselves by manipulating their sexual allure and controlling its value. They can thus be seen as the 1940s equivalent to the prewar 'screwball' gold-diggers. . . . The shift from romantic comedy to the 'tough' crime thriller as the principal generic setting for these women suggests a more acutely troubled framing of the problems they signify in regard to marriage and to patriarchal economic regulation. The romantic comedies lay stress upon convincing the woman that love provides greater satisfaction than money or ambition, but in the *noir* 'tough' thrillers the *femmes fatales* tend—as Christine Gledhill has suggested—to be rigorously and aggressively subjected to male investigation and moral censure (also, they frequently die). (63)

Place also comments extensively on the powerful destructiveness of this new gold-digging femme fatale:

Often the original transgression of the dangerous lady of film noir (unlike the vamp seductress of the 20s) is ambition expressed metaphorically in her freedom of movement and visual dominance. This ambition is inappropriate to her status as a woman, and must be confined. She wants to be the owner of the nightclub, not the owner's wife. . . . She wants her husband's insurance money, not her comfortable, middle-class life. . . . She wants money and succeeds only in destroying herself and the man who loves her. . . . Whether evil . . . or innocent . . . her desire for freedom, wealth or independence ignites the forces which threaten the hero. (56-7)

Haskell also recognizes the drive and power behind women in film noir of the forties as she says, "They are nobody's fools, these women, but their smarts are devoted to getting what they can out of life—men and money (or more men and more money)—rather than to any high purpose or ideal" (199). However, despite her selfish narcissism and destructiveness, Harvey notes that "Despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot fully be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance" (45). Place also comments on this phenomenon when she says, "Visually, film noir is fluid, sensual, extraordinarily expressive, making the sexually expressive

woman, which is its dominant image of woman, extremely powerful. It is not their inevitable demise we remember but their strong, dangerous, and, above all, exciting sexuality” (48). In addition, Harvey notes that “the ideological safety valve device that operates in the offering of women as sexual commodities breaks down in probably most of these films [noir of the forties], because the women are not, finally, possessed” (40). Despite the fact that Hollywood film makers attempted to put women in their places as a reaction to the cultural confusion created by the increased presence of women in what had previously been men’s jobs, the result was not a full recontainment. The women of film noir, despite their self-destruction, are never fully destroyed, for in their memorable performances of strength and determination, they clearly establish that women can alter the course of their own lives and the lives of those around them.

Numerous films from the forties present this destructive femme fatale gold-digger, including *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, Paramount, 1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, MGM, 1946), and *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, Universal International, 1946). The first two are based on stories by James M. Cain and offer examples of the “black widow” character who attempts to improve her life by murdering a wealthy husband with the assistance of a man she lures into her plot. In *Double Indemnity* Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) poses as an innocent woman to lure insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) into insuring her husband for \$50,000 without Mr. Dietrichson’s (Tom Powers) knowledge. When Neff first appears in her home, Mrs. Dietrichson appears clad only in a towel, and she and Neff immediately begin to express a strong sexual attraction for one another. However, when she tells Neff that she wants to buy a policy for her husband without his knowledge, Neff

understands the implied message—she wants to be free of the husband and get a sizable amount of cash as well. He tells her of several women whose husbands his company has insured and how they were caught after killing their husbands to get the cash. In response to one story of a woman who went to jail for murder, Phyllis Dietrichson replies, “Perhaps it was worth it to her.” Posing as an abused and neglected wife, she finally gets Neff to join in her plot. The policy he sells her comes with a double indemnity clause that states the insurance company will pay double the insured amount in the event that the husband dies in an unusual accident. Neff cooks up a scheme to get the full \$100,000 by making it look as if Mr. Dietrichson falls from a train and dies in a freakish, one-in-a-million accident. After the murder, however, Neff learns that Mrs. Dietrichson married her husband in the first place to get his money, but then, after the marriage, his income decreased. Neff also learns that Mrs. Dietrichson had been the nurse of her husband’s first wife and although she hadn’t exactly murdered her predecessor, she had hurried the sick woman’s death along by opening windows to the woman’s room and taking the covers from her bed. Phyllis claims that she had not married Mr. Dietrichson only for his money, but that she had “wanted a home” and that she had pitied the man. However, since she is strongly implicated in the death of the previous Mrs. Dietrichson, her claims that she married him for less than selfish reasons seem bogus. In addition, after she and Neff kill Mr. Dietrichson, Neff is impressed that she sheds “not a tear” and explains, “I was afraid you might go to pieces after we’d done it.” But cold hearted Phyllis does not go to pieces. In fact, Lola (Jean Heather), Mr. Dietrichson’s daughter by his previous wife, tells Neff she caught Phyllis trying on mourning clothes two days before her husband’s death. In the end, however, forties film

goers get a double whammy of so-called justice: not only does Phyllis reform, but she also dies. When Neff comes to murder her and pin the blame on Nino Zachetti (Byron Barr), her daughter's boyfriend (and, it is implied, another of Phyllis' own lovers), she shoots Neff once, but then cannot fire at him again because suddenly she realizes for the first time in her life that she really loves someone, Neff. He takes the gun from her and kills her. Then, he uses his last strength to go back to his office and record a confession for the insurance company's investigator (Edward G. Robinson) before collapsing, unable to run from the law.

In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* a similar plot by wife against husband is enacted. A drifter, Frank Chambers (John Garfield), shows up at a roadside gas station and restaurant owned by Nick Smith (Cecil Calloway) and his wife Cora (Lana Turner). When Chambers and Cora discover they are in love, Cora refuses to run away because to do so would mean giving up financial security. They kill Nick rather than simply running away. Cora had originally married Nick because, she tells Chambers, she was tired of fighting off all the other men who wanted her and because she wanted not only financial security but "to be somebody." In other words, Cora wants wealth and the prestige that comes along with it. The middle-class security she has with Nick is not enough for her. After Nick's death, Cora immediately gets a liquor license and works to make her dreams come true by turning the sleepy roadside restaurant into a busy beer joint. She even capitalizes on the notoriety she has gained through the very public trial she underwent after being arrested on charges of murder after her husband's death. In the end, however, Cora is coincidentally killed in a car accident immediately after she and Chambers decide they can once again be a happy couple together. The murdering gold-

digger is once again destroyed in the brutal criminal world of film noir. She also takes Frank Chambers down with her, as he is arrested on charges of murder after her death. Ironically, Cora and Frank are found innocent of the murder they committed, and Frank is found guilty of a murder he did not commit.

The Killers offers a somewhat different slant on the gold-digging femme fatale. Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner) is a gangster's moll who double-crosses everyone to get a nice home. She tells insurance investigator Jim Reardon (Edmond O'Brien) that she saw Ole "Swede" Anderson (Burt Lancaster) as her chance to pull off a deal that would get "a big pay-off" so she could leave behind the gang and lead a clean, married life outside the criminal underworld. She says she doesn't have the courage to leave on her own or the means to get money to do so alone, so she needs a man to help her, and Swede was the man she picked. However, she tricks Swede into believing that he has been double-crossed by the gang leader, Big Jim Colfax (Albert Dekker), while in reality, she double-crosses Swede, steals the money from a big heist from him, and marries Colfax who proceeds to go straight and become a legitimate business man. In the end, once again, the gold-digger is punished for her wicked ways, however. After Colfax is shot and is dying on the stairs of his and Kitty's luxurious home, Kitty begs him to tell them she had no knowledge of the murders, but he dies without saying the words that will set her free. The nice home she had wanted, her ticket out of the criminal underworld, slips through her fingers as the life slips from his body.

In film noir's world of shadows, the femme fatale gold-digger is relegated to the dark, criminal underworld, and there is little chance of escape for her from that world. Crime will be punished; the gold-digging femme fatale must be punished. Yet her

biggest crime seems to be that she wants to have a nice (i.e. better than middle class) home. Kitty Collins wants to escape from a criminal underworld and find that nice home. Cora Smith destroys her husband to keep and improve her home. Phyllis Dietrichson employs criminal techniques to gain and keep that home. While the gold-digging femme fatale is not satisfied with middle-class comforts, her desire to have and keep a nice home is not so far from an ideal espoused by many Americans in the years following World War II. As Krutnik notes,

Immediately following the war, the US experienced a massive increase in both the production and consumption of consumer durables, and one of the effects of this was an intensifying pressure for people to define themselves in relation to (the ownership of) mass-produced objects. The idealised home, stacked with consumer goods, separated and protected from the social space of the town or the city, became a new 'temple' of aspiration and conformity. The suburbs defined the horizons of the new America, and they were testimony simultaneously to material wealth and to cultural alienation. (60)

According to Krutnik, this trend began before the war's end, however, as he notes Michael Renov's claim that in 1944 "there was a lessening of wartime exigencies . . . with a victory for the Allied Forces being seen as a more viable and imminent prospect" (59). With the end of the war a real possibility, women had to move back into their positions as wives and not workers, but once again, only the right kind of women could be allowed into the closed suburban communities of the postwar era. Strong, independent women were a threat to postwar America, and the femme fatale was the warning of what kind of woman was to be avoided.

The Palm Beach Story and *The Lady Eve*: Femmes Fatales Gold-Diggers or Good Girls?

Two films that disrupt a relatively clear pattern in viewing gold-diggers, good girls, and femme fatales in the early forties are *The Palm Beach Story* (Preston Sturges, Paramount, 1942) and *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, Paramount, 1941). In *The Palm Beach Story* Gerry Jeffers (Claudette Colbert) is a very practical minded gold-digger who realizes that her marriage to Tom Jeffers (Joel McCrea) is not working to the benefit of either partner. She is not happy waiting for his innovative engineering ideas to bring about his success and says she is “very tired of being broke” and wants “it now while [she] can enjoy it.” She is very aware, and has been for a long time, of what a good looking woman can get simply by being beautiful and receptive to the advances of wealthy gentlemen. She decides to divorce Tom and tells him, “Sex always has something to do with it,” “You can always find a provider if you really want one,” and “You have no idea what a long-legged gal can do without doing anything.” Gerry runs away from Tom to Palm Beach, and on the way she meets John D. Hackensacker, III (Rudy Vallee), the wealthiest man in America, who immediately takes a liking to her and begins buying her expensive clothing and jewelry. When Tom shows up in Palm Beach, she convinces him to pose as her brother, and he grudgingly goes along with her plan to go through with the divorce so that she can marry Hackensacker. Tom, she hopes, will marry Hackensacker’s sister, the Princess Centimilla (Mary Astor). When Tom resists, she tells him over and over to be practical and not so noble. Being noble and honest and unwilling to take advantage of rich fools is impractical, and to Gerry, as foolish as the rich folks themselves are. However, when Gerry realizes that she is, after all, too much

in love to be practical, too much in love to go through with the plan to marry the wealthy fool she has snagged, she says to Tom, “I hope you realize this is costing us millions.”

The end of the film finds Tom and Gerry back together. However, Tom has entered into a partnership with Hackensacker’s backing to put his ideas into realistic practice. Coincidentally, we learn at the end of the film that Tom and Gerry have identical twin siblings who are perfectly willing to marry Hackensacker and Centimilla at the last minute. This unlikely resolution fits into the gold-digger tradition, although in this case ties to a wealthy family do not disrupt the marriage that almost ended in divorce as they did in *The Gold Diggers of 1935* when Dick Curtis (Dick Powell) and Arline Davis (Dorothy Dare) break their engagement in order to make more lucrative marriage connections. The moral righteousness of marriage is protected in the end of the movie through this deus ex machina ending, twins appearing in the last five minutes of the film. Yet, the statement made just before the closing credits, written in large script over the wedding scene and underscored by the sound of breaking glass, potentially undermines this fairy-tale ending in which gold-diggers end up married for love and with the millions they need to be happy: “and they lived happily ever after . . . or did they?”

The ambiguity of the not-so-happy-ever-after, Tom and Gerry’s pose as brother and sister to lure Hackensacker and Centimilla into marriage, and the idea that marriage for love is impractical disrupt the moral conventions of the time. Despite the tidy package presented by the preservation of Tom and Gerry’s marriage, and despite the obvious passion the two feel towards each other, Gerry’s insistence that her marriage to Tom is impractical and the idea that marriage is expendable if it is not lucrative suggest that marriage may not always be the best choice. Economic issues are at least as

important as issues of emotion and social convention. To Gerry, lying is practical and necessary. As she says to Tom, “The greatest men in the world have told lies and let things be misunderstood if it was useful to them. Haven’t you ever heard of a campaign promise?” Gerry is a con artist, a gold-digger, and a trickster, who in the end gets to stay with the man she loves and reap the benefits of gold-digging another man.

The Lady Eve also fits easily into the gold-digger tradition with its shipboard romance between Jean (Barbara Stanwyck), a thief and con-woman, and Hopsie (Henry Fonda), an effete, awkward heir to an ale fortune. Jean, like every other woman on the ship, wants to hook Hopsie because of his fortune and his good looks. However, con-woman Jean employs tricks the other women will not resort to, including tripping him to get his attention and then yelling at him for breaking the heel off her shoe. She also wears perfume that drives him insane, and as they spend an evening together, when he asks her to go dancing, she instead suggests that it is “time for us to go to bed.” The promise offered by this suggestion cannot immediately be fulfilled, however, and although they go to his private chambers together, the sexual interaction between the two is limited to what a twenties novel might have called heavy petting. Jean goes to Hopsie’s cabin with him but is frightened by a snake he is bringing back from South America, so she drags him to her room instead. There, she lies on a lounge and holds his head to her chest, running her hands through his hair. The obvious use of sex to lure this man into her snare with the ultimate goal of fleecing him clearly puts her into the gold-digger category. However, like some of her gold-digging predecessors in the twenties, Jean falls in love with her target. When Hopsie learns that she is part of a gang of thieves, however, he dumps her, and she vows to get her revenge against the self-

righteous prig.

At this point in the film, Jean becomes much more like her film noir femme fatale sisters. Coming from a criminal underworld to begin with, her tactics for getting revenge seem less than scrupulous, and the ambiguity of her relationship with him renders the film morally uncertain. Although Jean wants to reform and leave behind her criminal past when she falls in love with Hopsie, and she even asks her con-man father, Harry (Charles Coburn), to reform as well, she does not reform entirely. However, she does blur the boundary between good girls and gold-digging femme fatales. She tells Hopsie, “You don’t know very much about girls. The best ones aren’t as good as you probably think they are, and the bad ones aren’t as bad, not nearly as bad. So I suppose you’re right to worry, falling in love with an adventuress on the high seas.” Hopsie, already aware of her position as a criminal, replies, “Are you an adventuress?” Jean’s response offers a justification for her behavior; she says, “Course I am. All women are. They have to be. If you waited for a man to propose to you from natural causes, you’d die of old maidenhood. That’s why I let you try my slippers on and then I put my cheek against yours and then I made you put your arms around me . . . and then I fell in love.” Like earlier gold-diggers, Jean is aware that in order to get her man, she must employ trickery; she must seduce him into proposing. However, the trickery has failed, and because of her reputation as a criminal, Hopsie leaves her.

In leaving her, however, Hopsie has left himself open to the gold-digger’s attack, but Jean does not take advantage of him. He has proposed to her. He has asked Harry for her hand in marriage. She has a clear cut breach of promise suit available to her. But she chooses, instead, to create an elaborate plan for revenge, following him to

Connecticut and posing as British nobility, seducing him into marriage, and then performing her fictitious Lady Eve character as a tramp who has had a sordid past including affairs with her father's groomsmen and other men Hopsie deems beneath her, many men—Angus, Herman, Vernon, Cecil, Hubert, Herbert, John, etc. Hopsie fully believes what he is told about his new wife and leaves her on the train that is taking them to their honeymoon destination. Again, Hopsie has left himself open to the unscrupulous gold-digger. Jean could get a very nice divorce settlement. However, she does not do so. Instead, all she wants, she says, is to talk to him one last time, and then she will go to Reno and pay the divorce expenses herself. Hopsie refuses to meet with her; the divorce is not obtained.

Finally, back on shipboard, Jean reappears, tripping Hopsie once again to get his attention, and the two reaffirm their love for each other. They immediately go to her cabin, where he admits that he is married, and she says she is also married. Hopsie does not care, and as the door closes on the two lovers in a passionate embrace, he believes he is about to commit adultery and does not want to know what it is that she says she ought to tell him. In true reformed gold-digger spirit, Jean has the chance to fleece a millionaire more than once but does not do it, yet in the end, she gets her millionaire man, although why she wants the snob at this point is a question that remains unanswered. Also unanswered is the question of how much access she actually will have to his wealth and the question of the legality of their marriage, of which Hopsie is not even aware. He thinks he is married to Eve, not Jean. If Jean is simply having an affair with Hopsie, is she entitled to the benefits of his wealth? If Jean is married to Hopsie under a false name and under false pretenses, is the marriage legal? When asked this question, Jean's father

says, "It appears to be." However, the legality of the marriage, like the ambiguity of the relationship itself, is never resolved. Clearly, Jean/Eve is a trickster character who takes advantage of the not-particularly-bright Hopsie, but to what advantage does she do so? The film's ending leaves these questions open. The tactics employed by Jean to get her man, to get her revenge, and then to get her man back include trickery similar to that used by other gold-diggers and by the femmes fatales who follow. The result of the trickery is as ambiguous as the relationship between Hopsie and Jean. Jean has been punished, perhaps, by the loss of Hopsie once, and she has used Hopsie to get her revenge in Connecticut, but in the end we do not know where the relationship will end or whether or not Jean will reap the rewards of her work with Hopsie. She finally rests somewhere between the light hearted success of the gold-digger and the dangerous, seductive and ultimately punished femme fatale. As Lori Landay says, "Although the screwball comedy genre continues into the forties, female trickery now is represented in a more complicated light that shades into the low-key lighting and shadows of film noir" (137).

Postwar Gold-Diggers: Nostalgia and Trash

The complications offered by *The Lady Eve* and *Palm Beach Story* are probably acceptable because they come in the form of comedy; often comedy can transgress boundaries in ways that serious drama cannot, precisely because comedy is not to be taken seriously. However, an additional reason why these films may be acceptable is because although they do question the authority of the institution of marriage, like the

noir femme fatale, they do so in a tawdry manner, offering risqué titillation for their audience. In doing so, an audience may safely view indiscretions on the screen that might be shocking in reality, despite the reality that similar situations might have existed.

Along with these films, the increasingly lurid covers of pulp paperbacks dealing with gold-diggers tells a tale of what becomes of this character type after World War II. A 1946 cover of Vina Delmar's *The Marriage Racket*, originally published in 1931, shows the top half of a woman in a strapless, red dress, lying on her back with a man bending over her and embracing her. The top of the book jacket notes that Delmar is also the author of *Bad Girl*, and inside the front jacket, *The Marriage Racket* is described as the story of a woman who "was looking for luxury rather than love" when she married her husband, and that after "the marriage didn't pan out . . . she embarked on an intoxicating career of illicit thrills that brought her a penthouse on Park Avenue, numerous admirers and lovers, and a scandalous reputation" (inside cover). From the red, strapless gown that barely covers her breasts to the overtly sexual illustration on the cover, the postwar novel cover proclaims the book to be for adults. Cicely Schiller's 1947 *The Harlot* is touted as "The uncensored romance of a Jezebel" and its cover shows a woman in a negligee, leg exposed through a slit in the front, one hand on her hip, the other leaning against an open door. On a 1949 reprint of the 1931 story *Gold Diggers*, by Lois Bull, again a woman in a strapless red dress poses in the jacket illustration, her head cocked to one side with a come-hither expression on her face (eyebrows raised, a smirk on her lips) and her hands on her hips. The jacket says, "Meet the come-on girl with the pay-off smile!" On a 1950 reprint of Rufus King's *Somewhere in This House*, the jacket proclaims, "She lived for men and their money." The illustration on the cover shows a

woman in a pink negligee on her knees with her arms wrapped around a bed post as a man approaches her with a knife. The cover of the 1956 novel *The Men in Her Death*, by Stephen Ransome, says the book is “A startling mystery about the murder of a gold digger and The Men in Her Death.” The cover illustration shows a woman lying dead in a pool of water, leafless weeds sprouting up around her prone body, her clinging black skirt and yellow blouse half torn from her body.

By the sixties, covers of pulp versions of gold-digger novels become even more titillating. 1961's *The Affairs of Clio*, by Matt Gesson, shows a woman in red panties with black lace trim and a flimsy white camisole lying in front of a fireplace, playfully holding her long black hair over her mouth and looking at the camera. On the cover, we read, “She had known so many men . . . she could not change. An intimate peek into the heart and mind of a passionate woman.” Inside the title page of the book, we learn that it is “Exciting Reading FOR MEN.” Stanley Curson’s 1965 *Sister For Sale* shows a nude man reclining on a sofa, and blocking the view of his body is a back shot of a tall, thin woman with long blond hair covering most of her naked back. She wears only black, fishnet stockings and black stiletto heels. The cover says, “She came to New York to trade virgin beauty for wealth, only to lose herself in illicit passions.” Jackson Harmon’s *The Wanton Shack-up* from 1967 says, “Bobbie surrendered to the lust of many men to discover the sort of girl she really was.” A 1968 printing of *The Lust Heiress* by John Dexter states boldly on the front cover that it is “ADULT READING” and on a red background a nude, platinum blonde woman with heavy eye makeup is draped in just enough feather boas to cover the parts of her body that the book seemingly promises to reveal.

Countless other examples of such book jackets from the forties through the sixties clearly indicate just what became of the gold-digger after the forties. Gold-diggers are the stuff masturbation fantasies are made of, not worthy of serious presentation or consideration. Gold-diggers after the forties live in the gutter, even when aboard an exclusive yacht or in an expensive penthouse. Even the actress who played more gold-digging characters in the fifties than any other, Marilyn Monroe, was presented as a sex kitten, purring and cooing to her audience in a way that many critics think overshadowed the real talent she had. As Molly Haskell says of Monroe, “throughout her career, she was giving more to idiotic parts than they called for—more feeling, more warmth, more anguish; and, as a result, her films have a richer tone than they deserve. The best ones, which is to say, the best that she could get under the circumstances, are the films that suggest the discrepancy between the woman . . . and the sexpot . . .” (256).

While Monroe’s image was that of a sexually abundant but naive baby, her gold-diggers also tended to be drawn from times past. *The Prince and the Showgirl* (Laurence Olivier, Warner Brothers, 1957), for instance, is set in the 1890s, and the showgirl ends up turning down the prince’s (Laurence Olivier) offer of marriage, knowing their two worlds can never meet and marry successfully. In *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, United Artists, 1959), Monroe’s Sugar Cane, loosely based on the 1920s boop-boop-bee-doop girl, Helen “Candy” Kane, and set in the roaring twenties of Chicago and Palm Beach, gives up her hunt for a millionaire and rides off into the sunset in a motorboat with her newest lover, a penniless saxophone player (Tony Curtis). Even one of her most famous gold-digging roles, that of Lorelei Lee in the 1953 version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, directed by Howard Hawks for 20th Century Fox, although set in the fifties, is a remake

of Anita Loos' very popular 1925 novel, which had previously been produced on film in 1928 (IMDb.com). *How to Marry a Millionaire*, directed by Jean Negulesco for 20th Century Fox and released in November of 1953, seems to be little more than an attempt to further capitalize on the success of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* which was released in July of the same year. At one point in the film, a fashion show announcer even introduces Monroe by taking the title line from that film's most famous song: "You know of course that diamonds are a girl's best friend, and this is our proof of it." *How to Marry a Millionaire* is also clearly a nostalgia piece which makes use of its own references to 1920's culture and recycles themes explored in several films of the thirties. Monroe's near-sighted Pola Debevoise misquotes Dorothy Parker's 1920's quip: "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses" (Parker "News Item" 82). On a plane, speaking to David Wayne, Monroe says, "You know what they say about girls who wear glasses. . . . Men aren't attentive to girls who wear glasses." In addition, *How to Marry a Millionaire* is a reworking of a plot used in a number of films during the thirties, including *The Greeks Had a Word for Them/Three Broadway Girls* (1932) and *Three Blind Mice* (1938). Both films, like *How to Marry a Millionaire*, give writing credits to a play or plays by Zoe Akin. Both thirties films also involve three single women who try to land wealthy husbands (IMDb.com).

One redeeming moment in Monroe's career playing the gold-digger in film comes in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* when she meets her fiancé Gus Esmond's (Tommy Noonan) father (Taylor Holmes) for the first time and challenges him regarding her intentions to marry a man who has money and whom she loves. She tells him, "Don't you know that a man being rich is like a girl being pretty? You might not marry a girl

just because she's pretty, but my goodness, doesn't it help? And if you had a daughter, wouldn't you rather she didn't marry a poor man? You'd want her to have the most wonderful things in the world and be very happy. Well, why is it wrong for me to want those things?" In this rare instance, a 1950's film presents a very strong case for a gold-digger's claim to equality with others who are born to wealth. When Mr. Esmond expresses his surprise at Lorelei's sound logic and says he thought she was dumb, she responds, "I can be smart when it's important, but most men don't like it. . . ." Smart women are apparently not a valuable commodity; pretty, simple-minded women are, and Monroe's Lee plays the part of a simple-minded bimbo well.

Despite its fifties costumes and sets, for the most part, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* follows the basic patterns of gold-digging found in the novel from which it was adapted and other texts from the same period. Lorelei constantly refers to her fiancé, Gus Esmond, as "Daddy," emphasizing the parental role of the male and the spoiled child role of the female in such relationships. And like many texts from the early thirties, Hawks' version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* makes ample commentary justifying women's gold-digging behavior. Lorelei tells Gus, "It's men like you who have made me the way I am, and if you loved me at all, you'd feel sorry for the terrible troubles I've been through instead of holding them against me." While Lorelei's statement seems out of proportion and is made too earnestly, it suggests that a pretty woman hasn't got a chance, and that men make beautiful women become gold-diggers and sexpots. Gold-diggers are victims of the men who desire them, says Lorelei, a comment reiterated in one of the most famous songs from the film, "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." Lorelei and Dorothy (Jane Russell) sing, "Men grow cold as girls grow old, and we all lose our charms in the

end. . . .” Men’s interest in beautiful women is fleeting, dependent entirely on the woman’s maintenance of her beauty and his own financial security: “He’s your guy when stocks are high, but beware when they start to descend. It’s then that those louses go back to their spouses.” The result is that a woman must be practical and not too dependent on men in the long run. She must get what she can and hold onto it so that she can take care of herself later because “[a] kiss may be grand, but it won’t pay the rental on your humble flat or help you at the automat.” This practical lesson in gold-digging makes a strong case for sympathy for the young woman who is used by men for her beauty, and who in turn uses men for their wealth.

However, this interpretation of the film is undercut by several factors within the film, most notably the double wedding at the end of the film. In Loos’ novel, Dorothy Shaw never marries, but in Hawks’ film, both Dorothy and Lorelei walk down the aisle together, in matching white lace tea-length dresses cut in a style that would have made Mamie Eisenhower proud. As they march down the aisle, Dorothy says to Lorelei, “Remember, honey, on your wedding day it’s alright to say, ‘Yes.’” All this time, these two unescorted, busty, leggy, worldly showgirls who spend a great deal of time on romantic cruises with amorous gentlemen have been innocent, unspoiled virgins. It seems more than a little difficult to believe, yet the closing lines spoken by Dorothy suggest that this is what we are supposed to believe. To further support the idea that Dorothy and Lorelei are just good girls about whom people assume bad things, consider Lorelei’s relationship with Sir Francis Beekman (Charles Coburn), a dirty old man who owns diamond mines. When Detective Malone (Elliott Reid) catches Lorelei in an embrace with Beekman and snaps a photograph to send back to Mr. Esmond, Dorothy is

certain of Lorelei's innocence and is only concerned about getting the pictures back because of how they will be misinterpreted. Also, in the novel, Lorelei marries Henry Spoffard, throwing over Mr. Eisman and several other gents along the way, not because she loves him but because she sees him as an opportunity to further her aspirations toward a film career. He has the funds to get her onto film. But in Hawks' film, Lorelei maintains a relationship with Gus Esmond throughout the film and eventually marries him because she loves him: "There's not another millionaire in the world with such a gentle disposition. He never wins an argument, always does anything I ask, and he's got the money to do it. How can I help but love a man like that?" While her reasons for loving Esmond seem a bit questionable—she loves him because he's a doormat who lets her get away with whatever she likes—she does love him, and money is only one of the things that make her love him. Unlike the purely mercenary Lorelei in Loos' novel, Hawks' Lorelei is a good, unspoiled girl. As Landay says,

The difference between the Loreleis of the 1925 serialized novel and the 1953 film is analogous to the difference many scholars have described between Mae West's and Marilyn Monroe's interpretations of the blonde sex goddess. West's deliberate, self-aware display and deployment of her sexuality is in sharp contrast to Monroe's "innocent" lack of awareness of her sexuality. (157)

Rowe also notices the crucial differences between Monroe's sexuality and the more consciously deployed Depression-era sexuality of Mae West:

While the popularity of blonde sex goddesses such as Mamie Van Doren, Jayne Mansfield, and Monroe herself suggested that female unruliness had returned to the kind of overt sexuality represented by Mae West in the 1930s, the resemblance was largely superficial. Rather than using sexuality self-consciously for their own pleasure and power, as West did, these women, especially Monroe, replaced power with vulnerability and offered up their own sexuality for male pleasure. (171)

In presenting Lorelei as a good girl and in marrying off both her and Dorothy at the end

of Hawks' film, the gold-digger is stripped of much of her power. As Rowe says, "Lorelei's virginity...is a commodity in a very serious business, something to be traded to the highest bidder. It is a sign of her value to men, rather than to herself" (179). The two women are not complete without husbands to provide for them. Dorothy is especially stripped of her power. She marries the very man who has caused so many problems for her and Lorelei, a detective who takes evidence out of context that is used to break up Lorelei's relationship with Gus. Emotionally, Dorothy is weak; she cannot resist the charms of Malone. Lorelei's future financial security is entirely dependent on her ability to convince Gus's father that he should allow the two to marry.

The sense that women's destinies are guided by the men they love in fifties films is even more clear in another Monroe film that came out later the same year. *How to Marry a Millionaire*, unfortunately, lacks the depth that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* offers.

In this film, three young, attractive women rent a fully furnished, penthouse apartment specifically for the purpose of finding and marrying millionaires. However, their efforts are fruitless, and they have to hock all of the furniture to pay the rent so they can continue their search. Loco Dempsey (Betty Grable) begins chasing the stuffy, married Waldo Brewster (Fred Clark), but the two cannot stand each other. She ends up falling for and marrying Eben (Rory Calhoun), the man who takes care of Brewster's cabin getaway, a poor forest ranger who doesn't even own his own home. Her attempts at gold-digging are the least successful of the three women. Pola Debevoise (Marilyn Monroe) is a bit more successful than Dempsey. She begins by pursuing J. Stewart Merrill (Alexander D'Arcy), a playboy who she thinks is rich, but who is actually a gigolo. However, because she has such poor eyesight and is afraid to wear her glasses, she ends up on the

wrong airplane and misses her rendezvous with Merrill. Instead, she ends up sitting next to Freddie Denmark (David Wayne), a gentleman who, like her, has poor vision. He convinces her that she looks lovely in her glasses, and the two fall in love and marry. It turns out that this man is the very person from whom they have rented their temporary penthouse. The reason he had to rent out the place, however, is because he is in trouble with the I.R.S. and is on the lam. Debevoise gets her wealthy gent, but he has no access to his cash, so her gold-digging is next to useless. Schatze Page (Lauren Bacall) comes closest to achieving her goal, almost marrying J. D. Hanley (William Powell), a rich old millionaire whom she doesn't love. He knows she doesn't love him and offers to marry her anyway out of kindness and because he is in love with her. However, at the last minute she chooses not to marry the kind old millionaire, and instead she chooses to marry Tom Brookman (Cameron Mitchell), a young man who has been pursuing her throughout the film. She thinks he is a "gas pump jockey" and has tried to avoid him. But, alas, his charms are too strong for this emotionally weak woman. In the end, however, she finds out that he is actually a multi-millionaire. Page gets her wealthy man, but the fact that she gets him is entirely by accident. What is most significant about the endeavors of all three gold-diggers in this film is that none of them are in control of their eventual outcomes. Each sets out to capture game that she fails to get; each is seduced by the charms of someone she was not initially interested in. Marriage is celebrated in the end of the film with all three women married for love, not money, although one is successfully (and accidentally) married to a wealthy man. Women in this film, even gold-diggers, cannot be in charge of their fortunes; they are at the mercy of men and emotional attachment. The message of the film seems to be, at least for Page, that the

way to marry a millionaire is not to try to marry a millionaire but only to marry for love. The men not only are in control of the action of the film; they also have the last word. When Brookman reveals his wealth at the end of the film, the three women pass out, and as they lie on the floor in the diner, Brookman rises, along with Eben and Denmark, and says, "To our wives," and the three men down their beers.

The endings of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *How to Marry a Millionaire* both reinforce a common popular view of women's roles in postwar America. David Halberstam explains this view of women in the fifties that critics have upheld since the sixties and sees the fifties as "a retreat from the earlier part of the century" with "little encouragement for women seeking professional careers, and in fact . . . a good deal of quite deliberate discouraging of it" (589). Perhaps this helps to explain why the gold-digger, a figure most potent in the twenties and thirties, came back into the public view fairly regularly, often in the reprints of books originally published in the twenties and thirties or in films that harked back to other times when gold-diggers were successful business women who more often than not achieved their goals.

One important gold-digger film of the fifties is *Auntie Mame* (Morton DaCosta, Warner Brothers, 1958). This film presents a Depression era gold-digger's life story, and Mame Dennis (Rosalind Russell) is a heroic character who challenges the bourgeois assumptions of Dwight Babcock (Fred Clark) and the Upsons (Willard Waterman and Lee Patrick). However, her gold-digging of Beauregard Jackson Pickett Burnside (Forrest Tucker) after losing her wealth in the Stock Market crash of 1929 is downplayed. She marries the wealthy Southern gentleman, she says, not for his money but because she loves him. Yet her marriage to Burnside is clearly related to his financial security,

and her relationship with Burnside is the subject of a relatively short and relatively insignificant part of the film, only important because the money Mame inherits from him allows her to have economic independence. Despite Mame's colorful, eccentric, and successful Bohemian life, the film also ends with the celebration of the institution of marriage, as her nephew Patrick (Roger Smith) and her secretary (Pippa Scott) begin their own nuclear family. In addition, it is through Mame's intervention that the homely Agnes Gooch (Peggy Cass) finally realizes that she is not an unwed mother, and that she is indeed married to the Irish poet (Robin Hughes) who seduced her. As is typical in films produced from the fifties well into the 1990's, ranging from *Victor, Victoria* (1982) to *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and *The Birdcage* (1996), the unmarried, sexless character's main purpose is to make sure the obstacle to heterosexual marriage is removed; those who choose not to marry serve only to bring together those who do choose marriage. It is the older generation of women, the Mame Dennises of the twenties and thirties, who can remain successfully single and vital; younger women must be married to be happy and acceptable. Yet even Mame's independence is undermined by her dependence on the money she gets from men. After she loses her money in the Stock Market crash, Mame tries to work to support herself but fails. She goes on the stage with her good friend, actress Vera Charles (Coral Brown), and embellishes her role and her costume, making a mockery of the ill-fated show. When she goes to work in a department store, she is fired because the only type of sales receipt she is capable of filling out is a C. O. D. slip, and her sales book is, to say the least, poorly maintained. Mame is inept when it comes to financially supporting herself. She needs the wealth of a man to get by. This supposedly independent woman is dependent on the man who rescues her. Her independence is only

fully reestablished when Burnside falls from the Matterhorn to his death and she inherits enough cash to support herself in her usual grand style. Lovable but selfish in her relations with men, Mame is another narcissistic gold-digger to whom men are only valuable as financial resources, despite attempts made in the film to downplay her gold-digging.

In the view of fifties film womanhood offered by *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *How to Marry a Millionaire*, and *Auntie Mame*, the fifties are regressive, a time when women were not encouraged to push for greater equality, a time when women's lives were dependent on men's money and generosity. In the popular culture and rhetoric of the fifties, women were often presented only as consumers and as objects of consumption, not as independent individuals capable of supporting themselves. Halberstam says,

In the postwar years, the sheer affluence of the country meant that many families could now live a middle-class existence on only one income. In addition, the migration to the suburbs physically separated women from the workplace. The new culture of consumerism told women they should be homemakers and saw them merely as potential buyers for all the new washers and dryers, freezers, floor waxers, pressure cookers, and blenders. (589)

Karal Ann Marling, in *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, also notes the degree of affluence in postwar America: "For the first time, leisure was a mass phenomenon, too. Thorstein Veblen's old 'leisure class' had expanded to include almost everybody. So many people had joined the ranks, said the *New Yorker*, that the term was obsolete. Leisure was a classless nowadays, a textbook example of democracy in action" (51). In the popular culture of the decade, according to Halberstam, the place of women was clearly defined: "To be feminine, the American woman first and foremost did not work. If she did, that made her competitive with men, which made her hard and aggressive and almost surely doomed to loneliness" (590). However, numerous recent

critics have argued that this view of women in the fifties is only partially accurate at best, noting that women in the fifties have been reduced by this view into “a snapshot of middle-class women in suburban homes” (Meyerowitz 2). Women in the fifties were obviously much more diverse than the June Cleaver stereotype suggests. In her introduction to *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, Joanne Meyerowitz says, “While some women fit this stereotype, many others did not. To state the obvious, in the years following World War II, many women were not white, middle-class, married, and suburban; and many white, middle-class, married, suburban women were neither wholly domestic or quiescent” (2).

Despite the reality of Meyerowitz’s claims, however, the stereotype of the suburban housewife was a powerful one that impacted the lives of many women during and after that decade. Brandon French notes that in the fifties “women were encouraged by the culture to dissociate their identities from their jobs; encouraged, that is, to adopt the culture’s schizoid dislocation by defining themselves entirely through their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers, regardless of what else they did . . .” (xvii). In “Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years,” Susan M. Hartmann describes the fifties as “an era marked by the quiescence of organized feminism and the celebration of domesticity by public figures and popular culture . . .” (84). While recognizing that feminism did not entirely disappear during the fifties and that not all women gave in to the “celebration of domesticity” touted by politicians and popular culture, the stereotypes of women as followers and not leaders, as dependents and not self-sufficient individuals, was very strong and influential. Hartmann goes on to identify several causes for the fact that women did seem less actively involved in pushing

for change and more likely to give in to the cult of home and family. One cause was McCarthyism. Hartmann says,

McCarthyism, the most obvious domestic manifestation of the Cold War, suppressed dissent and reform impulses among women as well as men. Although McCarthyism was only one of many factors contributing to the low level of women's activism during the post-World War II era, the anti-communist crusade discredited individual women and induced caution among women leaders and organizations. . . . Other forces related to the Cold War strengthened the status quo. As Elaine Tyler May has demonstrated, the insecurity and anxiety generated by the presumed Soviet threat put a premium on family stability and linked women's traditional domestic roles to the nation's security. National leaders as well as popular culture proclaimed that women's role in the international crisis was to strengthen the family and raise new citizens emotionally and mentally fit to win the Cold War. (85)

Kathleene Rowe, in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* also sees a connection between women's position in postwar America and the threats of perceived threats of communism and atomic warfare:

[T]he threat of communism and the atom bomb became linked with the threat of women out of control, and taming women was seen as an essential element in taming the dangers of the atomic age. The decade accompanied its heightened interest in sexuality...with an increasing fear of sexual degeneracy, which it saw as a key indicator of moral weakness. The resulting call for traditional values urged women to retreat from the workplace to the home, where they could resume their proper roles as guardians of morality. Those women who did not were seen as threats to the national security, weakening the country's moral fiber and the masculine authority needed to combat communism. (170)

In an era when it was dangerous to show dissent, and when women were told it was their patriotic duty to be good mothers and housewives, it is no wonder that more visible feminist movements are not easy to identify. A good deal of criticism shows the facade behind which women's dissent was often hidden. Marling discusses the surface level sheen of fifties America, examining how in many ways style was more important than substance in America's popular vision of itself. She says, "it is all too easy to dismiss as trivial and superficial the lives of those who looked for their own reflections in the era's

glittering surfaces” (15). The visible signs of the seemingly insignificant items used in everyday life are not trivial; they are at once a reflection of our desires and a guide to what we should desire, subtle glimpses into what we believe about ourselves and what we are led to believe about ourselves.

If image is so important in viewing the popular culture of the affluent fifties, it may be that part of the cause for this phenomenon lies in the fear of seeing under the surface, the fear of exposing oneself to the criticism of cultural forces that deemed difference as potentially subversive and dangerous. In attempting to look beyond the glitzy surface of fifties culture, Molly Haskell says the stars of the fifties

had an unreal quality, images at once bland and tortured. They were all *about* sex, but *without* sex. The fabulous fifties were a box of Cracker Jacks without a prize; or with the prize distorted into a forty-inch bust, a forty-year-old virgin. . . . America was once again able to avoid outright sin and protect its innocence. But innocence, at this advanced age, was no longer charming. It was beginning to look a little unhealthy, what with breast fetishism combining with Lolita lechery in the one ultimate sweater girl/daddy’s girl, Marilyn Monroe. (235)

In Haskell’s view, fifties films tended to emphasize image over substance, the promise of something never fully revealed or experienced. If the fifties were so steeped in not seeing beneath the surface, in not fulfilling what is promised, then it is no surprise that the films of stars such as Marilyn Monroe tended so often to nostalgia trips, regressions to earlier times when the promise might be more easily fulfilled. Perhaps this is why so many gold-digger films did appear in the 1950’s as part of a regression to past times when a gold-digger was not necessarily a whore, and when a woman who used sex, or the promise of sex, for self-advancement was often seen as an intelligent individual who used a viable means of achieving mobility in a world in which women’s social mobility was severely limited by her husband’s success or her success in finding a husband. And

perhaps, as in the case of *Auntie Mame* or the films of Marilyn Monroe, this is why image is so important, why glitzy surfaces, such as the sequin and satin gowns of Russell and Monroe (compared to the dowdy brown and gray tweeds of the other women around them) or the kaleidoscope opening sequence over the credits of *Auntie Mame* are so common in gold-digger films of the fifties.

CONCLUSION

*Satin sheets to lie on,
Satin pillows to cry on,
Still, I'm not happy don't you see.
Big long Cadillac,
Tailor-mades upon my back,
Still, I want you to set me free.*

Jeanne Pruett, "Satin Sheets" (1973)

*We are living in a material world,
And I am a material girl.*

Madonna, "Material Girl" (1984)

In his 1983 book *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* Paul Fussell says, "You can outrage people today, simply by mentioning social class, very much the way, sipping tea among the aspidistras a century ago, you could silence a party by adverting too openly to sex" (15). This claim brings together two topics that still make many Americans uncomfortable, two of the most important issues that are crucial to the development of the gold-digger as well as her downfall—sex and class. The importance of the gold-digger rests in her brazen disregard for boundaries: between upper and lower classes, between art and trash, between high and low culture, between acceptable and unacceptable behavior and sexuality. In doing so, she represents both our frustrations with our failures and our hopes for success within the American capitalist system.

There has been no other time like the two decades between World Wars I and II, especially the early thirties, for gold-diggers. In these two decades the most outspoken and unapologetic social climbers yet to appear on the American cultural scene are found.

Immediately preceding this golden age of the gold-digger, a women's rights movement and the end of a war coincided and helped to provide the conditions necessary for the gold-digger to thrive. The suffragists unwittingly helped to pave the way for the gold-digger. The confidence of the suffragists' daughters allowed them to take for granted what their mothers had fought for, and the war provided them with a disenchanted, party-hungry freedom that led them to break out of additional social, if not political, restraints (Stephenson 123, Allen 78, Kessler-Harris 226). Even while refusing to push for greater feminist advances in the twenties and thirties (Kessler-Harris 251), in her uncompromising drive for greater advancements in comfort (i.e. less confining clothing) and pleasure (i.e. smoking, drinking, petting parties), the women of the twenties and early thirties were crucial to the development of personal freedoms that today we take for granted (Haskell 45, LaSalle 76). As a part of this group of freedom-seeking women, the gold-diggers of the twenties and thirties found means by which they could state their own cases and make their criticisms boldly and with greater clarity than ever before.

In this study I have traced the development of the modern gold-digger from the moralistic cautionary tales of the 1890's, through the more self-aware and autonomous representations of gold-diggers in film and fiction during the 1920's and 1930's, and further on to the criminals and sexual babies of the 1940's and 1950's. In the twenties, the bratty, baby-doll gold-digger showed us not only that women wanted to share in the wealth that seemed so readily available, but that within the system that was in place, little of that wealth was available to her unless she was willing to use her sex appeal as a bargaining chip. In taking a character type that had previously been tragic and showing that instead she could be successful, even if annoying, creators of the twenties gold-

digger redrew the class and gender boundaries that contained women while exposing the inequities by which those boundaries had been constructed. In doing so, the gold-digger opened up a world of possibilities that previously had not been a part of our American mythology of wealth. Suddenly, a gold-digger might use “it” to increase her dough-remi.

With the Great Depression came a sense of urgency that the flapper-gold-diggers of the twenties had not shown, and Depression-era films featured the most unapologetic challenge to the boundaries that held back women and the poor that had yet been seen.

Those films offered

a realm of moral anarchy where reprobates run headlong into perdition. . . . If paid out in the final reel, the wages of sin are less a warning about the costs of the unregenerate life than an advertisement for its compensation. . . . Antiauthoritarian, adultery-driven, and pleasure-seeking, the vice films surrendered willingly to one or more of the seven deadly sins and discovered that succumbing wasn’t necessarily fatal. (Doherty 103)

The world in which the gold-digger thrived was a world that seemed chaotic, a world in which old rules no longer seemed to apply, a world which seemed to many to be falling apart, and during the first half of the thirties, that world was represented in the films where gold-diggers existed, a world in which they might teach the world a lesson about inequality. For the first time, the gold-digger at times seemed noble as she offered a poignant critique of the gender and class system in which she lived. While the gold-digger of the twenties was tolerated as someone who played the bad girl, who might challenge our assumptions, but who was easily brought back into the fold, the gold-digger of the thirties represented a real threat to boundaries between the classes and the sexes. In the thirties the gold-digger offered a powerful voice that refused to take rich people seriously only because they were rich and refused to take men seriously simply

because they were men. The gold-digger insisted on a more egalitarian treatment of the working classes and women. Because of the dangerous nature of the issues she exposed, however, the gold-digger was one of a number of characters who was not to be tolerated, and by the mid thirties, she was relegated to the criminal underworld.

As she was forced back into the world of illegal and immoral activity, however, the gold-digger showed us just how powerful America's standards of class and gender were. Fussell claims that because Americans live in a world where social class is difficult to identify, "the American, almost uniquely, can be puzzled about where, in the society, he stands" (18). This confusion helps to explain, perhaps, a part of why gold-diggers were so dangerous: "The special hazards attending the class situation in America, where movement appears so fluid and where prizes seem available to anyone who's lucky, are disappointment, and, following close on that, envy" (Fussell 20). Americans who had not fulfilled the dream of easy social and economic upward mobility (and to some degree that includes most of us) do not want to be reminded of their own failure to achieve what our mythology tells us is so readily available.

One of the most important signs of class that also seems most unreliable is taste. That is why the middle class luxury of yesterday—the Tiffany lamp, for instance—becomes the kitsch of later decades and eventually, if its owner is lucky, the valuable antique of a century later¹. Taste is an unreliable measure of class because the standards of taste change so quickly. As Fussell notes, "Belonging to a rapidly changing rather

¹ For a more thorough discussion of how an object might become kitsch or camp before finally becoming antique, see the following: Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp." *A Susan Sontag Reader*. New York: Vintage, 1982. 105-119. Harris, Daniel. "The Death of Camp: Gay Men and Hollywood Diva Worship, from Reverence to Ridicule." *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*. New York: Hyperion, 1997. 8-39. Also see the essays collected in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. Ed. David Bergman. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993.

than a traditional society, Americans find Knowing Where You Stand harder than do most Europeans. And a yet more pressing matter, Making It, assumes crucial importance here" (18-19). In a society where one may be constantly uncertain of where he or she stands in the social strata, the gold-digger's assault on taste becomes very threatening. Her lack of taste may reflect our own as we are invited to laugh at her as others laugh at us. Her ability to insult the pretensions of taste in those around her may also threaten our uncertain pretensions of taste, our own markers of social status.

The gold-digger reminds us of our own shortcomings by reminding us that, yes, there is a class system at work in America, no matter how much we'd like to deny its existence. The gold-digger also offers a dangerous threat to the American system of production and consumption simply by refusing to work within the guidelines of the system, indeed, by working the system like a professional pool or card shark works his game, pretending to be innocent of the game and using the pose of innocence to win big. Most importantly, the gold-digger exposes a flaw in our socio-economic mythology, on one hand by offering a parasitical means of achieving that social mobility, almost a parody of other mythological means of achieving mobility. On the other hand, the gold-digger points out the same flaw by exposing the fact that socially accepted means of achieving this mobility may get us absolutely nothing.

In addition to her multiple assaults on class, the gold-digger also threatens our gender system, by emphasizing the very rigid standards by which men and women were expected to live. If men were the bread-winners, then so be it, but let the women get their part of the great American pie, by whatever means necessary and using the tools they did have at their disposal, their bodies and their ability to manipulate men with their physical

attractiveness. The gold-digger, working within the conditions that existed in the first half of the twentieth century, offered a solution to inequities of gender and class that called into question the values by which relationships between men and women were governed and exposed the economic nature of those relationships at the same time. If women were property to be exchanged among men, then at least let women have some say in how that property was to be used and by whom. Because most women in the decades between the World Wars did not work and the majority of working women held low-paying, dead-end jobs, the vast majority of women were dependent on men for their economic well-being. In this sense, the attorney in Avery Hopwood's *The Gold Diggers* may be correct in claiming that every woman was, indeed, a gold-digger. By necessity, she had to be to survive. By calling attention to the forces that created her, the gold-digger forced us to recognize that the men who were legislating against her by the late thirties were no different, fundamentally, than the men who had created her in the first place. If all women were gold-diggers, then all men were sugar daddies, and all heterosexual relationships must have been at least partially economic in nature. Suddenly, even the most sanctified marriage might be regarded as little more than a whitewashed imitation of prostitution. If sexual relationships between men and women, including marriage, are also economic relationships, then at least acknowledge women's value as a commodity and pay a fair price to consume that commodity.

It is because of these threats that the gold-digger became a figure of scorn in the forties and, at best, a dirty joke in the fifties. The fear of the erasure of traditional boundaries of gender caused by World War II when women moved into the work force at levels previously unknown created anxiety about gender that could not stand the presence

of the ambitious women of the twenties and thirties. After all, if women could work and take care of themselves, what would men's roles become once they returned from the war? In the postwar-era, Cold War anxieties about threats to capitalism could not stand criticism of the current economic system that already was threatened by the spread of communism. Since hard work and pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps were core ideals of the American capitalist system, how could the gold-digger, leeching the wealth of the successful capitalist, be tolerated? Because of her challenge to American ideals, the gold-digger's potential threat to gender and class systems in America was contained by censorship and legal restriction. Her voice remained, but it never again achieved the capability to challenge America's economic gender systems.

As we progress into the twenty-first-century, old myths about gold-diggers persist. Scrambling for wealth is an American pastime, even if most of us only scramble vicariously through what we see on television and film, what we hear in popular songs, and what we read in fiction. Money, we are told, cannot buy happiness, yet our television programs encourage us to engage in get-rich-quick schemes found in infomercials promising big money in real estate investment and game shows such as ABC's *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Meanwhile, women encouraged to seek out wealthy husbands are fooled by network hype and the rich appearance of FOX's *Joe Millionaire* whose title character is decidedly not rich, and the gold-digging women who compete for his affection (and his money) are exposed and duped at the same moment.

Despite being made to appear stupid, evil, dangerous, and devoid of accepted moral strengths, despite her ability to make American class and gender boundaries clear to us and to suggest means, viable or not, of crossing class boundaries, the gold-digger

remains a vital part of our discussions of economics and class, sexuality and gender.

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