

**THE DEVELOPMENT IN HOLLYWOOD'S GENDER ROLES**

HEROES AND HEROINES

IN

RE-INTERPRETATIONS OF WOMEN'S FILMS

1930-2000

By

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Through history gender roles have changed and developed continually influencing the political, social and economic scene at the time, which in return has influenced gender roles for the future in an eternal merry-go-round. The same has happened for the movie industry and their audience as movies often reflect current ideals or reality. When the ideals and reality in a period change, the movies also change with them. Over the last century the moving picture has entered the scene more and more and gradually become part of people's everyday lives. This has given people, as either the ones making the movie or the ones watching the movie, both a direct and an indirect way to take part in the shaping of gender roles and ideals.

In this thesis I will look at how and why characters and gender roles in "women's films" develop and change over time. I will concentrate on three historical periods which have had a strong impact on both the United States and Hollywood; the Depression, the early cold war years and the aftermath of the cold war. These three periods are also distinct for the woman's film genre, namely; the "Golden age," the early television years and the period I see as the woman's film renaissance. Ten movies from the early 1930s until today will be seen against theories of film and gender as well as historical events and tendencies. The movies, which will be analyzed and compared, are four American mainstream movies in the "woman's film" genre and their remakes; *Little Women* (1933), *Show Boat* (1936), *The Shop around the Corner* (1940) and *Sabrina* (1954). Furthermore, I will look at the movies' characters, the relations between them and the actors and actresses behind the characters as well as how they might reflect the ideals or reality of their time. An interesting question is whether or not there is a universal ideal for a hero or heroine. Therefore, as important as it is to look at what changes, it will be interesting to see if some ideals or personalities actually

stay the same. Consequently, the first version<sup>1</sup> of the movie will be compared to its remakes in one chapter per movie plot and then, in the conclusion, across each of the three periods; the thirties, the post war years and the nineties.

### **My thesis**

Whether or not a mainstream woman's film and its characters reflect reality or ideals it will reflect the time in which it was produced. As I see it, some parts, characters, contexts or life situations must be recognizable for the intended audience for them to relate to its content. To create a hero or heroine within this context the characters need to be placed in interesting, exciting or funny situations where they can act and make the choices the audience wants them to, but perhaps smarter and more daring than the audience would have done. It is a combination of the current reality, dreams and ideals for the audience. Consequently, a movie cannot stray too far from the audience's reality, dreams or ideals. If, however, some movies do "stray", there have to be certain factors that are regarded as being above these general rules.

### **The choice to use women's films**

The term "woman's film" is not considered an independent genre in itself but rather an "umbrella term referring to Hollywood films of the 1930s to early 1950s, created primarily for a female audience"<sup>2</sup> as it includes different genres, such as comedy, melodrama, thriller and suspense, crime and musicals, with the common focus, women and human relations. But as "women's films" usually deal with women's concerns within the woman's sphere, where the female lead is "at the center of the universe,"<sup>3</sup> my focus when looking at gender roles

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<sup>1</sup> The first version after the advent of sound. Silent films will not be taken into account

<sup>2</sup> Walsh, Andrea. *Women's Film and Female Experience 1940-1950*. (New York: Praeger Publisher, 1984) 23

<sup>3</sup> Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 155

might seem somewhat unbalanced considering male leads' limited possibility to portray complete characters when not being "at the center," as this sphere is usually not their main sphere. These movies do, however, portray men and women and the relation between them in a sphere where they are both admitted and necessary. The exclusion of women from certain areas outside the home as well as the focus on non-romantic plots and themes in many genres are the reasons why I have focused on the woman's film genre when narrowing my thesis.

According to Molly Haskell there is a general contempt for the woman's film.<sup>4</sup> In the movie industry, as well as among the general consumer of movies, this genre is easily regarded as second rate. But still, people watch women's films and the industry makes money. As the genre seldom focuses on breakthrough technology, exploding buildings and extensive outdoor mass scenes, as often is the case with "men's films," all of which might be relatively expensive, it would be fairly easy to produce "women's films" as low cost movies, if one does not consider the star salary. One exception might be the many musical comedies which focused on spectacular sets and choreography. The studios invested in these movies through such as building up swimming pools or water tanks for Ester Williams' diving and underwater scenes, Busby Berkeley stage scenes<sup>5</sup> or a great number of dancers, chorus girls, costumes, extras and orchestras. Musical comedies were, however, among the GIs' favourites during World War II.<sup>6</sup>

### **The choice to use remakes**

Remakes are altered and adjusted copies of earlier movie material that are either made to improve, reinterpret or make money off the original, and the alterations and adjustments made usually correspond with the development in gender roles, society and politics.

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<sup>4</sup> Haskell 13

<sup>5</sup> Larkin, Colin. *The Encyclopedia of Stage and Film Musical*. (London: Virgin Books; MUZE UK Ltd, 2000) A choreographer and director known for his "elaborate production numbers" in the thirties especially.

<sup>6</sup> Walsh 35

Many movies are, however, adaptations of novels, short stories and plays, just as their remakes might actually be re-adaptations of the same text instead of being based on the previous movie. Re-adaptations are some times also referred to as remakes. Whether or not the screenwriter, producer or director has seen the earlier movie versions and is thereby influenced by these productions is difficult to say, but their knowing about them seems likely even if they have decided to ignore them.<sup>7</sup> Some movies also base their screenplays on several sources using earlier versions of the movie, stage play and novel. Therefore, the adjustments made for a new version can be an attempt to reinterpret several historical periods at the same time.

Reusing old material is not uncommon in the movie industry. Even the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, also known as the Oscars, have divided the screenwriting category into two separate awards: best original screenplay and best adapted screenplay, acknowledging both forms of screenplay equally.<sup>8</sup> They do not, however, have an award for best remake, and thus it might not be regarded as highly as the adaptations. After all, remakes are seldom made for artistic reasons alone.

When combining historical development and film theory with different movie versions of a plot or story some sort of tendency or pattern will probably appear in an analysis. Therefore, my analysis will include two stories in three versions and two stories in two versions. There are several more versions of these stories, such as silent films, stage- and TV-productions and non-American versions. I have chosen not to take these versions into consideration as they will make my thesis too extensive. Moreover, the movies chosen for this thesis are all produced within the three short periods; pre World War II, post World War II and post Cold War, as these periods seem distinct for the genre in question.

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<sup>7</sup> Jahr, Ida Marie. "Better Not Sleep Under Water: A Comparison of two Norwegian Films and their American Remakes." (MA thesis. U. of Oslo 2005.) 10-14. Jahr explains here how remakes and re-adaptations differ.

<sup>8</sup> [www.oscars.org](http://www.oscars.org)

Several remakes produced after World War II turned into musicals, and thereby a lighter form of entertainment, because of technological improvements and competition from Television. Black and white movies, such as *Ninotchka* (1939), starring Greta Garbo; *The Women* (1939), with an all-women cast; *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), starring Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant and James Stewart; and *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), with Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart changed into the musicals *Silk Stockings* (1957), with Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse; *The Opposite Sex* (1956), with a mixed cast including June Allyson; *High Society* (1956), starring Grace Kelly, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra; and *In the Good Old Summertime* (1949), starring Judy Garland and Van Johnson - all in color. At the same time, several thirties musicals, with a casual or laidback song-and-dance style, such as *Roberta* (1935) starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and *Show Boat* (1936) with Irene Dunne were made “bigger and better.” These movies improved artistically in ways which focused on color, sound and a more “professional and serious” sort of entertainment, which resulted in the new *Lovely to Look at* (1952) and *Show Boat* version (1951), both starring Kathryn Grayson and Howard Keel.

During the nineties several movies within the woman’s film genre reinterpreted old women’s film material again, but these movies were often based on an original written source, and not the previous movie. Many of the remakes were therefore re-adaptations which changed some of the musicals back to romantic comedies or dramas. The musicals *In the Good Old Summertime* (1949) and *The King and I* (1956), starring Deborah Kerr and Yul Brynner were turned into the romantic comedy *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks and the drama *Anna and the King* (1999), starring Jodie Foster. They were, however, instead of remaking the post war versions, going back to the original sources for the stories, which seems to be an important factor in the nineties. An often re-used story is *Little Women*, and some of its movie versions are produced within all three periods for this thesis.

This movie follows the same pattern regarding remaking or re-adapting stories in the nineties, as the producers of the last version ignores previous movie material and goes straight to the source, the novel.

Despite research on these and other remakes, I fell back on examples that were already known to me. The movies mentioned above could all have been used as examples when looking at gender roles in the women's film genre, but due to limited time and space and the need for balance and some similarities between them, I have had to narrow the total down to my small selection of ten movies, all of them Hollywood productions with clear remakes or re-adaptations – and a number extensive enough to still be able to find possible tendencies or patterns between them.

### **The movies chosen for the thesis**

I have chosen certain movies and their remakes based on a combination of research and prior knowledge and interests, as well as a need for balance between them. Ideally, I wanted the same movie plot to be presented not only within the main era for “women's film” from 1930 to 1960, but also within the last fifteen years. Several studies have been done regarding the main era, analyzing and discussing both original movies, adaptations, re-adaptations and remakes, whereas the nineties, perhaps by being too close to the present, still have uncovered ground to discover. However, as the nineties movies will be compared to movies from an era full of economic, political and ideological contrasts, I have also decided to compare the differences before and after World War II, which leaves me with a selection of women's films divided almost equally between the three periods. When trying to find suitable movie-examples for this thesis, I used as my starting point movies I had already seen, a graduate seminar I attended during the fall semester of 2003; “Movies and American culture,” and a comparison I did during this seminar between the two versions of the film musical

“Show Boat.” The changing of gender roles apparent in this musical puzzled me as I, for the first time, saw the kind of steps taken to modernize a story and its characters.

My selection of movies presents different genres within woman’s films which all focus on relatively light entertainment for the masses. **First**, the family melodrama *Little Women* from 1933 is an adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s popular novel of the same name from 1868, and the screen play, which was written by Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Heerman, was awarded an Oscar. The second version I have included is from 1949 and this version is both a re-adaptation and a remake as both the novel and the 1933 screenplay have been credited together with the two new screenwriters; Sally Benson and Andrew Solt. The third version, from 1994, is a re-adaptation only by Robin Swicord. **Second**, *Show Boat* from 1936 is both an adaptation of Edna Ferber’s novel of the same name and the stage musical from 1927 by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. In 1929 they released a part-talkie of *Show Boat*, but as it is not a complete sound version of the movie musical I will use the 1936 version as my first version. For the screenplay Hammerstein II did a re-adaptation of his own stage libretto. In 1951 MGM released the new version written by John Lee Mahin which, like *Little Women* (1994) ignored the earlier film versions, and Mahin based the new screenplay on the novel and the stage play. **Third**, *The Shop around the Corner* from 1940 is an adaptation of Miklós László’s stage play *Perfumerie* from 1937 written by Samson Raphaelson and Ben Hecht. Only nine years passed before the story was ready for an adjustment, and Albert Hackett, Frances Goodrich and Ivan Tors based their new screenplay on both the stage play and the 1940 film version. In 1998 the story was adjusted to the new world of technology and big business through Nora and Delia Ephron’s re-adaptation of the stage play. Both *Little Women* and *The Shop around the Corner* seemed ideal for the thesis since they both cover all three periods. **Finally**, *Sabrina* from 1954 is an adaptation of Samuel Taylor’s play *Sabrina Fair*. The script was co-written by the play writer himself together with

Billy Wilder and Ernest Lehman. The nineties version of this story was, again, both a re-adaptation of the play and a remake of the film written by Barbara Benedek and David Rayfiel. Despite the different years of production, all the first versions are black and white movies, just as all the remakes or re-adaptations are in color.

## **Theories about film and why gender roles might change**

### **Who influences whom**

A subject often discussed in the field of the movie industry is whether movies reflect people's reality or ideals or do they, realistically or unrealistically, represent certain ideals pushed forward by different people's personal interests. I believe that the light entertainment genre used in this thesis can be approached the same way Andrea Walsh explains popular culture; that it is not enough for it to be created "for the people" it also has to be "of the people."<sup>9</sup> What is created "for the people" by someone might not always correspond with what the audience actually needs or wants. This means that movies "of the people," which are more relatable when being on the audience's premises, are more likely to become a success at the box office.

Haskell describes movies as "one of the clearest and most accessible of looking glasses into the past, being both cultural artifacts and mirrors."<sup>10</sup> This, I believe, is just partly correct, because what movies reflect is not necessarily reality. One would need additional historical sources to be able to distinguish between what is reality and what is the dream or the ideal. The argument regarding American movies in the period 1920-1950 is "whether the movies simply reflected the national culture that already existed or whether they produced a fantasy of their own that eventually came to be accepted as real."<sup>11</sup> But according to James

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<sup>9</sup> Walsh 6

<sup>10</sup> Haskell. Introduction xviii

<sup>11</sup> Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 262

Monaco, “the politics of film and the politics of ‘real life’ are so closely intertwined that it is generally impossible to determine which is the cause and which is the effect.”<sup>12</sup> In order to separate the two, it is necessary to look at the agenda behind the production, such as artistic perfection, nation building and profit.<sup>13</sup> Not everyone is aiming for a wider audience, even though this seems to be the general goal for most, but when it comes to nation building and profit, I believe the people behind the productions aim for the masses. Therefore, when the agenda is profit you indulge the audience with a combination of their reality, dreams and ideals. When the agenda is introducing new or unfamiliar ideals and values you combine these with the audience’s reality, dreams and ideals, because some sort of recognition or personal relation to movie content are, in addition to casting stars and popular actors, as I see it, the clues to secure a great audience.

### **Who is the audience?**

By looking at the box office results, the producers will easily see what and who the audience are drawn to. Women’s films were, and still are, supposedly designed for a female audience. The notion of finding the ultimate match in order to live happily ever after seems to be the core in most women’s films. This theme is easily relatable for the female audience since homemaking and marriage have traditionally been the focus for many women. When sexual images and acts were prohibited on screen romantic movies were perhaps as close as the audience could get when it came to sexual intimacy on screen. Therefore, before the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s romantic movies might have included an even greater audience as the movies available were somewhat limited in that regard even though romance has often been considered a female or feminine interest. After the sexual revolution and the abandonment of the Production Code, however, romance and sex have been divided into two

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<sup>12</sup> Monaco 262

<sup>13</sup> Jahr refers to “money, art, and ideology” as the three main reasons for films in her thesis.

separate branches, making it possible for the less emotional viewers, often men, to choose more technical and action filled movies without romance, while still getting scenes involving sex. As a result, after this woman's films might be even more directed towards a female audience only as most of the movies within the genre seem to have become an even greater contrast to "men's films."

## **What factors might be above the general rules**

### **Strength to carry the plot**

One important factor affecting main characters' personality and actions is their ability to carry the plot and keep the viewers' interest up. Seeing that the "function of the woman's film was to articulate female concerns, angers and desires, to give substance to a woman's dreams and a woman's problems," as described by Basinger, this "meant putting a strong woman at the center of things in order to carry the plot."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, having the necessary strength could also force women into strong characters and identities whether it was realistic or not. Consequently, if having the substantial **strength to carry the plot** is fundamental in a mainstream movie plot, I will have to search for this strength in my analysis.

### **The casting of Stars or actors**

The importance of casting the right actor or star for a part in a woman's film might also be a factor to be considered above the general rule. Not surprisingly, some stars and actors attract more viewers than others as they are easily associated with previously portrayed characters as well as their own style and personality. Therefore, I will distinguish between three types of people cast for a part, namely the "actor," the "type" and the "star." The actor or actress is able to portray different types of characters without letting their own personality shine

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<sup>14</sup> Basinger, Jeanine. *A Woman's view: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960*. (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) 36

through. The type will either have a strong personality or a certain look or talent portraying a limited range of characters only. Finally, the star can be anything since it is not up to the star if he or she becomes one. It is based on his or her popularity with their audience. Both an actor and a type can be a star. According to Molly Haskell, “the mere fact of being a star, was as important as the roles they played, and affected the very conception of those roles.”<sup>15</sup> For instance, the star and actress Ingrid Bergman’s extramarital affair with the director Roberto Rossellini, which resulted in an illegitimate child, led to “public disdain,” and strong efforts to not only ban her last movie, but also her staying in the country.<sup>16</sup> One of the reasons for this, I believe, as argued by Walsh is that women “tend to project themselves into the moviedrama, to imagine themselves as their favourite actress” as well as “fantasizing about playing opposite the romantic lead.”<sup>17</sup> This kind of identification is clearly more typical for women than it is for men, but the reason why however, is a “matter of speculation.”<sup>18</sup>

## **Context for the production**

### **Setting, style and costumes**

What happens around the world before and during a movie production is of great importance for the on-screen result and gives information about the time and place it was produced. This means that by looking at who the country of production’s friends and enemies are the reasons for heroes’ choices, actions and background can more easily be explained. During World War II and the Cold War this impact was especially clear and had much to say for the movies’ outcome. Your enemies’ values and beliefs are not the right qualities for a hero, whether it is looks or ideals. Therefore, a remake setting can be changed completely when the original setting seem too close to current enemies’ ideals and territory.

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<sup>15</sup> Haskell 5

<sup>16</sup> Walsh 38

<sup>17</sup> Walsh 41

<sup>18</sup> Walsh 43

Another reason for changing a historical setting is new research and a different way of looking at history. If the producers are attempting to re-create a setting correctly or at least more accurate the movie content might “stray” from the audience’s reality and ideals. The selection of movies that will be analyzed below can be divided into two types of settings; contemporary context and historical context. Both types of setting will in fact be represented in all three periods of my analysis.

What is interesting is that the look of the period aimed at and presented in a movie is often full of contemporary signs. These signs are easily spotted by a skilled audience, yet often pass the average audience by un-noticed. The fact that the hero and heroine in a historical setting often are more contemporarily portrayed compared to the characters surrounding them is probably consciously done in order to appeal to paying movie goers.

## **Theories about gender and movies**

### **What defines femininity and masculinity**

“A man is supposedly most himself when he is driving to achieve, to create, to conquer; he is least himself when reflecting or making love. A woman is supposedly most herself in the throes of emotion (the love of man or of children), and least herself, that is, least ‘womanly,’ in the pursuit of knowledge or success.”<sup>19</sup>

Qualities often associated with what has been considered natural and appropriate for men and women in the western world are usually opposites. When men are described as dominant, strong, independent, active, solid, extroverted and rational, women are described as their opposites with words like submissive, weak, dependent, passive, fragile, introverted and emotional. These descriptions or qualities, which I will use in my analysis, are not only current definitions, but beliefs and values supported through history by religions, politics, art

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<sup>19</sup> Haskell 4

and society in general. The nineteenth century's ideal for women for instance, as described in Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860"<sup>20</sup> was "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity;" ideals which seem to have a renaissance right after World War II. In Elaine Tyler May's portrayal of the post war years in *Homeward Bound* she emphasises some of the same ideals as Welter - ideals such as submissiveness and domesticity.<sup>21</sup> The terms often used to describe what is masculine and what is feminine are seen as correct or becoming behaviour for men and women, and by many as something positive or at least natural. When switching qualities, and thereby gender roles, the terms are likely to be regarded as something negative and even un-natural. Nevertheless, because of the positive connotations to male qualities, women can more easily fit into these qualities than men can fit into the "female" qualities.

One example of the balance between men and women in the movies has to do with age and experience and Haskell explains how "time and again, young women are paired with men twenty years their senior and nobody thinks twice about it; yet, a man paired with a woman a mere five years older is something out of the ordinary, often a joke or a perversion."<sup>22</sup> As long as the age difference is within reason for a romantic relationship it will more easily be in favour of an older man together with a younger woman than the other way around, if the goal is to keep the traditional balance between the dominant and the submissive.

According to Basinger, "much of the stereotyping of women in movies is related to passivity- to the fact that female characters are often not allowed to take action."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, I believe Basinger's claim here would perhaps fit better with other genres than "women's films." These kinds of movies are dependent on the leading ladies' necessary strength to "carry the plot," which means that they cannot be too passive. Women who are not

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<sup>20</sup> Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" (in *American Quarterly*, University of Pennsylvania/ The American Studies Association, 18 (2), 1966: 151.174)

<sup>21</sup> May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. (Basic Books, 1999)

<sup>22</sup> Haskell 14

<sup>23</sup> Basinger 41-42

the lead, however, are free to stay passive. Because it “was when a woman was *not* the center of universe but only a secondary character that one saw the true ugliness, the real repression.”<sup>24</sup>

One way to develop masculine qualities is associated with the westward movement in American history to physically go west, either temporarily or for good. People going west are associated with the male characteristics such as self-reliance, individuality, independence, strength and activity, a world that from early on was dominated by male loners or male communities.<sup>25</sup> Europeans and people from the East Coast, could mean either wealthy and refined people, too weak or spineless to go west in search of a better life or women left behind until their men sent for them. This leads me to assume that characters going east instead of west are in need of feminine qualities, whether it is done to feminize characters that were considered too strong to be able to fit their romantic co-star or make a male character less manly and thereby less desirable.

### **What might put women in a position of power**

Women with too much power in the movies are considered a threat to the patriarchal society as we know it, and in order to maintain this society the balance between men and women must not change in favour of the woman. Basinger claims that the “woman’s film often suggests that a woman should be feisty, but not too feisty. Strong, but not too strong. Well dressed, but not overdressed. Glamorous, but not too glamorous. According to the movies, a woman should never be ‘too’ anything, because this might put her in a position of power, a place she should never be.”<sup>26</sup> Another situation where women may come to a “position of power” is in sexual relationships. Basinger also claims that when “a woman can be involved

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<sup>24</sup> Basinger 37

<sup>25</sup> Basinger 470

<sup>26</sup> Basinger 137

in sex without love, she can end up mastering the situation,” and, that “a true love- blocks her independence.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite the focus on love and marriage, movies tend to focus on the time leading up to marriage instead of married life itself. If not, trouble in the marital paradise is necessary for a romantic plot. What often comes in the way then is the question revolving work and ambitions which might set the relationship out of balance. How strange it seems that so many movies focus on the heroines finding “the one” to marry, when, as explained by Haskell, “all the excitement of life-the passion, the risk-occurs outside marriage rather than within it”<sup>28</sup> making movies focusing on the time from marriage on too passive and boring for the audience. As the marriage rate was at its perhaps all time low during the Depression and rose tremendously during World War II,<sup>29</sup> I suspect the average age for stars and characters to have decreased in the second period - just as the stars and characters of the nineties, due to sexual liberation and a testing period before marriage, probably will have added a few years to their lives. Furthermore, women on film are often expected to either choose a professional career and success or love, marriage and motherhood. This is what Basinger refers to as the “traditional love-versus-career movie choice.”<sup>30</sup> The development with actors and their age as well as the “love-versus-career” choice will be looked at in the coming chapters.

## **What causes the changes in gender roles**

In the period from 1930 until today, what has caused certain changes on screen is related to several major events and developments in both world history and American history. The causes often dealt with in regard of influencing the American women’s films are often The Depression, World War II and the Cold War. This might be due to a general focus on the

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<sup>27</sup> Basinger 266

<sup>28</sup> Haskell 156

<sup>29</sup> May

<sup>30</sup> Basinger 146

years between 1930 and 1960s as the main era for “women’s films.” Consequently, I will also use these causes set against the movies chosen for this thesis. However, as I see the 1990s as a renaissance for the genre, a few more aspects must be added, such as a civil rights- and women’s liberation movement, the fall of Communism and a new direction in American politics.

### **The thirties**

The decade was set off by the Crash in October 1929 which led to economic and personal struggle for most Americans the following years. Women were expected both to work, in order to help with their family’s income, and at the same time step aside leaving their jobs for unemployed men. Laws were changed to protect America’s male breadwinners, taking away certain job possibilities and employment from female workers.<sup>31</sup> At the same time women had to be strong for their family and country, often with a double work load, both within and outside the home, sometimes also as their family’s sole provider. The movies of the thirties often reflected this situation giving the audience portrayals of strong, smart and more or less independent women either in glamorous and upper-class escapist movies or in the more realistic lower- and middle class dramas and comedies. One of the female trademarks in this period, according to Maria DiBattista,<sup>32</sup> was to portray the women on film as “fast-talking-dames.” These “dames” were high-class women; smart, sassy, witty and quick thinking who thrived in “gangster and crime melodramas” as well as comedies.

The “dames” of the thirties probably had a great impact on other “women’s film” sub genres as well. The same actors and actresses were used in most genres because of Hollywood’s studio system<sup>33</sup> which had actors and actresses on contract for longer or shorter

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<sup>31</sup> May 40

<sup>32</sup> DiBattista, Maria. *Fast-Talking Dames*. (USA: R.R. Donnelly & Sons 2001)

<sup>33</sup> Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. (USA: Vintage Books Edition, 1994) 170-172

periods of time. Moreover, she argues that “dames” “weren’t afraid of slang nor shy of the truth. They called things as they saw them, and even if they were wrong- and often they were- they knew how to correct their mistakes, how to find new words for the changed state of their feelings.”<sup>34</sup> The importance of dialogue right after the introduction of sound in the movies presented “dames” as intelligent and talkative. To hold an audience’s attention through the duration of a movie by conversation mainly takes a well written manuscript making the leading lady smart, interesting and often quick thinking. And just “as the articulate heroine arose partly in response to a technological development- sound- the “working woman” arose in response to the prohibitions legislated by the Production Code and the new crop of Depression-related films.”<sup>35</sup> Because of limitations in scenes showing sexual acts or behaviour heroines were taken out of the bedroom and rather placed in a work related environment.

### **The post war years**

According to Elaine Tyler May, female sexuality was in the late 1940s and 50s seen as a positive necessity when confined within marriage. Unleashed, however, it was considered a threat to both the family and the American nation and thereby also world peace. Therefore, the “modern family would, presumably, tame fears of atomic holocaust, and tame women as well.”<sup>36</sup> Woman’s submissive and weak character was as natural as man’s dominant and decision making position. Many of the movies made during these years often portrayed what was considered to be the ideal way of life at that time, showing correct moral behavior and solutions, set in an aesthetically beautiful and politically carefree world. The war and its outcome had a great impact on the lives for the American audience, and the focus on

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<sup>34</sup> DiBattista, Preface IX,X

<sup>35</sup> Haskell 139

<sup>36</sup> May 99

consumerism, traditional gender roles, foreign policy and the ideal, white, middle-class life was strengthened.

Two of the main factors that influenced Hollywood's post war moviemaking and the movies' shift in storyline and leading characters were the audience's new life situation and reality and the ideal glorified by media to face the threats of Communism. Both factors led to non-threatening storylines and personalities, and what are seen as traditional gender roles between the leading characters as Hollywood shifted towards a non-controversial way of making movies. Despite the general fear of a new economic decline, the Depression was over, the economy was booming and the living standard for most Americans improved. The low marriage and birth rate due to economic pessimism in the thirties and soldiers having been away during World War II led to a great rise in the numbers of wives, mothers and children during the post war decade, making it more natural and necessary for women to stay at home. The reversed gender roles, which in the thirties were viewed as "temporary measures"<sup>37</sup> and unfortunate by many in the younger generation, were therefore easily re-reversed. Many of the World War II veterans were given their jobs back as well as the possibility to get an education through the GI bill. This gave men more skills, knowledge, income and independence than most women. The enhanced differences between men and women following these circumstances and a better personal economy might have lessened a possible opposition to the ideal of a white, suburban middleclass of nuclear families, which often were portrayed on screen, as a weapon against communism.

The House Un-American Activities Committee's impact on Hollywood during the post war years removed much of the creativity that could be accused of being oppositional, and therefore, in order to professionally survive in Hollywood's movie-making at that time, the movie industry could not easily challenge the official American ideals and believes

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<sup>37</sup> May 43. The shifting of household responsibilities was viewed as "temporary measures caused by unfortunate circumstances, rather than as positive outcomes of the crisis."

without being questioned or condemned. Hollywood productions could easily be one of the means used to reach the masses as possible propaganda, national education or a safeguard against un-American thinking, and they “reinforced [the] fantasy of the United States as one big carefree suburb.”<sup>38</sup> In these movies heroes were white, middle-class citizens, and the leading ladies taught American women to make the right choices in life, adjusting to the reinforced male power through dependency and submissiveness.

Finally, new film technology, such as the use of color and sound improvement made new productions and remakes into aesthetical and glamorous screen results. Many post war movies were as a result of these renewing possibilities turned into “post card” remakes, the beautiful highlights version, especially the musicals, which could use extravagant costumes and large music- and dance numbers. However, new technology also turned television<sup>39</sup> into a new form of “woman’s film,” thereby fading out these kinds of productions and their focus during the 1950’s.<sup>40</sup>

### **The nineties**

The “woman’s film” has, in the nineties, come back after decades of artistic, alternative and action filled productions as a parallel to “men’s films” within the light entertainment genre. Movies from the seventies and eighties were dominantly male oriented leaving much of the female audience without movies and heroines to relate to, thus creating a market with an unused profitable potential. Furthermore, both the Production Code- and studio system era were over, imposing fewer limitations on movie productions. Since the post war years Americans have been through a civil rights- and women’s liberation movement as well as political scandals and more than a four decade long Cold War that had just ended. Without the Cold War to worry about, the western world could relax as the global tension eased and fear

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<sup>38</sup> Boyer 124

<sup>39</sup> Haskell 187

<sup>40</sup> May

for a nuclear war was reduced, and it seemed perhaps natural to concentrate on domestic affairs for a while even if it did not take long before the focus was back on foreign policy.<sup>41</sup>

The Civil Rights Movement and the women's liberation movement are some of the reasons for why many of the possible nineties remakes became re-adaptations instead. When reinterpreting old movie material many productions were a result of re-reading history or an original source. The self assertion for the non-elites following the sixties and seventies gave women and minority groups the chance to extend what was considered to be history.

What politically influenced the woman's film genre in this decade was women's new gained power outside the domestic sphere on one side and the increasing support for the right wing's traditional values on the other. In the early nineties the economy was still relatively weak after a decline in the late eighties. However, both employment and the economy improved and stabilized during the second half of the decade. President Bill Clinton launched his domestic program with focus on "health care, education, jobs, and economic growth"<sup>42</sup> as women entered "American public life."<sup>43</sup> At the same time, due to the "emerging global economy, the rise of entertainment conglomerates and new communications technologies" the "pace of social and technological change" became "unsettling" and the conservatives' traditional family values<sup>44</sup> impacting social- and religious politics were strengthened.<sup>45</sup>

## **America and Hollywood**

The strong impact the United States has had on the western world over the last century, and especially after World War II, as a superpower and a land of dreams still, has provided the United States with a great market in the western world and thereby a non-American audience as well. Movies and television productions are perhaps the most influential ambassador for

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<sup>41</sup> Boyer 445

<sup>42</sup> Boyer 447

<sup>43</sup> Boyer 449

<sup>44</sup> Boyer 445-446

<sup>45</sup> Boyer, Chap. 15

American culture. Through these movies, as a part of their popular culture, Americans' focal point, reality and ideals, developing through history, have been presented to outsiders.

America is, however, different from Hollywood. And so, how is it possible to have one single fiction-producing city only to reflect and represent nearly a whole continent? Hollywood has gradually expanded to more than one specific area and rather become a term associated with American mainstream entertainment. Hollywood mainstream movies are, however, often portrayals of the WASP culture and conservative ideals and morals – a dream factory that is claimed to reinforce the American dream. Therefore, I am not claiming Hollywood movies to be a complete “American” product as Hollywood tended to be a secluded society of artists, stars and money with great differences from the varied USA.

## **Plan**

In the next four chapters I will look at what changes or remains the same, analyzing the movie plots chosen chronologically. My main focus will be on the leading couple in each movie, but I will also include peripheral characters I find important, such as secondary couples and less desirable suitors to complete the picture. I will compare their strengths and weaknesses, personalities and talents. I will also look at the actors behind the characters as well as their age and popularity. I must add that this thesis is neither meant to be part of the feminist re-reading-gender genre and movie tradition nor a critique of American or Hollywood stereotypes. My position as a woman, a Norwegian and a non-American outsider, however, is inescapable.

## Chapter 2

### *Little Women*

#### Introduction

In 1933 one might say that the movie industry was in its childhood still, at least when it comes to the talking moving-picture. The tremendous effect and influence the movies have had on its audience and thereby society does not seem to have affected the early movie making as much as later productions because people were perhaps less aware of its potential power. The movie, *Little Women*, starred several experienced and well known actors at that time such as Katharine Hepburn, Paul Lukas, Joan Bennet, Edna May Oliver and Douglass Montgomery, and they gave the audience their first concrete, fixed image of the characters on screen after the advent of sound. When analyzing and comparing the *Little Women* versions I will primarily concentrate on Jo March and her two opposite male leads in the two first versions and then include the rest of the Marches in the second half of the chapter as they gradually become more than just peripheral characters.

The movie *Little Women* is based on Louisa May Alcott's novel from 1868, an adaptation which won an Academy Award in 1933,<sup>46</sup> by the same name and it is about the March family with four daughters living in Concord during and after the Civil War. Their story is mostly told through Josephine (Jo), the second oldest of the girls as she is the author amongst them and the main focus in the movie. The Marches are a respectable family which have lost most of their prior wealth and only the eldest of the daughters, Meg, is able to vaguely remember what that life was like. She is very correct in everything she does, responsible and follows the rules of society, wanting to be a part of the elite where she does not have to work and can dress accordingly. Meg is often embarrassed by Jo who does not agree with the rules of society. Jo is smart, up-front and good-hearted. She is imaginative,

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<sup>46</sup> [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

writes stories and gladly acts out every part in a play. At the same time, she also wishes she were a man. Beth, the third sister, is a timid and shy girl, content staying at home and taking care of the rest of the family and being their little angel. She loves music and plays the piano tirelessly. Finally, there is Amy, the artistic and self centered girl who desperately tries to portray herself as better as and more important than others.

### **Plot summary common for all three version**

When the movie begins, Mr. March is away in the army and the March women all have to take part in the daily chores and extra work responsibilities. Jo is her old and bitter aunt's companion, Meg is a governess, Beth helps out around the house and Amy is still in school. Next door lives Mr. Lawrence with his grandson, Laurie, a boy Jo desperately would like to get acquainted with, and when she gets the opportunity, she takes the initiative. They become great friends and he is treated almost like family. Several times the sisters and Laurie are also joined by Mr. Brooke, Laurie's private teacher, who quickly falls in love with Meg. Jo does not want people to fall in love because that changes her world. One day Mrs. March, Marmee, leaves the girls alone for some time to tend to their father who is in the hospital, and while she is away Beth comes down with scarlet fever. They send for their mother as Beth is close to death. She gets better but will never again be quite the same. After a while Mr. March comes home, the War ends and Meg marries Mr. Brooke. Jo is saddened by the fact that life as she knows it finally has changed. Laurie proposes marriage, but she has to refuse him as she does not love him that way. Jo decides to leave for New York, to work there as a governess in a boarding house while writing on her spare time. Here she meets Professor Bhaer, an older German immigrant and a writer. He teaches her both about life and how to improve her writing. During Jo's time in New York, Amy goes to Europe with Aunt March instead of Jo, who was the one promised the trip, and while staying in Europe she meets Laurie again. Back

in Concord, Beth is getting weaker and Jo returns to be with her. Beth knows she will die shortly and comforts Jo by explaining to her why this is a good thing. Professor Bhaer's advice and Beth's death inspire Jo to write about what she knows, namely her family. She sends the manuscript to her friend while staying in Concord. When Amy returns from Europe, it is as Laurie's wife, but Jo reassures them both that she is happy for them. During this family reunion Professor Bhaer comes to see Jo, surprising her by bringing her a copy of her published book. He humbly proposes marriage and she accepts.

### **Characters**

The focus in this first version seems to be on pride, strength and helping the less fortunate through self sacrifice, qualities which became more and more necessary in the early thirties. The whole family is included in some sort of charity work, whether it is supporting their troops, entertaining young girls with Jo's plays or giving up their Christmas breakfast to a poor immigrant family who has nothing at all. Jo's strengths are both mental and physical and she appears to be true to her emotions all through the movie and displaying no fake modesty. She says she will try to become more ladylike for her father's sake, but nevertheless she jumps fences, throws snowballs, fences with and outruns Laurie, swings from branches in addition to carrying her grown sister effortlessly down the stairs when needed.

Katharine Hepburn's version of Jo portrays the character with both feminine and masculine qualities. Jo seems to throw herself into the action with all her heart and energy, daringly and truthfully. During the performance of her play she plays the guitar and sings as well as playing the male roles. Jo also shows many typically feminine qualities, such as being caring and loving, but her speech and the way she physically carries herself are very often somewhat manly. These qualities give the character a presence as a strong human being, fully

capable of carrying the plot. She cannot be accused of being “shy of the truth”<sup>47</sup> as she speaks her mind, but neither is she afraid of owning to her mistakes or correcting them. As a result, Katharine Hepburn makes the other characters peripheral.

Jo’s relationship with both Laurie and Professor Bhaer can be seen as the main focus of the movie when it comes to romantic relationships, even if only one of them is what Jo needs to fulfil her dreams. As a contrast to Meg’s traditional love and marriage to a poor man, Amy’s practical love for a wealthy man and Beth, with a child’s non-sexual affection for an old man, Jo chooses the man who will not stand in the way of her writing and independence. Some critics<sup>48</sup> have claimed that Bhaer does stand in her way with his early criticizing, at least when it comes to the novel itself, but in this movie version I do not believe that this is the case. Jeanine Basinger<sup>49</sup> explains such a relationship for a movie heroine by saying that “...a man who helps her through it without the usual love and sex component is furthering her profession.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, she also states that these “asexual husbands” often are either old, European or very wealthy. Professor Bhaer is a European intellectual, far older than Jo and has many typical feminine qualities. He takes Jo to the opera, plays the piano and sings to her, helps the maid with “women’s work” and does not mind sewing on his own buttons. An audience will see clearly that he cares for Jo, but at the same time, they will never see them kiss. He does, however, show how men can support their women in times of crisis, such as in the thirties, instead of being too proud, leaving all domestic responsibilities to the women.

Laurie, on the other hand cannot see how her scribbling, as he calls it, is an essential part of Jo’s life. As young playmates they are equals, however, in a man- woman relationship she would have to fill a more submissive part in his life in a traditional sexual relationship that would probably pressure Jo into the submissive and dependent woman’s role. Yet, since

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<sup>47</sup> DiBattista

<sup>48</sup> Kok, Ingjerd Fjeld. ”Critical Interpretations of Little Women” (MA thesis, U of Oslo, 1996)

<sup>49</sup> Basinger

<sup>50</sup> Basinger 289

the reversed gender roles in the thirties were seen as “temporary measures,” Laurie should be presented as the ideal choice for Jo. Instead he is, with his wealth, hardly a part of the audience’s reality and neither does he seem like the ideal. Furthermore, the equality between Jo and Laurie is not only based on her strength and masculine qualities, it also has to do with his feminine sides. Laurie’s fair looks, manners and emotions, combined with his love for the March women and need to be in their presence makes him less masculine. He seems to prefer the “woman’s sphere.”

The rest of the Marches are not peripheral just because of Katharine Hepburn’s strength, but also because the result of the casting of actors they cannot compete with or be compared to Hepburn. At the same time, their characters’ presence and personalities when acting opposite the lead are what helps place Hepburn at the center whether they work as foils or complements for Jo.

### ***Little Women 1949***

A few years after World War II, one would expect the remake productions within the woman’s film to have changed their focus and gender roles in order to adapt to the new society and lifestyle that became essential to the American Post-War conformity. However, some remakes kept a strong and relatively independent leading lady. *Little Women 1949* was one of them, keeping much of the essence from the 1933 version. Few alterations were made for the Post War audience- much of the dialogue was kept- and the most important and notable changes were a new, popular cast, colors and costumes.

The movie starred June Allyson, Peter Lawford, Rossano Brazzi, Margaret O’Brien, Janet Leigh and a young Elisabeth Taylor, a relatively young and popular cast. Margaret O’Brien, who at the age of twelve was already an experienced actress, played Beth and is one of few young stars who portray a character older than the actor’s true age. June Allyson, on

the other hand, starred as her two years older sister, Jo, at the age of thirty two. The fact that Allyson was older than Hepburn was when playing Jo does not correspond with my expectation about a drop in romantic leads' ages in the post war years. On the other hand, Allyson was about twice the age than the character she was portraying, and thus her popularity might be what made the producers choose, as their lead, someone far from both reality and ideals in age. Allyson was petite and had the image of the "all American" "girl next door" and was therefore often type cast as such. Despite her sweet image, she was physically strong and active having trained to be a dancer and also having performed in Broadway shows. Just as Hepburn's Jo, Allyson's Jo jumps fences, runs fast and energetically as well as throwing snowballs and fencing with Laurie. Yet, however boyish or active, she was given a more feminine touch compared to the 1933 version. When jumping the fence the first time, she stumbles and falls flat in the snow. She is more often placed in a domestic environment, sewing, mending and taking care of children, instead of reading and performing as the first Jo. Moreover, she dances and wears feminine dresses with corsets, tight waist coats and wide skirts. The Post War fashion, with what is considered to be typical feminine lines, is closer to the Civil War costumes than the straighter silhouette and loosely fitted style of the early thirties with the lifted waist line. This means that both the Civil War period and the post war period stress the wide skirts, a slim and correct waist line and closely fitted fabrics from the waste and up following the feminine lines of the female body.

According to certain ideals of what makes a good American in the Post-War years, the balance between Jo and the men in her life also needs to change because Laurie is now given a military background. Laurie, played by Peter Lawford the age of 26, apparently lied about his age and ran away in order to join the army before he moved in with his grandfather and got to know the Marches. Such a loyalty to his country must have suited the hero's character

better, leaving the 1933 version of Prof. Bhaer much too weak according to Post-War standards.

To balance out Laurie's strength as a hero, Jo's true hero is given a more youthful appearance. Rossano Brazzi, who plays the Professor, has black hair and is thirteen years younger than the grey haired Paul Lukas from 1933. And whereas the relationship between the leads in 1933 gives the impression of a more equal partnership, Jo in 1949 is more expected to tend the professor's needs and wishes. When Jo informs Bhaer in 1949 she will be leaving New York his reaction is, although said nicely, "whom will I go to the opera with?" and "who will sew on my buttons?"

### ***Little Women 1994***

*Little Women* from 1994 seems to be influenced by a new way of looking at history which, rather than accepting the words of "dead white European males" and giving "more space to non-elites" in history textbooks,<sup>51</sup> also stresses the lives and difficulties for young girls and women in the 1860s. Screenplay, direction and production were done by women in addition to casting strong, female actresses who all are quite dominant in their portrayals. In order to add a touch of authenticity, parts of the fabrics for the costumes are originals from the nineteenth century,<sup>52</sup> as well as keeping the feminine lines for the dresses. The way I interpret this version is that it is aimed at a female audience only; that men are welcome to see it, but their good opinion is of no importance or consequence. I doubt that the plot or characters would offend or scare off the male audience, but I do believe it would be of no interest for them, this being a story developing mostly within the woman's sphere with a more feminist angle.

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<sup>51</sup> Boyer 472

<sup>52</sup> *Little Women* (Dir. Gillian Armstrong, 1994) bonus material in Collectors Edition

### **Jo's lost masculinity and Laurie's feminine traits**

Jo, played by Winona Ryder<sup>53</sup> is, in 1994, a sweet, emotional and non-threatening girl, and is actually the most feminine version of this character. She might be boyish at times, but never masculine the way Katharine Hepburn was able to portray Jo. Her sweetness seems to cover her strength, making her innocence partly submissive in her encounters with the two male leads. She lowers her eyes and smiles and takes on the role as the weaker sex. This reaction or behaviour in Jo changes quickly in the company of Laurie as he becomes her so called equal through friendship and not a potential husband for her.

Laurie has many feminine traits in this version. He was raised in Italy amongst vagrants, he went to a French school and he was an accomplished pianist. One might say that he takes over some of Professor Bhaer's feminine traits with his skills in languages and music. Laurie cannot see why Jo and Amy are allowed to concentrate on their painting and writing, whereas he has to give up his music and take over his grandfather's business. Jo, on the other hand, envies him for being allowed to go to college even though he does not especially care for it. The actor cast as Laurie, Christian Bale, is in addition to his feminine traits the youngest of the three Lauries, only twenty, and is probably a more equal match for Jo, seeing that she too is both younger and more girlish than the two previous Jo's.

### **The Americanization of Professor Bhaer**

Because a nineties' heroine was not likely to marry into a passionless relationship in order to be professionally independent, Jo's future husband needed more strength and authority and less "Europeaness." In 1994, Professor Bhaer (Gabriel Byrne) and Jo kiss for the first time

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<sup>53</sup> www.imdb.com, Ryder has had much of the same upbringing as Louisa May Alcott, spending years with her family in a community with few facilities during the late seventies, but with friends of the family known from the "beat-" and counter culture, such as Allan Ginsberg and Timothy Leary instead of the transcendentalists from the mid 1800s.

and this changes the balance in their relationship. Does this mean that he will not be furthering her profession the same way the two previous professors would have? His “Europeaness” seems less evident. Byrne’s Professor neither plays the piano nor sings German songs. He rather quotes Walt Whitman. And just like Rossano Brazzi he has dark hair. In the end he decides to go west because getting work will be easier there. Bhaer is thus following what is considered to be the typically American way of improving one’s life situation. Both the actor Byrne and the character Bhaer do not come off as possible “asexual husbands.” In 1994, Bhaer guides, teaches and criticizes Jo with more authority than he does in 1933 and 1949. The thirties version gives the impression of the Professor as being more like a sweet and caring uncle or grandfather. Therefore, Byrne might be hindering her independent profession.

The decision to go either west or east and the assumption that this will make a character more masculine or feminine are interesting issues in all three versions of *Little Women*. Both Jo and Amy wish to go to Europe and absorb its cultural splendours. The two sisters are the most energetic of the Marches in their young adolescence and also the least “womanly” in behaviour. Amy is the one that actually goes east, but is also the one who becomes the most feminine and thereby quite suitable for Laurie. Their bond is by some critics,<sup>54</sup> seen as a father-child relationship. Jo misses out on the opportunity to go to Europe, but instead Bhaer cultivates her by bringing Europe to Jo. She does, however, retain her ambitions and a hint of independence. Additionally in the 1994 version, Bhaer, who intends to go even further west, shows an interest in becoming even more masculine.

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<sup>54</sup> Kok

### **Sisterhood “more important than marriage”**

More than once is the relation between sisters in 1994 claimed to be set above other relations; such as marriage. Whether it is taken lightly or seriously it still differs greatly from the early versions in its dealing with marriage. It also shows the sisters, especially Jo and Amy, quarrel and fight with each other. The “separate spheres”<sup>55</sup> men and women were used to in the nineteenth century are perhaps more obvious in the later version because of the shared focus between the female characters making women the center, not the lead only. “I could never love anyone as I love my sisters” Jo assures Amy when she questions Jo’s early friendship with Laurie. At the end, after Amy has already married Laurie, Amy is not quite sure if Jo feels comfortable with their marriage, and Amy needs her sister’s approval as she proclaims sisters to be “a relation stronger than marriage”.

### **Jo sells her hair**

In order to pay for Marmee’s train ticket to see Mr. March in hospital, Ryder’s Jo does not even try to ask her aunt March for the money, but goes straight to cut and sell her hair, showing both responsibility and individuality. Jo in both 1933 and 1949 has a strong sense of pride, yet she still asks for the necessary amount before she decides to sell her hair. In 1994 Jo shows independence when providing for her mother. She also explains her actions by saying that “it’s not going to affect the state of the Union...It will grow back.” The irrelevance of Jo’s actions when she puts it in a bigger perspective allows her a dose of individuality. It is her way of looking at it from the bright side when Amy shocked proclaims her hair to be her “one beauty!” Jo’s reaction in 1933 to her family’s shock when seeing her hair cut short is that she “thought it would do my brain good to have my mop cut off,” as well as proclaiming it to be “boyish, becoming and easy to keep in order” whereas in 1949 Jo answers she feels

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<sup>55</sup> Linda K. Kerber, “Seperate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History.” (Journal of American History 75 (june 1988) 9-39)

“deliciously light and cool”, as Marmee proudly tells that she has never been as beautiful as she is at that moment. The values for the heroines in the three periods would therefore be, according to this scene in the *Little Women* versions, intelligence and practicality in 1933, beauty and comfort in 1949 and individuality in 1994.

### **Beth's death**

The changes done to the scenes concerning Beth's death are also related to Jo's somewhat domestic transformation towards the end of the story as, according to certain critics of the novel, Jo changes into Beth.<sup>56</sup> Hepburn's Jo is especially strong regarding their family's loss. Right before Beth dies, Jo writes about her sister leaving Jo, “as a gift, those virtues which have beautified [her] life.” Understanding and accepting Beth's dying and leaving them, Jo is the one who comforts her devastated mother. After that scene she is shown once doing a womanly chore; ironing. But even if she physically does these things, she has not lost her strong, honest and direct personality and speech with a touch of masculinity. Allyson's Jo, on the other hand, is asked by Mr. March to hide her emotions by not letting Beth see her cry. When she does need to cry, however, she goes to the attic, but is followed by Beth who explains and comforts her, making this Jo more emotional, weak and feminine as well as stressing her father's influence. There are no domestic scenes with Jo or a letter concerning a transfer of Beth's virtues following her death in 1949. Perhaps her qualities as the “girl next door” were already womanly enough? Finally, Ryder's Jo is relatively strong during her last scene with Beth while reading aloud to her, but she gives up being brave as it becomes too hard when Beth explains her leaving, and Jo is portrayed in several scenes thereafter coping with her loss and grief in different ways and therefore putting more focus on the death's importance for Jo even if there is no letter in this version either. Moreover, she is depicted

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<sup>56</sup> Kok 27

baking, covered in flower as well as caring for her newly born niece and nephew. Her womanly qualities now seem to be connected to motherhood.

### **The inheritance from Aunt March**

The 1994 version lets Aunt March pass away while in France, after having been left there as Amy and Laurie return to Concord as a married couple. She leaves Jo her big house “Plumfield” which, coincidentally, would work perfectly as a school. Jo is therefore left in a position where she is both better off economically and in their work relation than Professor Bhaer. However, teaching could be considered both masculine and feminine, and consequently it will neither weaken the man nor strengthen the woman too much. When Bhaer proposes in the end he asks Jo very humbly as he has nothing to offer her because his “hands are empty,” and Jo’s reply is therefore for the first time given a double meaning when she takes his hands and says “not empty now.” This is the only version which mentions this at all, as Aunt March returns with Amy and is still alive when the first two movies end, leaving the two Jos in a weaker and more dependent position.

### **Marmee’s strength**

Despite the traditional main focus on Jo much of the spotlight is now shared with the other characters, and especially with Marmee and her outspoken feminism. She actually takes over some of Jo’s spunk and frustration regarding her limited possibilities in life as a woman. Perhaps this is so because she is both older and a married woman and therefore can afford to be tougher than the eligible heroine. Much of Marmee’s actions, wisdom and outspokenness are not found in the two earlier versions, such as her short speech to Meg’s future husband, Brooke, explaining how “feminine weakness and fainting spells are the direct result of our confining young girls to the house bent over their needlework in restrictive corsets.” She also

decides to take Amy out of school after having heard Amy quoting her teacher saying that “it was as useful to educate a woman as to educate a female cat.” Marmee is, with her skills, instead of the doctor, the one who gets Beth’s fever down and helps her daughter back to life when the scarlet fever is at its worst. In 1933 and 1949 she does not return to Concord until after the fever has already turned. Therefore, in 1994 women’s activities and importance through history are strengthened.

### **Values and focus**

The Marches’ values in 1994 are presented as something women of the nineties probably would agree with and therefore set the March family apart from the other families presented in the movie. They express politically correct views which are not mentioned in the two previous versions. For instance, they would not buy silk because they were against children’s labor. The Marches are also described by others to have “views on slavery,” and they refer to Mr. March having to close his school because they had admitted a black girl. Moreover, the differences between men and women and what society would or would not allow in the 1860s are stressed in a way so that it gives women of the nineties a women’s history lesson. Jo, who is smart and loves to read and write and desperately wants to go to college, can do nothing but watch Laurie leave for Harvard. Moreover, the sisters are all expected to work on perfecting themselves as their parents are transcendentalists. This belief and philosophy is not directly mentioned in the two previous versions. The importance of the father and his values through his impact on the March women’s lives, and their constant emphasis on “perfecting oneself,” are stressed much more in his absence than when he is present. As a result, the influence of Mr. March is greater than the actual portrayal of the character. The Marches are also temperance people, and when Meg is painted and dressed up at a party by other girls, as well as drinking alcohol and carefully flirting, she is considered improper both by herself and

others. Why men are not considered improper when acting the same way frustrates Jo. Marmee explains to her that men will not be as easily “demeaned” because they are men and have other rights and possibilities in this world. Finally, we also see Jo at the boarding house listening to a group of male boarders discussing suffrage. She speaks up and explains to the men why women should have the right to vote- not because they are “good,” but because they are “human beings” and “citizens.” Again, this is new to the story and helps strengthen the context for a female audience. Due to the characters’ age and plot the movie will probably draw a young female audience as well, and as a counter reaction to a growing conservative emergence in the nineties young girls’ awareness regarding their rights is strengthened.

## **Conclusion**

Summing up this comparison, all three version give portrayals of the “woman’s sphere” during the 1860s even though the general focus has changed because of different agendas. The pre war version seems to reflect the depression era’s temporary reality and ideals through a strong leading lady and a weaker and more peripheral, but supportive leading man, and thereby stressing work as much as marriage. The post war version is, surprisingly, not that different from the original due to its reuse of much of the original script, but focus developed towards the beautiful exterior of costumes and colors, creating a non-threatening atmosphere with a sweet leading lady and a handsome leading man. The “contemporary” version has sexualized the leading couple through an even “sweeter” version of the leading lady together with a more masculine leading man in a context stressing love rather than work, and with strong secondary characters educating the audience by a new way of looking at history. The heroine has gone from being a somewhat masculine tomboy focusing on intelligence, artistic creativity and experience, goodness and self sacrifice through post war Allyson’s non-threatening sweetness combined with her fairly high level of strength to Ryder’s feminist

awareness hidden behind a feminine and girlish tomboy. The hero's development has gone the opposite way starting with a non-sexual grey haired European through a youthful Brazzi towards a more masculine and "American" Byrne. The suitor not chosen, Laurie, seems to follow much of the same pattern as the heroine, gradually turning more feminine. Overall, the balance between the leads is kept by either weakening or strengthening their power and dominance over each other. Hepburn's outshining presence and strength to "carry the plot" is continued by aesthetics and Allyson's "girl next door" image and popularity, whereas the last version stresses authenticity to a certain degree and distributes much of the strength to secondary characters enabling Ryder to remain feminine.

## Chapter 3

### *Show Boat* 1936

#### Introduction

The story of *Show Boat* deals with issues which became rather tension filled after World War II. Therefore, this must be one of the better examples of how and why certain characters, focus, and gender roles change in order to fit new ideals. The novel *Show Boat*, by Edna Ferber, was, in 1927, made into a stage musical by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. Its immediate success and different long running productions resulted in a film version released in 1936.<sup>57</sup> The film is known for its songs like “Ol’ Man River” and “Can’t Help Loving,” and musical numbers and dance routines are either worked into the plot or given as examples of performances in their different shows. Some songs were also written especially for the 1936 version. Since this is a film focusing on realities in life, self irony and humour, the musical score appears to support and compliment the plot and personalities in this production. I will focus on both leading and supporting characters as this is a movie with several subplots and couples.

#### Plot summary

Set in the late eighteen- and early nineteen hundreds on a Mississippi show boat, the 1936 version tells the story of Magnolia Hawks’ life, love and career. As the daughter of the showman boat owner Magnolia (Irene Dunne) plays the piano and helps out in any way she can, but her mother will never allow her to be an actress on stage, something of which she dreams. Her best friend is the leading lady onboard the Cotton Blossom, Julie La Verne (Helen Morgan), a woman of more experience. This close relationship is not accepted by Magnolia’s mother, the strict and proper Parthy Hawks (Helen Westley). Magnolia’s

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<sup>57</sup> The first sound complete version

optimistic and kind father, Andy Hawks (Charles Winninger), on the other hand, does not seem to mind a bit. When staying and performing in a southern town, Julie, who looks white, is exposed by a jealous worker onboard as a mulatto married to a white man. Interracial marriages were in many states prohibited by law at that time, and Julie and her husband Steve (Donald Cook), are forced to leave the Cotton Blossom, even if the sheriff finally is convinced that they actually both have black blood in them. In order to quickly and painlessly replace the leading couple, Magnolia is finally given the chance to act. As her co-star they get Gaylord Ravenal (Allan Jones), a handsome gambler Magnolia just met earlier that day and who needs a lift down the river. Magnolia and Gaylord instantly fall in love. After a period of theatrical success and secret courtship, they decide to marry. They continue as the leading couple onboard until Kim (Marilyn Knowlden and Sunnie O'Dea) is born, and then leave for Chicago, so that Gaylord can show Magnolia the world. They enjoy life as Gaylord gambles and wins, but his luck does not last, and he leaves his wife and daughter so that they can go back to the Cotton Blossom. By coincidence Magnolia runs into the previous dancing couple from Cotton Blossom, Frank and Ellie Schultz (Sammy White and Queenie Smith), and they have her audition for a new show, in order to take care of herself and her daughter. When her old friend, Julie, who has the job Magnolia so badly needs, sees her auditioning, Julie leaves her job instantly to help an unaware friend. Magnolia is a great success and goes on to Broadway and London to make her career. After years of success on stage, she retires, and watches and helps Kim, who has decided to follow in her mother's footsteps. During one of Kim's opening nights, Magnolia is reunited with a reduced Gaylord who has taken a job as the stage doorman in order to be near his daughter.

## **Characters**

### **Magnolia**

As a thirties' ideal, the self confident Magnolia, played by Irene Dunne, who might seem a little naïve at first, turns out of necessity into a strong and independent woman with guts when left by her husband and having to choose her direction in life. Magnolia is intelligent, quick thinking and talented. When other actors forget their lines she knows them all, both during rehearsals and shows. When the first leading man in the troupe tries to change the villain's instructions in the show she corrects him and explains how his idea is logically impossible. As a showman's daughter, brought up in an artistic environment Magnolia is portrayed to have many artistic talents and skills herself. All through the film there are examples of her playing different instruments, such as the piano, the banjo and the guitar, and she combines her playing with singing and dancing. Her many talents strengthens her independence.

Magnolia's self confidence and toughness make her scold the Trocadero manager because he did not like the song she auditioned with, telling him "That's the most beautiful song I know, and if you don't like it, I'm sorry for you." Her pride, trust in and support for her husband make her keep the truth about their living situation a secret from her family as the three Ravenals have been living in a one room apartment with only one bed for several years. She is physically active, often without a corset, and dances during her musical numbers. Finally, the actor portraying Magnolia, Irene Dunne, is one of the "fast-talking-dames" discussed by DiBattista. Despite a very different genre and character type she keeps the tempo and quantity of words in some of the early scenes.

### **Gaylord**

Gaylord is portrayed as the opposite to Magnolia, an effeminate and fair haired gentleman, who, like many during the thirties, has a hard time adjusting to his fall in status and funds. He

is not good at “driving to achieve, to create, to conquer,” but seems perhaps better when “making love” and in the “throes of emotion.”<sup>58</sup> One might say that he has qualities that fit the good times in life, but unfortunately he lacks the ones needed through the bad times. As a gentleman he is probably trained in manners appropriate for his supposedly previous standing in society, in control of himself and with little experience in actual work. When Gaylord proposes marriage to Magnolia, telling her about the fantastic world he plans to share with her she questions his ability to afford such a life. He quickly corrects her by saying that “it’s not the place of a gentlewoman to share her husband’s business” He takes his wife and daughter to Chicago where he introduces them to a life of luxury, living in fancy hotels, driving a car and betting at the race tracks. Basing his fortune on luck, however, is an insecure living for a family. He does not work when needed, and thus gives up providing for his family when leaving them and remains dependent on his gambling. Being a gentleman and a professional gambler are weaknesses that become his downfall when his luck turns. Gaylord’s role as the failing provider can be seen as reflecting the hard times in the thirties where the traditional breadwinner suffered through a weak economy and employment cuts, making him a reality whereas Magnolia, who takes over the provider’s responsibility, can be seen as both a reality and an ideal according to the thirties. Her successful career, however, might also be related to the opportunities Hollywood actresses had to reach the same professional and salary level as men. The novel itself was written in the early twenties and can therefore not be based on the Depression, but it is still a recognizable plot scenario for the audience.

### **Supporting characters**

The supporting characters in this version of *Show Boat* are not weak or peripheral. Moreover, the male characters seem more at home on stage than the female characters who are more

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<sup>58</sup> Haskell 4

practical or ambitious. Magnolia's father is the one in focus on stage who gladly steps in and takes over the entire show. He is the optimist who loves the theater. Magnolia's mother, on the other hand, seems to despise actors and the theater. She is, however, the practical one who is in charge of their business. The other secondary couple, Ellie and Frank, gives an example of hard working people without the necessary qualities to reach the top and become stars. They also show some of the envy that often exists between those who have and those who do not have, while discussing Magnolia and Gaylord's instant success. What irritates Frank is how Gaylord, after his three weeks of acting is treated and advertised for like a star onboard the show boat when nobody knows Frank who has been touring "up and down the river for twelve years." Ellie too feels the same way about Magnolia and her position as a star. Moreover, Frank and Ellie are not married yet, but have been working and dancing together for five years already when the viewer gets acquainted with them. This corresponds with the delaying of marriage during the Depression. Ellie is a terrible actress and a mediocre dancer, but her flirtatious and smart character gives her power and control over Frank, who seems both more talented and technically strong at his dancing. During the first half of the movie she seems to be "mastering the situation"<sup>59</sup> by having the sexual control without being in love. Their dialogue in her dressing room after a performance gives an indication of this:

Ellie: Do you know the secret of their quick success? They're falling in love with each other.

Frank: What's that got to do with it?

Ellie: Well, they make love on the stage, and it rings true. That's why they're a hit.

Frank: Well, I've been playing opposite you for five years, and I love you.

Ellie: Hi, hi... Yeah, but maybe I don't love you...

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<sup>59</sup> Basinger 266

## **Black characters and subplots**

As the only movie discussed in this thesis, *Show Boat* also gives a portrayal of characters outside Hollywood's white entertainment reality. The movie deals with interracial and black relationships. Julie, the mulatto passing for white, is portrayed by the 36 year old Helen Morgan as a non-sensual grown white woman. She seems somewhat lifeless and barely convincing in her part as the leading lady on the Cotton Blossom even if she passes as a singer. Physically, she is slow and passive. Vocally, she is classical in her sound and style. Therefore, there is little resemblance to what is considered stereotypical and culturally "black." Whether or not Helen Morgan was chosen because she was from the original stage cast in 1927 as well as the part-talkie version from 1929 or just because she was the right woman for the part, is uncertain, but that she appears somewhat pale compared to both the white and black cast seems clear. She becomes more of a background figure, even when she is meant to be at the center, a relatively weak character that does not belong – despite her strong musical numbers.

In the background, the life and music of the black working couple, Joe and Queenie, runs as a subplot and an important setting surrounding the leads in the theater-boat scenes, but compared to Julie, these two characters do not pass the audience by unnoticed. Joe is portrayed as the perhaps most masculine and sensual male character in *Show Boat* despite his laidback appearance and views on life. He is not "driving to achieve, to create, to conquer,"<sup>60</sup> yet still comes off as the more manly of the male leads. His wife, Queenie, is tough and bossy and the dominant figure who runs his life. She complains about his laziness on more than one occasion and believes him to be the "laziest man that ever lived on [the] river." His defense is that he can do "a lot of things if it was necessary," in a scene showing him shelling peas while sitting comfortably in his rocking chair, with a folded paper attached to his leg for transferring

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<sup>60</sup> Haskell 4

the few peas he does not eat himself down into the bowl without having to bend or move. To a certain degree, Joe corresponds with the black stereotype of being lazy and sexual, whereas Queenie, with her efficiency and hard work, does not. She does, however, fit into the strong mammy stereotype, widely known from several movies in the traditional woman's film era. Both Joe and Queenie, however, seem confident in their gender roles and show a strong chemistry between them.

### **Focus**

The 1936 version of *Show Boat* focuses on the many different layers and personalities in society in addition to the heroine's strength, talents and independence. The southern black community is relatively well represented in mass scenes along the river as well as Joe and Queenie's importance, both musically and as persons close to the main family. Moreover, other mass scenes involving different settings or locations, such as different theaters, the race tracks, Kim's convent school, the church for Magnolia and Gaylord's wedding, parades and towns, show an extensive use of extras. The cost to hire extras was perhaps not too high in 1936, considering the shortage of paid employment. Human weaknesses and realities in life are not hidden from the audience, but portrayed with charm, temper, and a great sense of humor, and self irony. This includes Mr. "Rubber Face" with his funny faces, the show number with Magnolia and dancers in a black parody, Andy's way of covering up chaos during a show by playing all the parts himself, sending a dead goose on a wire across the stage for making the scene look "realistic," Parthy's making fun of Frank's not so handsome face, Ellie's somewhat lack of talent, and what we today would considered as more than overweight chorus girls in skimpy outfits. The actors portray the characters with less than perfection both in looks and personality, acknowledging different sides of the characters as not only good and beautiful or only bad and ugly, and also letting the qualities of their

personalities develop as the story continues, when maturing and growing up. The female characters are not afraid of asking for what they want and they show off their stage underwear and do not seem to mind overdoing their allegedly bad acting style and ability in the stage scenes.

### ***Show Boat 1951***

The new version of *Show Boat* from 1951 is a great example of movies changing with the times and adapting to new ideals by rewriting, removing, and recreating what is necessary for the updated story. The balance between men and women regarding masculinity and femininity which changed during the forties made it important to portray men as strong and dominant, and women as weak and submissive. The story is shortened and narrowed down, making it a smoother romance with colorful sets and costumes and professional entertainment. The biggest changes are found in the second half of the plot. First, Magnolia chooses homemaking and dependency rather than career and independency, and second, Gaylord leaves his wife before Kim is born, instead of waiting until she is about ten years old. Moreover, a whole evening's entertainment onboard the show boat, the secret rendezvous and wedding between the main characters as well as the secondary characters' subplots are missing. Certain musical numbers have been replaced with other numbers better suited for the period. Even the historical costumes from the late 1800s accommodated the post war period, and the women's costumes were given more feminine lines, compared to the 1936 version which focused more on the flat chests and slim hips.

## **Magnolia**

Magnolia in the 1951 version is both an innocent and submissive, sweet girl as well as the protector of family values, a perfect example of the post war ideal for women. When comparing the two Magnolias, Kathryn Grayson's 1951 version seems only a supporting heroine, whereas Irene Dunne's heroine actually took over the hero's role as well as her own. One of the few scenes in 1951, where Magnolia does rise to the occasion, is when she turns on Gaylord for failing her and is indirectly blaming him for not showing any sense of responsibility when they are expecting a baby, something of which he knows nothing. She also keeps her daughter with her when growing up, giving Kim a strong, yet alternative, family situation onboard the Cotton Blossom.

## **Gaylord**

When comparing the two interpretations of Gaylord Ravenal, Howard Keel's 1951 version shows the most dominant figure and, thus, he too falls into the post war gender roles. Whether this is because of his looks and personality or deeper voice, is difficult to say, but paired off with Kathryn Grayson, the difference between them seems much more obvious than that between Allan Jones and Irene Dunne. Allan Jones portrays a more ordinary and weak gentleman with a handsome face, and his Gaylord does not have the same self confidence and initiative as Keel's does. When Gaylord proposes marriage in 1936, it is after a talk with her father who is the one who gives him the idea for where to marry without Parthy finding out, since Parthy would never approve. In 1951, on the other hand, he informs Magnolia's parents of his intension to marry their daughter, after having been caught together, but with a slightly surprised and uncertain Magnolia, who agrees despite her mother's reaction. Gaylord in 1951 is also given a longer version of the song "Where's the Mate for Me?" a song that was minimized in 1936, which shows the character's wish to find someone. And a strong man gets

what he wants. To justify Gaylord's abandonment of wife and child, which the reduced Gaylord in 1936 does not want to be forgiven for, Keel's Gaylord seems excused for his actions because he did not know about his unborn daughter, and when he does find out, he rushes home immediately. Thereby, the hero is strengthened as he too is a protector of family values and shows responsibility.

### **The balance between the hero and heroine**

The balance between the leads switches from 1936 to 1951. The leading lady seems the more dominant of the two in 1936, whereas Magnolia changes the plot when she chooses traditional family values and dependency over a career. Looking at the scene where Magnolia and Gaylord first meet in 1936, it portrays a natural and happy Magnolia who takes the initiative when seeing him walking along the river. In the later version, he is the one who walks onboard and sees her first. He just stands still and admires her from a distance while she is rehearsing a scene on her own, and when he talks to her, she is, in Kathryn Grayson's innocent portrayal, embarrassed, shy and actually ashamed. When Magnolia and Gaylord start rehearsing together, they kiss in one of the acts. While Parthy, in the 1936 version just gets angry and leaves, the next Parthy (Agnes Morehead) actually stops them and then instructs them to pretend to be in love "at arms length, with no kissing," which fits more in with the proper behavior of the sweet and innocent Magnolia in 1951. Later in the story (1936), after having been deserted by Gaylord, Magnolia turns out to be a success during a New Years' eve show. She goes on to Broadway and becomes a celebrated star. Magnolia refuses to go back to Cotton Blossom "living on charity and having my mother tell me she always knew it would be like this," and she actually has a long and successful career. In 1951, on the other hand, she does not continue her career. She is pregnant and Gaylord does not know. In 1936, her daughter, Kim, was at this time in Magnolia's life already placed in a convent school, but in

1951 she sacrifices her work and independence in order to go back to the Cotton Blossom and take care of her unborn baby, living with her parents. This was the natural and correct choice to make in the early fifties, since the old family values had returned after World War II.

### **Supporting characters**

All the secondary couples in the post war version of *Show Boat* have become more of a background filling for the leads, except for their performances. This means that all tension filled subplots are removed making this version a movie which leaves the audience with colorful entertainment, but few questions or conflicts.

Ellie and Frank, the dancing couple from the Cotton Blossom, are left with just a few scenes where they actually matter for the plot, but instead they have upgraded the dancing numbers. In 1951, when the focus is on their song-and-dance routines, their 1936 subplot is missing. This subplot showed their ambitions and envy, in addition to some of their lacking acting abilities. In 1936, Ellie seems to be one of Andy's personal favorites, something she does not seem to mind and would take advantage of whenever possible. She goes out drinking with Frank, and later, teases him about his affection for her. Ellie would desperately like to have the leading role when Julie and Steve leave the Cotton Blossom, but is dismissed as the comedienne in the show. Moreover, she and Frank do not like to see Magnolia and Gaylord's instant popularity as the leading couple. The later version has the dancing-duo Marge and Gower Champion cast as Ellie and Frank. Being competent dancers, Ellie's hemline has been shortened considerably to improve and show off their dancing-routines and they are given two extra dance numbers, "I Might Fall Back on You" and "Life upon the Wicked Stage." These two numbers were not used in 1936, but taken from the 1927 stage musical.<sup>61</sup> However, they appear to have lost most of their personality. They are portrayed as a sweet and supportive

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<sup>61</sup> Larkin 547

couple. Ellie fits more into the stereotype of being a subordinate and virtuous wife with no ambitions of her own. She almost always appears together with her dancing partner, later, husband, seldom on her own. There is not a hint of jealousy, disapproval or temper in her - she is all smiles. She is not given many lines, and the ones she does have are mostly used to support or underline the other characters. The only glimpse of strength and individuality that can be seen in her in 1951 is during their song-and-dance routines, where her talents on stage are portrayed as much stronger than in 1936. As secondary characters they are “free to stay passive,” and Ellie’s personality and actions seem to support the post war ideals.

### **The problem with “blackness”**

Another issue and part of society which did not fit with the post war ideal of white, middle-class suburbia is the problem concerning race. Several of the noticeable adjustments done to the new version, deal with the scenes concerning African-Americans and their dominance in the 1936 version. Queenie, being both African-American and a woman, was not portrayed as either weak or submissive in 1936. When Pete questions her about a piece of jewellery she is wearing, she actually laughs in his face and says: “Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.” This scene with Queenie is the only one kept in 1951, but this version has changed the scene totally, and it portrays Queenie looking humble and scared, as she explains quickly that it has been given to her.

Joe and Queenie had their own subplot in the first version, but after World War II, their story was deleted as the movie was made non-threatening for post war America. The flirting and nagging between them gives the 1936 version more depth compared to the later one, as well as showing another side of Julie’s background. The sensuality Paul Robeson gives his character, and which Helen Morgan seems to lack, appears to be transferred to Julie in the later version. Helen Morgan’s more classical sound is toned down in 1951, something

which perhaps fits Ava Gardner's sensuality more. There is overall more focus on the teasing and flirting between the couples in 1936, and especially the subplot couples. In 1951 it seems uncertain whether Joe and Queenie actually are married. Their relationship was probably desexualized in order to accommodate the white suburban audience. Even though Joe's obvious sexual flirting in 1936 can be seen as a game between him and his wife, this could also be transferred to a white audience. Paul Robeson's character seems to show more masculinity and sensuality through his manual labor and strong voice than the leading white male, Allan Jones' effeminate and refined Gaylord. Having a sensual African-American man charming the white women watching the film could be dangerous since women more easily fantasize "about playing opposite the romantic lead,"<sup>62</sup> and black people were often believed to be animal like and hyper sexual.<sup>63</sup> Many people feared interracial relationships and black men were believed to be after white women. Therefore, the possibility to transfer the connection between the black male lead and the white female audience to real life was probably terrifying. The notion that uncontrolled and pre- or extramarital sex would weaken the nation and national security might also have influenced Joe's transformation.<sup>64</sup> In order to desexualize Joe and Queenie, all their interaction has been cut, and the actors cast as them portray their characters as insecure of both themselves and whites. Another reason for limiting Joe's presence might be related to the post war problems regarding desegregation. Black soldiers during World War II experienced the European reality as very different from what they were used to back home. They could socially interact with white women in non-segregated societies and they fought together with other allies against racism. Many of the ones remaining in the US migrated to cities or the industrialized North in order to get work in

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<sup>62</sup> Walsh 41

<sup>63</sup> Black stereotypes as they have been discussed in Deborah Kitchen's seminar "Movies and American Culture" at the University of Oslo, fall term 2003.

<sup>64</sup> May

the white GI's absence and had the possibility to improve their living conditions and perhaps save money.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the new self confidence amongst black people might cause problems.

The early version depicts black men, women and children are as natural as white in the community settings along the Mississippi river, but the later version tones down the presence of the black community and many of the "black" musical numbers too were removed from the plot. Joe and Queenie had been given some great musical numbers, and had also one written especially for the first film musical, "Ah Still Suits Me." In addition, "Gallivantin' around," a stage number by Magnolia together with a choir, shows them made up like African-Americans as well as the "black" number "Ah still suits me" performed by Joe (Paul Robeson). Unfortunately, the changes which were done to the remake only left Joe with a shorter version of "Ol' Man River," which because of his higher pitch range gave the song a more classical and less "black" sound. Queenie was not given any musical numbers. Paul Robeson's version of this song, in 1936, allowed Joe to show anger because of his people's situation, when presenting more of the black worker's reality. The second part of Julie's "Can't Help Lovin'" sung by Joe and Queenie was also cut, and an encore of Julie's version was given to Magnolia so that she could "learn" the song, taught by Julie, in addition to the removing of interaction between the black couple.

## **Stars**

Because of the removal of certain subplots, depth and conflicts in the post war version, the need for great stars or talents increased. Toning down potential tension or controversial subjects in 1951 seems to have been more important than following the multi layered plotline with strong actors, as a mean to draw a great audience by giving them what they want, or at least what the producers think they want. The focus in the 1951 version was on its stars'

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<sup>65</sup> Boyer 18

musical numbers, aesthetics and morals, making this production less controversial. The film was truly colorful with its costumes and special-made sets, and it had some of its time's most popular musical- and operetta singers in the leading roles, Kathryn Grayson as Magnolia and Howard Keel as Gaylord. The prima donna, Julie, was probably meant to have beauty and sensuality as her main virtues in the film, since Ava Gardner was chosen for the part even if her singing had to be dubbed by Annette Warren. Another possibility was to use the actress who had last been cast as Julie, namely the African-American, Lena Horne. She had played Julie in the musical biography about the composer of *Show Boat*, Jerome Kern; *Till the Clouds Roll By* from 1946.<sup>66</sup> But seeing that this film only showed a few excerpts from the stage musical (1927), among them the scene where Lena Horne sung "Can't help lovin'", they did not have to directly deal with the problem concerning Julie's interracial marriage when using a real African-American in the part. 1951 was probably not the right time to test out both the official and the unofficial response to such a decision, since the Production Code, Hollywood's censoring office, had banned interracial film romances and these years were a rather tension filled period for the early Civil Rights Movement. Besides, African-Americans were almost never given leading- or supporting roles. Their main task was often to appear as artists in short musical numbers in addition to their typical portrayal of servants' roles.

The political climate and ideology, as well as the importance of current movie stars, must in 1951 have had a great impact on the production. Magnolia's strong personality and independent career are gone. So are many of the comical scenes and personalities. The musical numbers; "I Have the Room above Her," which shows the leading couple's early flirting, as well as "Ah Still Suits Me" and "Gallivanting around" are cut from the movie. These were numbers where trained singers and popular dancers could not shine at their utmost. Ellie and Frank's new dancing numbers and the additional song in 1951 "Why Do I

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<sup>66</sup> Horne, Lena. Interview. *That's Entertainment II* (Dir. Gene Kelly. Videocassette. MGM, 1976)

Love You?” sung by Magnolia and Gaylord were, however, more suitable for showing off the characters’ talents. Moreover, there was perhaps too much focus on black people and culture in many of the musical numbers. Kathryn Grayson would probably have surprised her audience if she was to do an impressive and humorous version of Magnolia’s “Gallivantin around.” Moreover, age wise and musically there would be no problem keeping Paul Robeson in the part of Joe. However, his political attention and converting to Communism during the forties probably made it impossible for the producers letting him be a part of the production. The whole subplot of Joe and Queenie is missing, and had it not been for the showstopper “Ol’ man river,” which also runs through parts of musical with its main theme, there would have been no problem with cutting Joe and Queenie completely from the final version.

The lists of the cast appearing in the beginning of both films, also give an indication for the focus in each film. In 1936, Irene Dunne has a clip of her own before she is mentioned once again together with other actors. Therefore, the life of Magnolia can be seen as being the only main focus in the story. The character Joe is placed before Julie and is the fourth character on the list. Whether this was caused by Paul Robeson’s name, since he had become a well known and popular Joe figure, or Joe’s importance in this version, is difficult to say. In 1951, the focus was more equally divided between Magnolia, Gaylord, and Julie. They were placed together in the first clip, something which probably was based on their popularity as actors. William Warfield (Joe), on the other hand, is the last name on the list, and Queenie is actually not even mentioned.

Another issue is the long time span in both the novel and partly the 1936 version which shows an ageing hero and heroine. When focus is set on beauty and youth, it might go against its own focus if the scenes with an old and somewhat wrinkly leading couple were to be kept. The portrayal of the reduced and ageing Gaylord at the end of the 1936 version was changed and in 1951 he remained “young and handsome.” This version covers about six years

only, and it means that they have had to leave some of the scenes out or move up some of the scenes to an earlier stage in the characters' lives, thereof the scene where Gaylord is reunited with his family. The only one who was portrayed to appear reduced is the mulatto who is given an extra scene at the end in the later version when she tells Gaylord about his daughter, a scene she is even more reduced.

The actors' age when the movies were released strengthens the analysis about gender roles and their reversals before and after World War II. The leading lady goes from 38 to 29 years old whereas the leading man goes from 29 to 32 years old. When paired off together, their strength, authority and perhaps life experiences switch places. Also Magnolia's parents follow this pattern as the actress portraying Parthy goes from 61 to 51 years old and the actor portraying Andy goes from 52 to 59 years old. Both mother and daughter are nine years older than their husbands in 1936, and according to Haskell<sup>67</sup> this would then be considered as a "joke or a perversion." On the other hand, the black couple who seemed to be well suited for each other in 1936 needed to go the other way around as a part of their desexualization having the actor portraying Joe go from 38 to 31 years old whereas the actress portraying Queenie went from 41 to 46 years old, making their fifteen years of difference an even greater "perversion." The remaining couples have less than five years between them if "reversed."

## **Conclusion**

To conclude the argument made about how and why the focus had changed as much as it had between the two *Show Boat* versions, I believe that in 1936, they primarily had, in addition to Irene Dunne, the story with its musical score, while in 1951 they had the Hollywood-stars' musical numbers and the ideal gender roles presented to the audience which helped remove anything controversial or realistic. The pre war version reflects the woman of the thirties as

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<sup>67</sup> Haskell 14

the sometimes sole provider and her ideal strength when needed. It also shows the husband's difficulty with adjusting to an unfamiliar situation. The post war version represents the ideal with men and women accepting and being comfortable with their place and responsibilities according to the post war values at the time combined with entertainment. That does not mean that there is not a hint of reality in it, but it is a post card picture of a selective reality. Both versions have their qualities, whether it means focusing on something closer to the whole story in the thirties, or the sugar coated artistry of the fifties.

## **Chapter 4**

### ***The Shop around the Corner 1940***

#### **Introduction**

The last of the pre-war movies *The Shop around the Corner* changes the earlier male-female balance of the thirties by introducing a strong, serious, hard working, and tall hero to complement the strong and self confident heroine. It is a romantic comedy centered around the main characters' work place, and not only the typical "woman's sphere." The three versions have all different settings and characters, but keep the plot about the two competing leads who are each other's worst enemy and beloved pen-friend.

#### **Plot summary**

*The Shop around the Corner* is set in Budapest, Hungary in a bag and suitcase shop owned by Matuchek where a young Alfred Kralik, played by James Stewart, has worked as a "first salesman" for several years. One day Klara Novak, played by Margaret Sullavan, enters the store in desperate need of a job. Kralik would gladly have hired her if there only had been an opening, and he takes down her name and address. However, she impresses Matuchek when she impulsively and intelligently manages to sell one of Matuchek's favorite cigar boxes, a virtually unsellable item, for a higher price than planned, and she gets the job. What Novak and Kralik do not know is that for some time, while spending most of their time in the store annoying each other and quarreling, they have been corresponding through letters with each other as strangers connected through an advertisement in the paper. They write on "cultural subjects" and have a deep admiration for their pen-friend. After a while, they decide to meet. In order to recognize one another, Miss Novak will have a copy of Anna Karenina with a red carnation as a book mark at her table when waiting in a café after working hours. However, when Kralik sees her through the café window, he does not want to go in. He changes his

mind though, yet enters pretending for it to be a coincidence and says he is supposed to meet another colleague of them at that exact café, and they start arguing at Miss Novak's table. They end up insulting one another once again and Miss Novak gets quite tough with him. In the meantime, Matuchek has tried to commit suicide after having suspected his wife of twenty years for having an affair with Kralik, leading to Kralik's dismissal, but then to realize that it was not Kralik, but Vadas, one of his other employees, who went behind his back. Matuchek rehires Kralik while lying in hospital upgrading him from first salesman to manager and one of his first tasks would be fire the true scoundrel. After having been stood up, Miss Novak is truly sad and disappointed, not knowing what has happened, and she feels incapable of working. Kralik, who now knows the other side of her, starts to show more consideration. He sends her another letter, explaining and excusing himself for not coming up to her in the café because of the handsome man, Kralik himself, who was sitting at her table. This makes her overjoyed and brings her back to work. Their quarreling in the store diminishes, and as pen friends they decide to try and meet again. It is Christmas Eve, and they both expect to become engaged over the holidays. About to close up, they talk about this and Kralik tells Miss Novak that her fiancée has been to talk to him about her salary and work situation, as Mr. "Pomkin" is out of a job. Kralik makes him look bad, frustrating Miss Novak who has never met him. At the same time she candidly admits to have fallen for Kralik in the beginning, even if she treated him like a dog believing that that would be the best way to have him fall for her. He finally discloses himself, surprising her, yet making her very happy, and she throws her arms around him and they kiss.

### **Characters**

The main characters in *The Shop around the Corner* are portrayed as equals in strength, but not in power. The heroine is a talkative and sweet character who also displays her strength

and killer instinct through her speech, showing the hero two different sides to her. One side is how she acts when she is at work and relates to men and women, customers and superiors, the other is how she expresses herself through her letters to her unknown gentleman. When at work, Klara only has a problem with one other character, namely the leading man. She tries to treat him like a “dog” because she believes that this is how you make someone fall for you, something she explains to Kralik in the final scene. When her plan does not work, she seems to get angrier and more competitive towards him as a reaction to his lacking response. It is her way of flirting, even if she at the same time is emotionally engaged to her pen friend. The manuscript provides Klara with a dialogue and a way with words that truly puts Kralik in his place through her many smart insults. He does fight back however, yet only up to a certain point, as she seems to put much more energy into her fighting. Klara delivers her intelligent lines fairly quickly with spunk as well as a controlled calmness, more or less upfront and direct. In her letters on the other hand, she shows a softer side, deep and poetic and not at all competitive, and Klara’s letters are what Alfred initially falls in love with. On the physical side Margaret Sullavan was quite petite, and next to James Stewart she probably looked even smaller. She is given other feminine characteristics as well, such as showing her weakness through crying, fainting and being emotionally confused, but as with the other “fast talking dames” she is not “shy of the truth.” Therefore she speaks her mind both when feeling strong and when feeling weak, after all, she was not the sole main focus in the film and thus not that dependent on being strong.

The result of the economic shift which occurred before the United States entered World War II restored much of man’s position and power in society, making the leading man the center of the plot as much, if not more, than the leading lady. Together they share the “strength to carry the plot.” Alfred is presented as a serious and trustworthy man with general concern for others and dedication for his job. Just as Klara, he is controlled and articulate, yet

always polite and loyal. However, while working he is always Klara's superior, something which puts him in a position of power over her; just as his knowing about her pen-pal identity for the second half of the film after meeting her at the café as well as being promoted to manager. Alfred does not, however, have that much power professionally as he works for someone who can easily fire him, something which also happens. Despite his ability and willingness to say what he feels even if his opinions differ from Matuchek's, he still remains relatively humble. Alfred is the strongest of the male pre-war leads as he is "driving to achieve," rarely in the "throes of emotion," a dedicated provider and a natural leader. If he does, however, come off as somewhat careful or out of control at times, he is cast opposite a strong character and actress who often pushes him with her slightly fierce behavior and style.

The 1940 movie *The Shop around the Corner* gives a portrayal of women as self-confident and independent, and continues to focus on up-beat dialogues, the variations in society and the importance of employment, all typical traits in the movies of the thirties. What does seem to change is the leading man's authority and importance compared to the two previous movies of the thirties. This might be a result of the movie being produced after the critical economic turning point and therefore moving towards what the pre-war audience probably considered as more normal in family structure and responsibilities. Furthermore, it deals with serious subjects, such as adultery and suicide attempts. The movie can be analyzed as a concentrated repetition of the thirties when looking at the leading couple. The man starts off having, carefree, worked for some years, for then to lose his job, and thereby his pride and manliness, temporarily, for finally, to return to work even stronger when he is upgraded to manager, reflecting the difficult economy and job situation which improved for many Americans towards the end of the decade. The strong woman who finds work in the beginning, however, gradually gives up some of her strength and becomes more vulnerable

and “womanly” when her strength and independence, as it was, is not needed as much as earlier.

### ***In the Good Old Summertime 1949***

The new version of *The Shop around the Corner* from 1940 was in addition to the usual change of cast, characters’ names, focus and balance, also renamed to match the new time and setting in the plot. The title, *In the Good Old Summertime*, refers to an old hit from the turn of the century and the movie was changed into a musical set in a music store in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicago, rather than in a suitcase store in the late thirties, Budapest. This must be seen as a much safer context in the early Cold War years since the gradual dividing of Eastern- and Western Europe, and with Hungary in the eastern part, had now become very clear, making Hungary a part of the communist threat. Therefore, the new setting must have been regarded as being far from current troubles and foreign affairs, making this version yet another innocent post card of entertainment. The movie also adds another love angle to the plot as it introduces a young and beautiful violinist, a lady friend of the male lead and a threat to the female lead. Moreover, the owner of the shop, Mr. Oberkugen, is not married and thereby not impacted by a wife’s extramarital affairs, a back stabbing employee, and a following suicide attempt, but rather courts an older female employee.

### **Characters**

Klara and Alfred, in this version Veronica and Andrew, meet during Veronica’s search for a job at another place. Due to his clumsiness he costs her the job, introducing their relationship as relatively tension filled one from the start. The leads were given to Judy Garland and Van Johnson, in addition to the new supporting cast with actors like Buster Keaton, S. Z. Sakall and Spring Byington. Being the greater star of the two leads, Judy

Garland, who plays the role of Veronica Fisher, presents a tough and aggressive girl as the musically strong, romantic lead. As both a star and the heroine of the movie, I would assume, some of her costumes are not typical for the turn of the century period, but rather influenced by the post war fashion as a contrast to the other actresses, but which relates her to the audience. With a somewhat childish temper she competes with the male character, Andrew Larkin, for better sales and musicality until the moment she falls in love. However, it is not her brains and quick thinking that gets her a job, it is her musical talent and extraordinary voice. Nevertheless, she stresses the fact that working is just a temporary situation, because she intends to marry one day. This was both the ideal and what was expected after World War II, and also, these intentions and values regarding female dependency in marriage were not included in 1940 even if marriage was important for the first two leads as well. Veronica is also romantically naïve and innocent, even more so than Klara, who admits to both having been interested in two men at the same time as well as using certain tricks to have Kralik fall for her. However, due to the new context of the story - the turn of the century as a more innocent time - this is perhaps not an unexpected portrayal of the heroine. Nevertheless, Veronica is presented with a stronger personality than Andrew, and she is far from submissive in her competitiveness. Andrew does not seem to like her because of this, and it leads to an even more aggressive chemistry between the two. She gives up some of her fighting in certain situations, such as when she is not feeling well, when she sees Andrew with another girl and when fussing over a baby together with Andrew in a domestic environment. Just as the first version, the male leads become caring and protective when the female leads show their weaknesses. Van Johnson is often referred to as a “guy next door”<sup>68</sup> type and thereby the male counterpart to actresses such as June Allyson from *Little Women*. Whether a girl or a guy “next door,” they will both fit into what is considered non-threatening and safe in the post-war

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<sup>68</sup> [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

context. It is neither his fair looks nor his boyish personality that makes him the strong hero. Since the story is set in another time and place, and all the seriousness from 1940 is removed, the need for the lead to demonstrate his strength might be lesser than what was perhaps expected at that time. Moreover, he does not steal Judy Garland's "thunder." She is the one who does the transforming by falling into the mother- and wife role as a natural development in the second half of the movie. Because of the lack of "seriousness" in the movie and a perhaps more stable job market in United States' current reality Andrew seems also less weakened by loosing his job.

*In the Good Old Summertime's* focus has gone from brains to artistic talent, from serious problems with suicide attempts and adultery to playing with misunderstandings that lead to jealousy, and the least historically correct costumes are worn by the leading lady as a way to strengthen her connection to the audience in a light and entertaining version of the plot.

### ***You've Got Mail 1998***

Set in contemporary New York the 1998 re-adaptation gives the leading couple each their book store to fight for as the competitive angle. Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) has her local children's book store inherited from her mother while Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) and his family's company are about to open yet another addition to their chain store in Kathleen's neighbourhood. This work situation gives them both a professional independence that was perhaps not as necessary in the two previous versions. Because of the social, economic and educational development over the last century, an insecure job as a salesman in a small shop seems impossible for a nineties hero because he would have a hard time appealing to the female audience, whereas the 1940 version was about finding and holding a job and the 1949 version was moved back about half a century and could therefore keep the same focus. For a

heroine it could perhaps be somewhat acceptable as she in the end becomes a dependent on the hero anyway. Both leads are also romantically involved with someone else despite their e-mail correspondence as the movie begins.

### **The sweet and non-threatening heroine**

Neither the main character Kathleen Kelly nor the actress Meg Ryan who portrays her seems to be a real threat to men's masculinity as this combination of actress- and character type seem to be a combination of sweetness. Both the character and the actor's strength to "carry the plot" appear to be based on their link to the male character and actor, Tom Hanks. Ryan and Hanks, now at the age of 37 and 42, had already proved to be a successful movie couple in the romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle* from 1993, directed by the same Nora Ephron, who also was in charge of this remake. They had both also been successful in individual projects, such as *When Harry Met Sally*<sup>69</sup> and *Forrest Gump*.<sup>70</sup>

Kathleen's way of fighting for her store does not seem too realistic. Instead the fighting is made comical and she is not portrayed as a believable threat to the hero. Moreover, Joe does not consider her a threat either. DiBattista<sup>71</sup> compares Kathleen to 1940's Klara describing Meg Ryan's role as a reduced character who is not able to "figure out what to say" when provoked and confronting Joe, because her "mind goes blank." This, DiBatista claims, would never have happened with the fast-talking-dames of the 1930s and 1940s, who would have answered back "without blinking." In many ways, Meg Ryan's portrayal of the heroine is made childlike, funny and sweet. However, this is what I believe enables her to win on the romantic front. When acting in what is considered a masculine way she either fails at what she is setting out to achieve or alienates the hero as we see with her business, her first romantic relationship and her later speeches of meanness and insults. Again, as with the two

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<sup>69</sup> Starring Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal and directed by Nora Ephron

<sup>70</sup> Tom Hanks received an Oscar for best actor

<sup>71</sup> DiBattista, Preface xii

previous versions, the hero and heroines relationship turns romantic only when Kathleen proves to be weak and vulnerable and, in this case, loses her professional and economic independence. The changes in Kathleen's life, indirectly caused by Joe, make her more eligible for the conservative audience; no personal ambitious strings or time consuming career to come in the way for marriage and motherhood.

### **The tough business man as a caring family man**

The contemporary hero of the late nineties will have difficulties being someone's employee and still be trustworthy as an ideal. Some sort of professional independence seems necessary for Joe Fox to have enough strength. He is third generation of the Foxes alive and working and probably still has long until he inherits the company. Yet, he seems to be the most active and in charge amongst them, keeping a high position within the company and dealing with business the tough way and excuses himself by saying that "it's not personal it's business." He "drives to achieve" and has still more to go on. Would the women in the audience fall for this? In my opinion, it is not likely to happen as the hero actually needs to be personal. In addition to relating to the heroine, they should also feel attracted to the hero, and thus it is necessary for him to romanticize the audience as well, through empathy, compassion, interest and care. Therefore, Joe also shows his soft sides when taking his very young aunt and brother to a street fair, in the company of his dog, and while corresponding with Kathleen through the computer. He proves to be a caring family man and a helpful friend. His potential as a strong provider and an attentive family man and father would again satisfy the conservative audience and among them, religious organisations such as "Promise Keepers."<sup>72</sup> Still, after Joe has crushed Kathleen's business, having dealt with her as with any other competitor, he is forgiven. Would he have forgiven her if she was the one crushing him? If so,

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<sup>72</sup> Boyer 493. A "men's religious movement that called upon American males to.... fulfill their divinely ordained role as strong husbands and attentive fathers."

the power balance would be turned and Joe would probably have lost his authority and confidence as a man in relation to Kathleen, as you do not easily cross below the gender boundaries of what is considered acceptable and necessary for being a man. If a possible romance between them was out of the question and Joe was simply a secondary character however, this alternative would not be unthinkable.

### **What and who the romantic leads do not choose**

Just as important as who the hero and heroine are and how they are portrayed is who they fall in love with and who they refuse or dismiss as this also gives the audience a notion of what is not the ideal. Both the 1949 version, *Sabrina* and *Little Women* gives a one-sided indication of this, but *You've Got Mail* shows both leads leaving a less desirable partner. When the story begins Joe and Kathleen are both in relationships that are supposedly wrong for them, and this leaves me with two characters that do not fit the movie ideal for a hero or heroine at the time. Kathleen's companion, Frank, played by the 35 year old Greg Kinnear, falls more into the "European" category as someone who helps the heroine's career. Together they agree to separate, since neither of them loves the other. The character is American, yet his focus is on old typewriters and history and he seems against general progress. Frank and Kathleen behave as equals, but on a much weaker level than Jo and Laurie in *Little Women*, making it boring and less interesting. Joe's girlfriend, on the other hand, is presented as the opposite. Patricia, played by Parker Posey at the age of thirty, is a nervous career-woman who is self-centred, ambitious, and stresses through life in a seemingly much faster tempo than Joe. She is the one "driving to achieve" and even more so than Joe, and she is completely independent of him as she takes over much of the male's role and thereby weakening the hero. Consequently, by not being the ones chosen, these supporting characters must be viewed to be far from the ideal.

### **What it takes to have romance**

One might say that when Kathleen closes her mother's store, she cuts loose from her own family and is free to enter into a romantic relationship with Joe, and become a part of his family, removing both the competition aspect as well as the obstacles that are in the way for their possible romance. The "love versus career choice" for female leads is very clear in the 1949- and 1998 plot, but especially in the last version. Kathleen's independence was perhaps not the most difficult issue to deal with, but the competitiveness regarding the leads' businesses had to be eliminated. Therefore, in order to not let the hero loose his strength, the heroine had to loose hers. The story shows how the hero's dominance and the heroine's dependency on him are necessary for a positive romantic outcome.

### **The heroines' strength and weaknesses**

Professionally, all three female leads are strong. They are great at what they do, but the heroines are not really competing with the hero in a field where he is at his best. Business wise the heroines are best at the lower levels and consequently the heroes elevate to the next level, namely leadership. Kathleen is great at children's books and stories, but not good enough at business to compete at Joe's level. Veronica, through Garland, is an extraordinary singer, whereas Andrew just sings and plays the piano for fun or as a part of his job, and he is made manager. Even the first couple experiences the same as Klara is perhaps the better sales person, while Alfred is the one who is put in charge. In the end, this leaves all three leading ladies as dependents on the leading men in different ways.

## The first date

The leading couple's first meeting, or blind date, is the one scene that keeps the same setting, focus and, partly, direction in all three versions as it is a turning point in the leads relationship. This meeting occurs halfway through the story and is when their relatively equal relation turns from competitive and quarrelling to a softer and gradually more romantic relation with clearer gender roles. After having corresponded for some time and developed a strong connection this way, they have decided to meet at a café. The heroine is inside, waiting with an easily recognizable book and flower whereas the hero is outside with a friend, looking shocked through the window when he sees who she is. The hero leaves the heroine at first, but returns after having thought about it and lightens his conscience. The exception is Andrew in 1949 who, when leaving the café, visits the other girl in his life, the violinist. One interpretation of this choice is that his disappointment over the love of his life being the same as the competitive, quarrelling girl who makes his life at work more miserable is a worse choice for a wife than the sweet and supportive violinist. However, the minute the violinist sees him she ecstatically tells him that she will be auditioning for a school in Austria, probably thankful for making her apply, something he had done when she was not a candidate. Therefore, her ambitions and unavailability can be seen as what sends Andrew back to the heroine. Veronica, with her competitiveness, is then partly a second choice and needs a personal transformation before she will fit the hero.

A small part of the context in the café has changed, though. The book brought by the heroine, *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy, is replaced with more suitable literature for the later versions. The reason for choosing this novel could be because of a relatively recent release of the film version,<sup>73</sup> but it could also be because it was a more suitable type of realism during the thirties hardships. Having the Russian novel, telling the story of a mother leaving her

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<sup>73</sup> *Anna Karenina*. (Dir. Clarence Brown. 1935,) starring Greta Garbo

husband and son to be with the man she loves and in the tragic ending commits suicide as the heroine's favourite was not ideal in 1949 where Veronica instead brings a collection of Elisabeth Browning's 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry. In 1998 Kathleen brings the classic romantic novel for many women, *Pride and Prejudice*, a romance by Jane Austin. This novel has, despite its traditional gender roles, a strong and intelligent heroine as well as a happy ending and would therefore suit the vast female audience better as it also was part of the late nineties nostalgia.<sup>74</sup>

The scene with the leads' blind date also changes when it comes to the balance in strength and power between them. The dialogues in the first two versions are relatively similar, with only just a few alterations and the differences between them are mainly due to their ways of reacting and speaking in addition to their balance of power at that point. Klara's speech of insults in 1940 is delivered calmly with self confidence and a smiling hint of superiority. Alfred is at the same time at his weakest in this part of the story as he just lost his job. In 1949 at this point Andrew still has his job and displays a different kind of self confidence as he enters the café. He is the stronger of the two because of this and can therefore allow Veronica some of her emotional and more childlike outbursts without losing his power. In 1998, the leads keep the same focus in their dialogue even if the words and sentences are new. Kathleen, who has never been able to "figure out to say" when confronting provocative people like Joe, is for the first time mean and self confident, and she is not at a loss for words in this situation. The balance between them, however, is even more in favor of the male lead compared to 1949, as not only does the hero have a job, but the heroine knows that because of him she will probably lose her own business. Therefore, her insulting speech is neither likely to put her in a real position of power nor will it weaken his position. Her speech does however make her feel bad.

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<sup>74</sup> Boyer 494; [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), several relatively recent movie-, TV- and mini production releases of Jane Austin adaptations; *Pride and Prejudice* (1995); *Sense and Sensibility* (1995); *Persuasion* (1995) ; *Emma* (1996); *Emma* (1996)

## Conclusion

The three versions of *The Shop around the Corner* deal with the importance of work in addition to human relations, and in some ways the story steps out of the “woman’s sphere.” These movies have, however, three different solutions to the “love versus career” choice. The pre-war’s heroine is not forced to choose and she proclaims that she will be back to work on Monday, probably engaged, whereas the hero says she will get a raise. The post-war’s heroine chooses love and says she is only working temporarily because of her plan to marry in the near future. The nineties version does not even let the heroine choose as the choice is made for her when she loses her business and job. Maybe a contemporary heroine would choose both if she only had the possibility. All the three heroines are portrayed as relatively sweet, but the pre-war heroine is still the toughest of them. The male leads actually follow some of the same pattern when it comes to personality; the first is the strongest and the most masculine, whereas the other two seem more casual, and have most of their strength through their work and their opposite lead’s feminine qualities or choices. The balance is still kept though, as the opposite lead keep the same development despite certain “unbalanced” scenes and starting points. What carries the plot in the three versions seems to be two strong leads in the pre-war version, the female lead’s popularity and song talent in the post war version and the combination of two actors based on their earlier romantic comedy success at the box offices in the nineties version.

## Chapter 5

### *Sabrina*

#### Introduction

*Sabrina* is a “Cinderella story” which does not change much from 1954 to 1995. As the only post war movie set in a contemporary context it should perhaps give the clearest portrayal of its time of production. The first version of the movie *Sabrina* was directed by Billy Wilder, starring Audrey Hepburn, Humphrey Boghart, and William Holden. All four had received Academy Awards for previous work and should therefore easily draw a great audience through the expectations for a quality product in addition to being great stars. It is a romantic comedy set in elegant surroundings and deals with the issue of class. According to Haskell “the notion of middle-classness,” is central to women’s films, “not just as an economic status, but as a state of mind and a relatively rigid moral code.”<sup>75</sup> At first glance, *Sabrina* is not about middle-classness. If the audience’s reality or ideals are middle-class, there is less for them to relate to. Therefore, the lives for the different classes portrayed seem perhaps not compatible with the average viewer. However, as the story develops the leads move towards “middle-class” as the center between them. *Sabrina* portrays clear gender roles reflecting the post war period.

#### Plot summary

*Sabrina* tells the story about the wealthy Larrabees and their chauffeur’s adolescent daughter, Sabrina. Sabrina has been in love with David Larrabee, the youngest son, for as “long as [she] can remember,” even though he hardly knows she exists. David, on the other hand, is a playboy who avoids work, lives on his family’s money and falls in love and marries easily. The Larrabees arrange for Sabrina to go to a cooking school in Paris for two years, but she

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<sup>75</sup> Haskell 159

does not want to go. Depressed by the scene when she watches David walk away from a party to meet a pretty girl in the indoor tennis court, Sabrina tries to commit suicide by suffocation in the Larrabees' garage. Being saved in the last minute by Linus, David's older brother, she is sent off to Paris the next day. After a slow start, while longing for David, Sabrina eventually settles and finds herself in Paris. She returns to the Larrabee Estate and her father as a beautiful and sophisticated woman, almost unrecognizable. From the minute David sees her, he is taken with her, and offers to drive her home from the station without knowing who she is at first. However, David is now engaged to be married to Elisabeth Tyson, arranged by Linus as a way to secure an important business merger with the Tyson's, and Sabrina's sudden presence might endanger this profitable union. Invited to a Larrabee party by David, Sabrina is being noticed by both the Larrabees and the Tyson's with suspicion as David dances tightly with her after having spilt a drink on Elisabeth's dress in order to get her out of the way. Sabrina has become a problem which has to be dealt with and Linus finds a way. He tricks David to sit on two champagne glasses which David has forgot he had placed in his back pockets making him partly invalid for a couple of days, leaving Sabrina alone. However, his indirect proposition to pay her off is not accepted. He therefore intends to make Sabrina forget David by having her fall for someone else, namely Linus himself, through innocently dating and charming her in David's place, while David is out with pieces of glass and stitches on his buttocks. Linus takes her sailing, they go to theaters and restaurants, and Sabrina finds herself becoming more and more frustrated as her infatuation with David starts fading. Nevertheless, Linus' plan to charm, yet not get charmed himself, falls through. His arrangements for sending Sabrina back to Paris alone by deserting her on the boat for France is too difficult to see through when he sees how genuinely happy and relieved she becomes when realizing that he will take her with him to Paris. Linus reveals his intentions and a disappointed and hurt Sabrina takes one of the Paris tickets and decides to leave anyway.

Linus then tries to do the right thing by calling off the merger and changing his ticket in order to send David instead. But David understands as he knows how Linus feels, and makes him admit this to himself and go after Sabrina as David helps him out sticking to his engagement and taking over some responsibility business wise.

## **Sabrina**

Sabrina goes from being a child to a sophisticated lady in control of her temper and irrational ways after her two years in Paris - a transition which makes her more acceptable and desirable for the Larrabee Brothers. Before Paris, Sabrina is an inexperienced girl unaware of her femininity. She lives alone with her father, and to a certain degree she also has boyish traits, such as climbing trees and knowledge of cars. In Paris she is at first completely pacified and un-concentrated because of her longing for David, but during her stay she finds the sophisticated woman in herself and learns "how to live." Her one-way love affair and suicide attempt were a young girl's infatuations and reactions to something she could not control. What she finds in Paris is her femininity and role as an elegant woman, refined, confident and more in control of her emotions. Apparently this is what works to have someone notice you romantically, as David for the first time is infatuated back when she returns. From then on, she is placed amongst the rich and their ways of leisure time, even though she, in Linus' office, is dressed in an apron trying to fix him something to eat.

After her return to the Larrabee estate, Sabrina cannot help but being self confident and radiant, which results in her great impact on the people surrounding her, giving Sabrina more control. She has taken on one of the "male" qualities and become extroverted. Sabrina's self confidence puts her in a position of power over David as she steers him as much as he does her. Because she knows how his mind works having followed him for years seeing how he courts women. Therefore, she finishes the sentences for him about where to meet for their

first rendezvous as she knows his moves after having asked him if he wanted to kiss her. Sabrina has, however outgrown David. She seems the most mature of the two as David is seemingly little responsible when it comes to work or love. This can be the reason for why she after years of loving David so easily falls out of love with him and turns to Linus. She starts off “mastering the situation” with Linus because she is not in love with him and remain therefore seemingly untouched as she continues with her upbeat talk and charming behavior. Perhaps his strength is what makes her let go of the responsibility and activeness which seems more necessary with David, and which she displays during the Larrabee party. In the end, however, Sabrina becomes more vulnerable and introverted when insecure about her love for Linus. Furthermore, after having offered her dependency to Linus and to then be let down by him, Sabrina leaves him - as an independent woman.

## **Sabrina’s two men**

### **David**

David can never be more than a short crush. He is not the designated hero, and his character can therefore not be too strong. Poor David’s wife-to-be will be stuck, at least temporarily, with a playboy who in the first place was forced into a marriage arranged by his family. He would also, after their engagement, have run away with Sabrina up to the minute he understands she probably does not love him the way she used to. The strong playboy image does not fit the ideal hero when the only thing he conquers is women in the era of white suburbia and the stable family unit. Therefore he cannot be more than a temporary infatuation for a true heroine who is supposed to represent the female audience. On the other hand, David is the one who sends Sabrina off into Linus’ arms. He asks her to go through with a date with Linus even if she does not want to. David thinks they should indulge Linus, since it is Linus’ wish and he would be helpful to have on their side later on. Therefore, despite his declarations

of love, he cannot be truly in love either, as he actually uses Sabrina. David is also unstable in love as he both finds it difficult to truly commit to someone and often chooses the wrong women when infatuated. Marriage, in the post war years, was supposed to help strengthen the nation and national security, and David, about to enter into his fourth marriage, cannot be seen as an ideal.

### **Linus**

Sabrina saves Linus from his corporate business life without love and his own family home, just as much as he saves her from loving the wrong man. He is the kind of man who lives for his work, and even at parties seems to prefer to gather other business men in his office demonstrating his latest project rather than joining the social event. He makes people a part of his business transactions and treats the ones that get in his way as something to be dealt with. Linus is tough and cynical, yet softens in the company of Sabrina. According to Molly Haskell's claim about what makes a man, Linus would fit the definition perfectly as someone who is "driving to achieve, to create, to conquer" as an opposite to his younger and less responsible brother. However, Linus, as he might be too manly in his dedication to his work, has to compromise in order to have the ideal American way of a middle class, family life. One might say that Sabrina causes a fall in status for Linus, but since "middle-class" also is the ideal in women's films, she must only be doing him good. Moreover, Linus needs more sensitivity and goes east, to Paris, where he will become less "masculine" learning how to embrace life and love rather than business, and where Sabrina can take the lead when knowing the city, the culture and the language.

Even though the focus in *Sabrina* (1954) seems to be on class differences and the movability between them, its gender roles are clear through the portrayal of a more professional homemaker and the successful businessman and breadwinner. Sabrina will

eventually, however, have servants to do most of the work, but her skills in French cooking make her a more sophisticated homemaker. All three leading characters go through a transformation in the movie; Sabrina from child to true woman, David from irresponsible playboy to accepting his second choice destiny, and Linus from business oriented to love oriented. The focus is also on elegance as well as subtle humor displayed by Linus and Mr. Larrabee.

Finally, just as with the thirties movie examples, the last movie, in this case *Sabrina*, differs slightly from the other three Post-War movies in its focus and ideals. With a greater distance from war and depression, and an even more stable economy and work force the audience probably needed more to reach for than middleclass suburbia, a lifestyle many already had become accustomed to, and the contemporary plot and setting stresses sophistication, having servants, traveling and luxury. Therefore, the aim must be for the upper middle-class.

### ***Sabrina* 1995**

The remake of *Sabrina* changes little yet does update certain necessities for the leads to appear realistic in the eyes of the audience. Parts of the original dialogue are kept, whereas the story is moved up to the nineties giving the female characters other skills, professions, and work. Some of the settings have changed for the dates between Sabrina and Linus to make it more authentic, such as taking the private Larrabee airplane and a helicopter to fly to Martha's Vineyard instead of going out in a sail boat, and the reason Linus uses to get Sabrina to go with him is her helping him with taking pictures for a sale instead of just entertaining her while David is ill. The nineties female costumes are less feminine than the post war costumes, and with few exceptions Sabrina now wears women's suits and trousers, shoulder

pads and straight lines, all according to the fashion of the nineties. However, when changing the heroine, all the characters surrounding her also need to change accordingly.

### **Sabrina**

Sabrina, played by Julia Ormond at the age of thirty, does not give a typically girlish portrayal of the main character before her trip to Paris. It is more of an unfashionable image with glasses, long hair with bangs, baggy clothes and no make up. Even after her transformation she appears more to be a woman much too grown to come back to live under her father's roof. The part was supposedly intended for Winona Ryder<sup>76</sup> at the age of 24, who were perhaps as close as it gets to the original Sabrina when it comes to physical appearance and looks, but Ryder "turned down the lead role in *Sabrina* (1995) because she felt she could not fill Audrey Hepburn's shoes and that the role was marked by sexism."<sup>77</sup> Seeing that the character has kept much of the image and lack of action from the 1954 version, the role does actually strengthen the dependent and submissive heroine from the early fifties, perhaps since the audience might expect more individuality, ambition and strength other than Julia Ormond's beautiful face.

### **The removal of the suicide**

One important alteration made at the beginning of the movie original though is Sabrina's desperate attempt to commit suicide in the Larrabees' garage in 1954. Forty years later she does not seem close to consider such a drastic move, and rather goes to David's room and tries to tell him she will miss him when she leaves. Unfortunately, it is Linus who hears this, and Sabrina just leaves the room embarrassed when she sees that it is not David. The removal of the suicide attempt is perhaps saying that a true heroine would never try to end her life just

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<sup>76</sup> Portrayed Jo March in *Little Women*, 1994

<sup>77</sup> [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com),

because of an undeserving man; that she should be both smarter and stronger. Another side of this might also be that suicides in the nineties perhaps were something you could more openly talk about compared to forty years earlier and therefore taken too seriously to include in a light entertainment movie.

### **Sabrina's transformation**

In 1995 Sabrina's great transformation during her stay in Paris is clear in looks and style, but not in self confidence. She is somewhat timid and insecure around men, and needs time to open up. On two occasions she uses alcohol to get her nerve up. She never teases, flirts or initiates much, but remains calm and peaceful through most of the movie. Consequently, Sabrina's passiveness makes her dependent on what the people surrounding her decides to make her a part of. She does, however, slap Linus' face when he kisses her while trying to get her out of David's life. Except for that incident and a second of happiness and tears near the end, she seems to have her emotions under control. Regardless of how deeply Linus hurts her feelings, she does not get angry; she just gets sad and seems to give up. Audrey Hepburn, on the other hand, displays strong emotions no matter what kind of mood she is in. When truly desperate, she tries to kill herself, when sad, she cannot concentrate or get anything right and when happy, she is excited, talkative and eager to embrace life.

### **Sabrina's trip to Paris; a student or an obedient assistant**

Sabrina learns about fashion and photography instead of cooking when working as an assistant in Paris. This too gives her feminine skills, even if it is not like the homemaking of the fifties. In a contemporary American nineties story a young heroine should perhaps have gone to college instead. Sabrina starts off as an assistant working with models and photo shoots, stressing about making plenty of mistakes as a beginner who does not understand the

language. Ormond's Sabrina accepts being bossed around and obediently tries to serve and please the people she is working for. This makes her even more submissive than the first Sabrina. She adapts and learns during her stay and starts dating a French photographer, as the memory of David begins to fade. The relationship to the old Baron, who Hepburn's Sabrina meets in the first version and teaches her about life and culture in Paris, was perhaps not considered a romance possibility the way her connection to the photographer was, and the Baron is removed from the later version. However, Sabrina's feelings for David make it impossible for them to share anything more than a friendship. As a result, Sabrina remains pure, innocent, submissive, and serving; qualities often associated with the post war period.

### **Sabrina's infatuation with a playboy**

Even though the heroine refuses David in the end, as she sees through his shallowness, a romantic relationship between them must still seem likeable for the audience. As a result David's playboy lifestyle and image in 1954 were toned down in the remake. He shows more independence, effort, and sincerity in his dealings with both Sabrina and his fiancée even if his self confidence is not as clear as in 1954. David takes an active part in his dating period with Elisabeth. Linus does not have to force him into marriage as this is decided by the couple themselves. When introducing Elisabeth to the Larrabee family for the first time, David even asks Linus to lie if necessary in order to "make him look good." What he does resent, however, is Linus' attempt to turn their marriage into a business merger. His fiancée, on the other hand, is a smart, independent, and highly educated woman, but no matter how nice or positively she is portrayed she is still presented as a second choice; meaning that her qualities are less fitting for a heroine. Elisabeth is the active one; the career woman who indirectly proposes marriage to David first at the hospital where she works as a pediatrician. Later, Elisabeth is out of town when David takes Sabrina to his mother's birthday party. Therefore,

the possibility for hurting Elisabeth by concentrating on Sabrina before her eyes or spilling on her dress to get her out of the way is removed, and David improves a little, if not much. David is also turned into a victim when lying in bed with stitches on his rear end, because Linus makes sure that he gets the kind of medicine that drugs him down in order to neither let him break off his engagement nor develop a deeper relationship with Sabrina before Linus has dealt with the problem. Finally, David is portrayed as smarter and more positive towards work, but the reason for him not being as serious or business oriented as Linus, is justified through his feelings of being redundant in the company because of his older brother. He grows up and proves his strength in the end, more so than in 1954, when taking charge of the company as he knowingly enables Linus to go after Sabrina.

### **Sabrina Fair; the savior**

When Sabrina “saves” Linus from himself in the nineties version, he turns softer than Humphrey Boghart seemed to do in the first version. In 1995, Linus is portrayed by Harrison Ford who is perhaps best known for his action filled *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars* movies, which might give the audience certain associations. However, his character’s masculine appearance and coldness could perhaps be considered weaker than Boghart’s portrayal from the beginning, as Ford’s personality seems less confident and more careful in general. His romantic and emotional insecurity is often stressed by his lack of quick speech outside his boardroom. When Ford’s Linus goes after Sabrina in the end, he tells her father that he needs her, and the hero is thereby forced to be dependent on the heroine as well as going east for more feminine qualities in the city Sabrina probably would take the lead.

### **Family structure**

In the second version of *Sabrina* the Larrabees' family structure is changed both to accommodate the strong women in society and to strengthen the hero. The nuclear family in 1954 with a working father, an elegant and domestic mother, and two more than grown sons, all living together, would perhaps weaken the eldest son as a nineties hero with too little professional and personal independence. The father is removed from the story, and despite a strong working mother, who has taken over as the head of the family Linus is at least freed from dependency on another male. Moreover, he has alternative housing in the city improving an undeniable bizarre situation for the nineties audience as the hero in his fifties is not likely to have to live with his parents. The female strength, in addition to Elisabeth's qualities, can be found in the Larrabee mother as she displays more male qualities. Therefore, if correct, the "true ugliness, the real repression," which is, according to Basinger, more typical for "secondary characters," would this time be their male qualities and unwanted strength.

### **Age**

The age difference between the leads in *Sabrina* is relatively big as the young and innocent girl meets the middle-aged business man. Hepburn, at the age of 25, matches the character with her youthful and petite looks. Also Boghart, even at thirty years older than Hepburn, he fits the character in the movie. In 1995 the balance changes somewhat because of Ormond's age and looks. She might look younger than thirty, but she is not the young and innocent girl who should still live with her father. Due to her age she should perhaps be more independent as a heroine. Ormond's Sabrina does, however, fit better with Ford who is two years younger than Boghart, making the nineties couple a perhaps more likely match. David, on the other side, goes from being eleven years older to being just two years older than Sabrina, making him even weaker in the last production.

## Strength

Strength to “carry the plot” is not easily found in these two movies. Some strength in the 1954 version, however, is found in the actors, and especially in Audrey Hepburn. Even if the movie is a black and white production, much emphasis is put on Sabrina’s costumes, both the pre-Paris one which received an Oscar as well as the post-Paris Givenchy costumes fit for her life among the upper class. It seems clear that Sabrina is the main focus, despite her usually strong co-leads, but since the character does not do much in order to be the center, it must be the actress who “carries the plot” and keeps the audience’s attention. Therefore, when the female lead is “related to passivity” and the movie does not have other truly strong factors, she needs to have a star quality instead. Audrey Hepburn’s recently received Oscar, her elflike beauty, sparkling personality, and straight forward innocence is what seems to make the character what it is. In the remake, even less strength is found in the female lead. The reason for this might be because much of the fifties’ lifestyle and the woman’s role have been transferred to the nineties without being adjusted enough.<sup>78</sup> So what is it that carries the plot in this version of a “woman’s film” when the female lead is introverted, passive and dependent on other people’s actions? The actress Julia Ormond is relatively new to the movie audience<sup>79</sup> and even if she perhaps outshines the rest of the female cast she would hardly outshine the original. Additionally, there is not much strength in the male leads either. Just as with *You’ve Got Mail*, Greg Kinnear plays the part as the less desirable second choice. Maybe he does not have the leading man quality. As a result, he does not steal anyone’s attention. On the other hand, neither does Harrison Ford. Maybe it is not the right part for him as he does not bring enough to the screen as perhaps expected. Ford’s popularity as an actor was related to

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<sup>78</sup> Jahr explains how cross cultural remakes which fail, might not have been adjusted enough to fit a new cultural climate.

<sup>79</sup> [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), Ormond starred in *Legends of the Fall* (1994,) and *First Knight* (1995)

physical roles with energy and action, and here he is portraying a middle-aged, stuffed, and controlled businessman with a cynical mind. He has even lost the scene where he could be Sabrina's knight in shining armor when the first Linus saves Sabrina from her suicide attempt.

For the two Sabrinas there is actually no choice to make regarding love or career. There are no career ambitions in either 1954 or 1995, not even temporary ones, and when Sabrina leaves Linus, the only goal she has is to return to the city which after a while made her feel at home and taught her about herself. Linus, however, chooses finally love whereas David, in 1995, chooses work.

### **Conclusion**

The lack of strength in the last version leaves me with the impression that somewhere along the way someone in charge of the production misjudged what it takes to "carry the plot." Neither does it seem to be reflecting reality or ideals at the time for either the audience or the people behind the production. If it were, *Sabrina* could have been seen as one of the movies that were a "reaction against modernity,"<sup>80</sup> but I rather see it as a weak attempt to transfer a post-war Cinderella story to the nineties without making enough adjustments. Therefore, when updating the setting, one also needs to update the gender roles.

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<sup>80</sup> Boyer 494

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The question has been how and why characters and gender roles have developed and changed in women's films from the early 1930s until today as well as how they reflect ideals or reality at the time. I will give a short summary and comparison of female and male leads' characteristics in each period and their position as a contrast to their surroundings of secondary characters and settings. Moreover, at some point, factors, such as strength to carry the plot and casting stars, which make the characters stray from what is considered normal or ideal for the audience become more important than following current ideals and reality.

### The female leads

The development in female leads' characteristics has gone from masculine qualities in the thirties, through traditional feminine qualities in the post war years, to, finally, somewhat modernized feminine qualities in the nineties. In the thirties the heroines are strong, active, bold, intelligent, direct, independent and dominant in addition to their feminine traits, such as being emotionally impulsive. They are not afraid of presenting themselves as more than just a pretty face, especially the first two leading ladies, *Jo* (1933) and *Magnolia* (1936). A trait in the thirties for many movie heroines described by Maria DiBattista was their quick speech, and this trait is also evident in these movies from the thirties. Elaine Tyler May claims that "films of the 1930s emphasized her subordination and need to be 'tamed' by a strong man and the domesticating influence of a child"<sup>81</sup> something which does not seem to apply to the leading couples in either *Little Women* or *Show Boat*. Both *Jo* and *Magnolia* make several choices that far from emphasize any subordination as both movies have happy endings without strong men or dependent children.

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<sup>81</sup> May 37

The Post War years' female leads are portrayed as sweeter and more innocent and girlish in their behaviour. They are in general more reserved and passive. I had expected these female leads to often have been placed in a domestic environment instead of in a work related environment, and to some extent they are, but the leading ladies actually work as little as possible, both outside and inside the home, except when it comes to song, dance and special talents. Perhaps these movies hide the reality of domestic and married life when portraying marriage as the ultimate goal for young women. When the female leads show anger and aggression, their emotions or reactions are more childlike. Thus less intelligent, less threatening and thereby less believable. The female leads are presented as more or less dependent, submissive and beautiful women who know a woman's responsibilities in life, ideal for their role as homemakers.

Female leads in the nineties are feminine and relatively passive in a time when women actually were strong and present outside the domestic sphere, in places such as the public and work related domain. They are presented with relatively few choices in life, and the most important choice in the woman's film, love or career, is less evident or removed as a possibility. The women of the nineties' movies, except the March sisters (1994,) are portrayed as perhaps a bit more experienced and a little less naïve in a new and tougher context, yet they have kept a non-threatening sweetness, passivity and innocence almost equal to the female characteristics of the post war years. Several of the female secondary characters, however, are presented as much stronger, more educated or more ambitious than the leads. Perhaps it is so that the secondary characters reflect reality and the lead represents the ideal.

### **Male leads**

The development for male leads goes from relatively weak and effeminate characters in the thirties, to stronger and more dominant leads from nineteen forty and through the post war

decade, to a more sensitive, but strong, male in the nineties. The male leads in the thirties seem refined and delicate, less active, and are all polite gentlemen. They are reserved, somewhat modest, respectful, yet also portrayed as less passionate. However, that impression might be caused by their overall control of manners and behaviour. Yet, they too appear confident in their role as men, even if they do fail once in a while at what they set out to do, and then they act humbly when recognizing their own weaknesses.

There is one exception though, and that is the lead in *The Shop around the Corner*. The male lead takes more pride in having a good job compared to the European academic and the gentleman river-gambler. When Alfred loses his job, and thereby some of his self confidence, he refuses to meet his pen-friend and he stands her up rather than facing his potential girlfriend as an incapable breadwinner. He is more serious than the two previous leads, Professor Bhaer and Gaylord, but at the same time he also has a much bigger part. He shares the spotlight more equally with his female co-star, giving her less focus than the two previous female leads. Moreover, she is not alone in making her future through her choices in life as they are far more dependent on each other.

One common trait for male characters in the post war years is self confidence. They do not seem to have any doubt about their manhood and men's role in society and they are portrayed with more seriousness than many of the secondary male characters. Bhaer and Gaylord in *Little Women* and *Show Boat* are portrayed as more masculine compared to the versions of the thirties where the Professor must have seemed too old and the gambler too young. Andrew in *In the Good Old Summertime* is the only post war lead that does not turn more masculine. This might have to do with the fact that the pre war lead was already relatively masculine. Compared to the other two pre war leads, Professor Bhaer and Gaylord, Andrew did have more masculine qualities. Furthermore, the post war character's opposite lead, Judy Garland, and the historical and non-threatening setting for the plot probably made

it less necessary for Andrew to be portrayed with the same strength as the other three post war leads.

The nineties heroes have both masculine and feminine qualities. Work seems to be of the utmost importance. Perhaps this is how their masculinity is balanced out when being tender in the feminine quality – making love – and therefore has to be the most successful in business. The male leads are neither portrayed as very strong nor very weak, but paired off with the female lead, the men are the stronger of the opposite leads.

### **Secondary characters – passivity or strength**

What I found regarding secondary characters characteristics interested me as these were always portrayed as quite different from the romantic leads, which tells me that they might reflect either reality or a comical characterization, but they do not represent the ideal. The secondary characters, which are “free to stay passive” as they are not the center who carries the plot are also free to stay active. This means that when the ideal for the romantic lead is to be passive or weak, the surrounding characters are active or strong, and it sets heroes and heroines apart from the masses. In all three nineties movies the female secondary characters are portrayed with more masculine qualities than the female leads. The male secondary characters, however, are portrayed with more feminine qualities than the male leads. When the audience fantasizes about “playing opposite the romantic lead” they will probably fantasize about the ideal, not about what they consider as second best. Therefore, the heroes and heroines seem to be the current ideals whereas secondary characters are more likely to be a part of people’s reality.

## **When and how do characters stray from reality or ideals**

### **Strength**

The strength to carry the plot is adjusted to fit new times the same way characters and gender roles are. During the thirties, strength is found in a dominant female lead. With or without strong co-stars and plots these women “carry” the plot. The male leads playing opposite these female leads almost disappear in their presence, except for James Stewart’s character who is portrayed as the female lead’s equal. Much is because of the tough challenges women in the thirties encountered and the choices they had to make. However, I do agree with those who claim the advent of sound and the Production Code had a great impact on making the female leads in women’s films perhaps stronger than the audience’s own reality as the female leads often were given a sharp dialogue and placed in an office. Combined with the need to have a strong lead at the center this gave these women a way with words and power.

When gender roles shifted during and after World War II, the strength to carry the plot was transferred from the leads’ personality to their talents. The use of song and dance during the post war years worked as a substitute for smart conversation and independent women. Art is often considered to be a feminine quality, and artistic talent, if not misused, did not clash with male strength and was not threatening to the family unit and the American ideals. A way for submissive and otherwise weak female characters to carry the plot in the Post-War years was thus to make the remakes into aesthetical musicals and let the leads have song and dance as their strength. Therefore, these female characters do not “stray” much from ideals or reality as they just find their strength elsewhere.

The strength in the movies from the nineties is neither found in the female leads’ personalities nor their talents. The characters surrounding them might be strong, but the female leads are made relatively passive, making them more dependent on what the opposite lead or secondary characters do. What is made strong is the romance itself. As the two leads

in *Sabrina* seem relatively weak, the romantic development between them becomes the focus. The same happens in *You've Got Mail*, but here the focus is not only the couple on screen who “carry the plot,” but also the association to previous couples the actors have portrayed.

The reason for heroines being allowed more masculine qualities in the thirties than in the nineties might be because a woman in the thirties did not have the same rights as they did sixty years later. Strong and smart women do not seem to pose the same threat to men or society when they as human beings are believed to be naturally inferior in certain areas in a society with a theoretical equality. Their strength and newly gained power are therefore balanced out by a non-threatening sweetness, carefulness, modesty and uncertainty.

### **Stars, types and actors**

The post war productions seem to cast stars for the audience and types who fit the politically correct ideal. At the same time, it is the stars who give the variations that differ from the ideal. If one considers the power the stars probably had, I believe that was the reason why a 32 year old June Allyson was allowed to play the young Jo March, just as Judy Garland was allowed less submissiveness and more aggressiveness as the shop worker. So how do they reflect their time? In the end they fall into what was considered the ideal at the time, namely the sweet and submissive part of the future wife. Elaine Tyler May claims that the “strong and autonomous women of the thirties no longer represented ideal wives,” and that these tough and rugged career women were admired as women, not as wives.”<sup>82</sup> As stars and artists, Garland and Allyson were probably admired as women, but they also needed to portray their characters as good, potential wives and mothers, just as Magnolia in the last *Show Boat* version.

All of the movies in this thesis, except for *Sabrina* 1995, have at least one actor or director who before or after these productions has received one or more Oscars. Great stars

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<sup>82</sup> May, p 35

and other talents were also part of these movies. Therefore, even if the genre or the plot is considered second rate, the people involved with the productions were not.

### **Age**

The importance of stars and correct adaptations are amongst what influence actors and actresses' age to stray from current ideals when portraying the different characters. The exceptions to my earlier assumptions regarding the development in age are first of all found in the two last versions of *Little Women*. In 1949, June Allyson (32) was too old for an adolescent girl, whereas Rossano Brazzi (33) fits the ideal, but was too young for the part of a middle aged Professor. Therefore, the producers must have prioritized the star as the female lead, but a more masculine actor as the romantic lead. In 1994, both Winona Ryder (23) and Gabriel Byrne (44) were more correct for their parts when focusing on retelling the original source rather than following the ideal or reality in the nineties. *Sabrina*, on the other hand, had barely adjusted the story for the remake, but the age difference between the romantic leads in 1995 was made slightly more realistic for the nineties ideal with just a twenty three year gap instead of a thirty year gap between them.

### **Love versus career**

All female leads, except for in *Sabrina* (1954), work in these movies, but all of them, except in *Little Women* (1933) and *Show Boat* (1936), give me the impression that love will stand in the way for a career. The pre war movies stress work as something both positive and necessary. During the post war years, marriage and love is more important than work, and the female leads are fully aware of the choice they have to make as neither can be seen to choose work before marriage or love. In the nineties, love is put above both marriage and work as neither of the heroines has a truly independent career. Sex is not in the way for a career. It is

not a part of any of my 10 movies, but the sexually implied relationship between the 2 leads and their former lovers in *You've Got Mail* portrayed them as more independent than later when they found true love and Kathleen gives up her up-to-then career.

### **The crossing of gender boundaries in the nineties**

What I found interesting in the movies of the nineties was that both men and women have lost some of their self-confidence, as they now, compared to earlier, cross invisible gender lines. Perhaps equality through rules and regulation does not apply to romantic relationships. There is a general insecurity amongst the nineties' heroes and heroines when it comes to gender roles. The notion that a woman should never be "too much" of anything also seems to apply to men. In theory they are equals, nevertheless, both men and women are now supposed to display certain qualities that are considered to be typical for the opposite sex as well as their own. Men should not be too sexist, too independent, too shallow or too tough just as women should not be too weak, too dependent, too innocent or too domestic. The hero must prove to be caring and sensitive, as well as somewhat talkative and romantic in addition to being strong and active. And the heroine must be tough when needed, relatively smart and talented, and somewhat strong and active in addition to knowing when to give up and put herself in the hands of the hero. This crossing of traditional, gender boundaries seem to give the audience weaker leading characters who are insecure, hold back and stutter, and who are not quite sure when to be the stronger or when to be the smarter.

### **Economy and politics**

As a necessary ideal, domestic difficulties seem to strengthen the heroine just as problems in foreign affairs seem to empower the hero. Also, when the economy is weak, female leads seem relatively strong and independent, but when the economy strengthens, the female lead's

power and independence are played down and transferred to the male lead who turn into a powerful and self confident man as a supposedly natural ideal. Perhaps the traditional gender-role pattern which focused on women's strength in the home and men's strength outside the home has been transferred to a bigger and more public scale. With the War against Terrorism after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 this might develop even further. If the threat of external enemies is the reason for Hollywood's moving towards greater gender differences in an attempt to strengthen the American people this might be the time for it. If a strong and escalating economy for Americans in general is the moving factor, they are perhaps not there yet.

### **Is there a universal hero and heroine?**

Because of the development in women's rights and gender roles it is difficult to find a universal heroine according to my selection of movies as the female leads have changed over time. However, if I consider the female leads as romantic heroines only, the ten movies I have analysed indicate that heroines cannot be too strong or self reliant in order to be successful on the romantic front.

Unlike the varied traits for heroines, heroes might actually be more universal despite some variations between them. The reason for this conclusion is that the first two male leads of the thirties, Professor Bhaer (1933) and Gaylord (1936,) do not appear to be heroes at all.<sup>83</sup> They are absent from great parts of the movie and when present, they are not at the center together with the strong female lead. From 1940 and onwards, all male leads are dominant in their relationships even when the part, sometimes, is limited in presence compared to the female lead. However, if women's films are designed for a female audience, it seems likely that the female lead is representing the female audience, whereas the male leads, on the other

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<sup>83</sup> Others are of course free to conclude differently

hand, do not represent the male audience. They rather represent the ideal man for the female audience.

### **Reality, dreams and ideals**

The thirties' movies focused on conversation and story telling in addition to economic independence, self-sufficiency and the importance of work and providing. In many ways they reflected the realities and necessities of their time. Values in these films both direct and indirect, were honesty, kindness, intelligence, independence, integrity and pride. The message seems to be that one should not be too dependent if you do not have to and also, if necessary, put work before love. What women perhaps dreamed of was necessities like food, clothes, a roof over their heads, jobs and security- or maybe just the luxury of having no worries at all. Strong women were not the ideal, but a necessity. The reason for some differences in focus and main characters towards the end of the decade might be explained by the fact that I chose to include the movie from 1940 as a pre-war result. The economic shift which occurred in the late thirties seems to have had some impact on gender roles in *The Shop around the Corner*.

Domesticity, good looks and clearer gender role differences are values laid before the post-war female audience in all four movies, and most important of all; nothing is threatening to a stable family life and therefore to domestic and foreign affairs; the plots, settings and dialogue are lighter than the pre war movies. In addition to portraying ideals and dreams with fewer conflicts, these movies do reflect certain aspects of the post war reality. The importance of finding someone to marry and settle down with in the ideal family unit surpasses the necessity for women to share being the breadwinner. Even if the female leads are fully capable of making it on their own, and sometimes becoming a greater success than their future husbands, whether it be in looks, intelligence or talent, they step down and seem to portray themselves as more dependent and weaker than their characters seem capable of.

After decades of artistic, alternative and action filled productions the woman's film has had a revival. Even though there has been a great improvement and development technologically, the new versions of the women's film remakes do not push any limits when it comes to the characters' personalities or artistic and technological improvements. Perhaps this was the agenda- a safe plot with big enough stars to bring in the audience, and thereby the money. However, the movies from the nineties seem to have three different agendas. *Little Women* (1994) focuses on correctly re-telling a "woman's story," *Sabrina* (1995) is an attempt to make easy money through incomplete work and *You've Got Mail* (1998) combines profit with light entertainment.

As this thesis has focused primarily on heroes and heroines, what would be interesting for further research is the secondary characters who seem to give an indication of reality. From what I can see when going through my sources for this thesis, the role of secondary characters has up until now not been explored to much extent. Perhaps there are more similarities between secondary characters in "men's films" and secondary characters in "women's films" as neither of these has to represent an ideal for the male or female audience.

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[[www.oscars.org](http://www.oscars.org)]

### **Facts:**

Name and movie search.

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[<http://www.oscars.org/>] Date accessed: 06.05.07.

## **Appendix A**

### **Filmography**

*In the Good Old Summertime.* Dir. Robert Z. Leonard. Warner Bros., 1949

*Little Women.* Dir. George Cuccor. RKO, 1933

*Little Women.* Dir. Merwyn LeRoy. MGM, 1949

*Little Women.* Dir. Gillian Armstrong. Di Novi Pictures Productions Company; Columbia, 1994. DVD Columbia, 2000

*Sabrina.* Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1954

*Sabrina.* Dir. Sydney Pollack. Paramount Pictures, 1995

*Shop Around the Corner, The.* Dir. Ernst Lubitsch. Turner Entertainment, 1940

*Show Boat.* Dir. James Whale. Universal, 1936

*Show Boat.* Dir. George Sydney. MGM, 1951

*You've Got Mail.* Dir. Nora Ephron. Warner Bros., 1998

## Appendix B

### Cast list and actor's age year of release (for romantic relations only)

#### *Little Women 1933*

**Jo** - Katharine Hepburn (26)  
**Amy** - Joan Bennett (23)  
**Prof. Bhaer** - Paul Lukas (46)  
**Aunt March** - Edna May Oliver  
**Beth** - Jean Parker (18)  
**Meg** - Frances Dee (24)  
**Mr. Laurence** - Henry Stephenson  
**Laurie** - Douglass Montgomery (26)  
**Brooke** - John Lodge (30)  
**Marmee** - Spring Byington (47)  
**Mr. March** – Samuel S. Hinds (58)

#### *Little Women 1949*

**Jo** - June Allyson (32)  
**Laurie** - Peter Lawford (26)  
**Beth** - Margaret O'Brien (12)  
**Amy** - Elizabeth Taylor (17)  
**Meg** - Janet Leigh (22)  
**Prof. Bhaer** - Rossano Brazzi (33)  
**Marmee** - Mary Astor (43)  
**Aunt March** - Lucile Watson  
**Mr. Laurence** - C. Aubrey Smith  
**Brooke** - Richard Wyler (26)  
**Mr. March** – Leon Ames (47)

#### *Little Women 1994*

**Jo** - Winona Ryder (23)  
**Bhaer** - Gabriel Byrne (44)  
**Meg** - Trini Alvarado (27)  
**Old Amy** - Samantha Mathis (24)  
**Young Amy** - Kirsten Dunst (12)  
**Beth** – Claire Danes (15)  
**Laurie** – Christian Bale (20)  
**Brooke** – Eric Stoltz (33)  
**Mr. Laurence** - John Neville  
**Aunt March** - Mary Wickes  
**Marmee** – Susan Sarandon (48)  
**Mr. March** – Matthew Walker (52)

### ***Show Boat 1936***

**Magnolia Hawks** - Irene Dunne (38)  
**Gaylord Ravenal** - Allan Jones (29)  
**Andy Hawks** - Charles Winninger (52)  
**Joe** - Paul Robeson (38)  
**Julie** - Helen Morgan (36)  
**Parthy Hawks** - Helen Westley (61)  
**Ellie** - Queenie Smith (38)  
**Frank** - Sammy White (42)  
**Steve** - Donald Cook (36)  
**Queenie** - Hattie McDaniel (41)  
**Kim as a child** - Marilyn Knowlden  
**Kim (at 16)** - Sunnie O'Dea

### ***Show Boat 1951***

**Magnolia** - Kathryn Grayson (29)  
**Julie** - Ava Gardner (29)  
**Gaylord** - Howard Keel (32)  
**Andy** - Joe E. Brown (59)  
**Ellie** - Marge Champion (32)  
**Frank** - Gower Champion (30)  
**Stephen** - Robert Sterling (34)  
**Parthy** - Agnes Moorehead (51)  
**Joe** - William Warfield (31)  
**Queenie** - Frances E. Williams (46)

### ***The Shop around the Corner 1940***

**Klara** - Margaret Sullavan (29)  
**Alfred Kralik** - James Stewart (32)  
**Matuschek** - Frank Morgan  
**Vadas** - Joseph Schildkraut

### ***In the Good Ol' Summertime 1949***

**Veronica Fisher** - Judy Garland (27)  
**Andrew Larkin** - Van Johnson (33)  
**Otto Oberkugen** - S.Z. Sakall (65)  
**Nellie Burke** - Spring Byington (63)  
**Rudy Hansen** - Clinton Sundberg  
**Hickey** - Buster Keaton  
**Louise Parkson** - Marcia Van Dyke (25)

### ***You've Got Mail 1998***

**Joe Fox** - Tom Hanks (42)  
**Kathleen Kelly** - Meg Ryan (37)  
**Frank** - Greg Kinnear (35)  
**Patricia** - Parker Posey (30)

***Sabrina 1954***

**Linus Larrabee** - Humphrey Bogart (55)  
**Sabrina Fairchild** - Audrey Hepburn (25)  
**David Larrabee** - William Holden (36)  
**Mr. Larrabee** - Walter Hampden  
**Mr. Fairchild** - John Williams  
**Elisabeth Tyson** - Martha Hyer (30)

***Sabrina 1995***

**Linus Larrabee** - Harrison Ford (53)  
**Sabrina Fairchild** - Julia Ormond (30)  
**David Larrabee** - Greg Kinnear (32)  
**Mrs. Larrabee** - Nancy Marchand  
**Mr. Fairchild** - John Wood  
**Mr. Tyson** - Richard Crenna  
**Mrs. Tyson** - Angie Dickinson  
**Elisabeth Tyson** - Lauren Holly (32)