

Michael Schueth

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Taking Liberties: Willa Cather and the 1934 Film Adaptation of A Lost Lady

In October 1934 Americans opened up their newspapers to find a new movie playing downtown--A Lost Lady starring Barbara Stanwyck and Frank Morgan based on the novel by Willa Cather. The adjacent placement of Willa Cather's name next to Barbara Stanwyck's name (which was usually featured sweeping across the page in most ads) marked a critical moment in Cather's career when her name and reputation were infused into her popular culture without her control. The film and, perhaps more importantly, its advertising survive as a showcase of how Hollywood transformed Cather's aesthetics into a popular-selling medium, the Hollywood Romance genre film.

The collusion of Cather and Hollywood reveals the shifting nature of professional writing in the 1920s and '30s as literary agents and publishers found new profit-making markets for their writers. Further, the relationship between Hollywood and literary texts documents how both popular selling and classic literature were becoming more complex material objects, exploitable in numerous ways. Film historian and critic Judith Mayne suggests that the massive Hollywood industry was part of the emergence of a new kind of public sphere, "one shaped by the institutions of consumerism" which often chose profit margins over art (1). The adaptation of Cather's novel into Hollywood mass-market middle-class American culture (mostly geared toward women) suggests much about her culture and its treatment of the artist as a consumable product. Unlike films based on novels by authors long dead, such as Charles Dickens or Jane Austen, living writers are in the midst of producing new work, and therefore they are continually developing their

literary reputations. As we will see with the film adaptation of A Lost Lady, film adaptations and Hollywood publicity machines became a new force in the cultural construction of a writer's reputation. Indeed the cultural construction became a complex site as critics, writers, publishers, and now, Hollywood marketing departments simultaneously presented competing images to the public. In this essay I will pay special attention to the advertising, since it was the primary means by which Warner Brothers used Cather's name as a selling device. The sheer exposure of the advertising--including newspaper ads, shop window displays, and radio promotions to name a few--widely exposed the public to Cather's name. Central questions to the twentieth-century literary marketplace emerge in such moments as these: Who has control over a writer's reputation? How is the public informed about a writer? How much control can a writer have over her work?

In the teens and '20s, Hollywood movies were consuming the attention of the American public. With rapid innovations in film technology, such as improved film projectors and the division of films into reels allowing for longer movies, leading filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith (Birth of a Nation) were able to tell more sophisticated stories through film. With such advancements, the film industry in the United States became a cultural juggernaut, reshaping concepts of amusement, entertainment, class systems, and narratives. Moreover, the film industry became big business. As Mayne suggests, after World War I Hollywood became "so dependent of the profit principle that the cinema at times seems to resemble a vulgar Marxist fantasy" (96). Indeed, Americans became so enamored with the cinema that by 1938 eighty million movie tickets were sold

every week, representing 65 percent of the total US population (Minnesota On-line Media Project).

With the rise of filmmaking and growing profits, there was a corresponding increase in the need for subject matter. In the silent film era, filmmakers recognized the limitations that the lack of sound placed on them to tell complex stories. Filming well-known works of literature became a standard choice for many filmmakers because it gave them a chance to work with story lines their audiences knew. As producers realized, well-known works of literature also provided a built-in marketing benefit: those who admired a book were drawn into seeing the filmed version, and quality of the literary work translated into a perceived perception that the film could also be good. Uncle Tom's Cabin, one of the earliest literary works put to film, was filmed over ten times in the silent film era beginning in 1903 (Gifford 144). With the popularity of novel adaptation in film, Hollywood grew dependant on novelists. As Virginia Woolf noted in 1926, "All the famous novels of the word, with their well known characters, and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films. The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to this moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim" (Authors on Film 88).

By the late teens and twenties (and institutionalized in the '30s), American authors were cashing in on Hollywood's interest. Edith Wharton, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner all participated in the lucrative financial windfall that came with selling their film rights to movie studios. Theodore Dreiser, for example, was paid \$150,000 for the film rights to An American Tragedy in 1931. By 1934, Edith Wharton's major novels

(The Age of Innocence, The House of Mirth, The Children, and Glimpses of the Moon) had all been adapted. Indeed, writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald depended on Hollywood film projects to support their writing careers. Hemingway scholar Frank M. Laurence notes that while some of Hemingway's Hollywood films were embarrassing, it nevertheless "served to widen his name recognition even within the public that might never had read a word he wrote" (24-25). Because book sales rise in the wake of a major film production of a literary work, writers could make money both from the sale of copyright and from the resulting book sales even when the Hollywood movies were terrible.

Cather knew this from experience. She sold the rights for A Lost Lady twice, once in 1924, which led to the now-lost 1925 silent film starring Irene Rich, and again in 1929, which ultimately led to the 1934 Warner Brothers film. Cather also sold rights to The Song of the Lark in 1932. After initially receiving a strong rejection from Cather, Ferris Greenslet, her editor and literary agent at Houghton Mifflin, wrote to her advising,

Don't you really think that since neither of us would ever be compelled to see the picture if we didn't want to, and since of the millions of persons who would see it only a very small percentage would be admirers of your literary art, you might take the cash and let a little of the credit go, not forgetting that some of the millions of spectators might be inspired to become readers of all your books? (FC to WC 26 Feb. 1932)

Cather finally agreed, but not for the standard promises of books sales or new, avid readers. She wrote Greenslet that from her earlier experience with the 1925 filmed version of A Lost Lady, the rise in book sales was short-lived and the fan letters she

received were from messy and illiterate people (WC to FG 13 March 1932). Despite her strong feeling toward the matter, Cather sold the rights to guard her art against what she must have assumed was a greater risk. Cather's agreement to sell the rights to The Song of the Lark stipulated that Houghton Mifflin never ask her to sell the film rights to My Ántonia. Greenslet comforted Cather's decision to sell The Song of the Lark by writing to her that he was "more than every convinced that there is not only a picture but a good picture in it, one that we need not necessarily be ashamed of" (FC to WC 15 March 1932). In this case, however, The Song of the Lark never reached production, and Cather must have been relieved.

Greenslet's optimism for a "good film" to come out of The Song of the Lark however, was perhaps misplaced given that film adaptations were notoriously poor in the late 1920s and early '30s. As film historians Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin note, while Hollywood exploited works of "highbrow" literature, the art often was pushed into a "body of established conventions that tended toward melodrama" (6). Maureen Turim, discussing the adaptation of Main Street into Warner Brothers' 1936 film I Married a Doctor, says that Warner Brothers "hoped to attract old devotees of Main Street, while appealing to a different audience who identified with the film through its new title as a 'woman's film'" (207). In 1932, after his own disappointed with the film adaptation of An American Tragedy for which he was highly paid, Theodore Dreiser wrote that a "movie representative admitted that they would prefer . . . to buy the title [of the novel] only" (Authors on Film 207). Dreiser complains that the artist in film has been replaced with "a more or less purely commercial and so business-minded group" who exert "a material tyranny over a new and even beautiful art form" (Authors on Film 209).

Likewise, with the 1934 adaptation of A Lost Lady, the storyline was exploited for its romantic possibilities over its artistic ones. On 21 February 1934 Gene Markey, co-author of the screenplay, wrote a Warner Brothers inter-office memo detailing his interest in adapting A Lost Lady because it could be turned into a “picture of dignity and great dramatic power.” Yet, in the midst of the Great Depression and of restrictive moral codes in the film industry, Markey noted, “However, there is much to be done with it--the creation of a whole new beginning- -and a whole new ending--to avoid the low-key depression feeling effect [sic] the last half of the novel.” Indeed, the novel underwent a major re-writing in the screenplay, and I will briefly touch on the storyline quoting from a short Warner Brothers’ plot summary.

The movie begins with a completely new opening where we see an engaged Marian at a lavish party where her fiancé is suddenly shot to death by the jealous husband of the woman her fiancé had “been carrying on a secret affair” with. “Shattered,” Marian takes a rest cure in the mountains where she suffers a fall and is rescued by Daniel Forrester, “one of the country’s leading corporation lawyers,” who was also “ordered to the mountains” by physicians. Forrester falls in love with Marian, who begins to recover under his friendship, and he eventually asks her to marry him. Marian accepts his proposal with an “understanding that honestly rather than love shall be the watchword between them.” Neil Herbert takes on only a minor role in the film as Forrester’s junior partner, “but stirs no response in Marian.” Ellinger, the character who replaces Cather’s Ivy Peters, “drops by from the sky like a thunderbolt in his aeroplane” at the Forresters’ new luxurious country estate, falls instantly in love with Marian, and the two carry on a secret love affair. When Forrester learns of his wife’s betrayal, he suffers a heart attack.

The script treatment goes on to explain that, “Through long months of hopeless illness, Marian nursed her husband . . . and learns, through a newspaper story, that Ellinger is about to marry a wealthy San Francisco girl.” Marrian and Forrester reunite in the end, realizing that “she loves this man who has been so devoted to her.”

Judith Mayne suggests that in “adapting traditional novels as well as best-sellers, the classical Hollywood cinema promises that the reading experience will be recaptured in the movie theatre.” Because of this, she contends, criticism on novel-film adaptations has long hinged on the “artistic superiority” of either the novel or the film that tends to “focus on authorship almost exclusively” (101-102). According to Mayne, novel-film criticism needs to account for the specific historical contexts informing film adaptations, reading those films under “the complexities engendered by a juncture of texts, viewers, and history” (105). Such a contextual reading of the A Lost Lady film adaptation proves useful as means to understand the massive changes Warner Brothers made to the storyline. One of the significant and revealing aspects in the A Lost Lady adaptation is the shift of the film’s setting from a remote Nebraska “thirty or forty years ago, in one of those small grey towns along the Burlington railroad” to a contemporary upper-class, glitzy Chicago. Warner Brothers was nervous about the “depressing” and “low key” aspects of the novel, which most likely underscored the contemporary economic crisis in the midst of the Great Depression. For many Americans during the Depression, movies were a cultural daydream to escape from the drudgery of unemployment lines and soup kitchens. Moreover, the film erases Cather’s complicated critique of modern materialism, especially in her characterization of Captain Forrester and Ellinger; it rewrites Forrester

as a rich corporate lawyer who has money and security, and Ellinger as a rich, bored playboy. As the movie industry embraced the bottom line in its own business practices, so too did the industry build propaganda into films to defend capitalist business practices. Cather's critique of "new materialism," as biographer James Woodress calls it, and her nostalgic look backward to the pioneer West populated "by dreamers, great-hearted adventures" who loved the land and protected it from exploitation, was perhaps dangerous to Hollywood studios intent on exploitation themselves.

No matter how different the film was from Cather's novel, Warner Brothers' marketing of the film used Cather's name to reinforce the "serious" dramatic power of the film. While Cather's contract with Warner Brothers was specific in detailing publicity restrictions, including a clause that states "no words shall be used which expressly or by inference convey the idea that the Owner [Cather] has written or supervised in any respect the dialogue or any other element of the motion picture," it did not stop Warner Brothers from exploiting her name. Memos from Warner Brothers executives suggest that there was serious consideration of just how to work Cather's name into advertising text. In a 25 May 1934 memo from Jim Seymour, he suggests:

Inasmuch as we have taken some liberties with Willa Cather's prizewinning novel in modernizing it, I recommend the following form of main title credit

A Lost Lady

Screenplay by Gene Markey and Kathryn Scola

Based on Willa Cather's novel/or/Based on the novel by Willa Cather

While Seymour does advise using Cather's name in the advertising text, he is careful to

suggest that, “It would be a mistake to mention the novel and/or novelists name on the first main title.” By June, however, a short memo suggests that Warner Brothers executives wanted an even more direct connection between the movie and Cather’s name. The new credit put forward in the memo reads, “Barbara Stanwyck in ‘A Lost Lady’ by Willa Cather.”

Indeed, the final newspaper advertisements sent to theatre companies suggest that Warner Brothers considered Cather’s name a highly marketable commodity. The movie’s newspaper advertisements, which ranged in size from one inch by one column size to full-page layouts, featured Cather’s name in a range of styles. Examples vary from “Willa Cather’s celebrated novel of a woman who tried to make marriage take the place of love comes to the screen in triumph” to “From the novel by Willa Cather, American’s Greatest Woman Writer.” The use of Cather’s name highlights her literary celebrity and Warner Brother’s faith that Cather’s name was solid enough to sell movie tickets. Further, her proclaimed stature as “America’s great woman writer” was used to market to both those who read and admired her work, and to those unfamiliar with her work, especially, it seems, to a targeted audience of middle-class women who were fond of formulaic romance films.

In the same press book, Warner Brothers constructed a sophisticated advertising campaign that included “tear sheets” for newspaper advertising, pre-penned movie reviews, photos of Barbara Stanwyck and Frank Morgan and the other stars, and newly emerging merchandise tie-in campaigns for dress shops, milliners, pipe and tobacco stores, and even pet stores since Forrester’s character has a collie in several scenes. The press book opens with large block lettering, featuring the film’s “Important Selling

Values.” Nestled between “star value” and “production value” is “story value” which reads, “the great American novel by Willa Cather, Pulitzer Prize winner, made into a great dramatic hit!” Underneath the selling points, in large lettering, is the advice to managers to “Back ‘Em Up with Big-Time Exploitation.” Exploitation indeed. Above all, every aspect of Barbara Stanwyck- -including her hair, clothing, and shoes--was featured as a product movie fans could buy at local shops.

Stanwyck’s role as an emerging star was a guiding influence in the film’s promotion. Warner Brothers was intent on making her a star of their studio, so all of the publicity revolved around her. For example, publicity calls Stanwyck a “dramatic genius” and says that the role of Marian Forrester is “made real” by her performance. As with Cather’s name, the studio turned Stanwyck into a commodity. The “Stanwyck Swirl” for example, was, according to the press book, “a startling new hairdress introduced by Miss Barbara Stanwyck” which can “top off your chic appearance--at business, at the theatre, at home.” Sarah Berry in her recent book Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood suggests that Hollywood actresses were often made into cults of personality who were not only put forward as “stars,” but also as leading representatives of American womanhood and lifestyle (27). In this way, while stars were featured as often glamorous and rich, they nevertheless functioned to give middle-class women an ideal lifestyle to duplicate as they purchased similar, affordably priced clothing and accessories modeled in the movies. One pre-penned article for newspapers educated women on the dress styles shown in A Lost Lady. The article says,

It is the contention of Orry-Kelly, famous designer of gowns for all the Warner Bros.-First National stars, that an actress must sense dramatic

effect in costume. Consequently, for “A Lost Lady,” taken from best seller of Willa Cather, famous Pulitzer Prize winner, Barbara Stanwyck has the wardrobe that reflects every mood.

Middle-class viewers were encouraged to emulate Stanwyck’s style by consuming the goods identified with her. Further, as consumers were sold Stanwyck’s sophisticated style, they were simultaneously buying into Cather’s reputation as “best seller,” “Pulitzer Prize winner,” and “great American writer.” As such, Cather was also used to represent middle-class American taste. As Joan Acocella explains of Cather’s reputation,

Throughout the thirties, even though her work was now becoming uneven, Cather was one of America’s best-loved novelists. . . . Universities gave her honorary doctorates. Time put her on its cover. And the regular book reviewers-- some of them excellent, but not leftist, not vanguard-- generally praised her (25).

Cather’s widespread success in the 1930s ensured that people knew her name, even among those who had never read her novels. As a public personality, her name was recognized and as such, became a highly marketable commodity. Movie ads proclaimed Cather’s credibility, her status as the “greatest,” against the melodramatic elements of the film’s storyline. Tag lines such as, “Willa Cather’s throbbing revelation of a woman’s heart!” seem grounded in some artistic merit to potential moviegoers, and so seeing a formulaic romance film attains middle-class respectability because it was written by (as another ad exclaims) “the magic pen of America’s greatest woman writer!”

Further, a host of promotional strategies were suggested, revealing how Warner Brother’s was specifically marked A Lost Lady to middle-class women. One promotion,

simply referred to as the “Problem Contest,” suggested that for a prize of free tickets to the film, women could write to their newspaper editors a 100-word essay answering the following question: “If YOU were the heroine of ‘A Lost Lady,’ portrayed by Barbara Stanwyck which of the three men would YOU choose in your quest for complete happiness in life?” Another suggested a “Femme Frolic” because, as the promotion material suggests, “This picture is truly a woman’s picture.” Managers were told that they could “pep up” a “For Women Only” matinee “by having a psychologist down to give a short lecture on some of the situations in the film.” Also, for “next to nothing,” managers could buy still shots from key scenes accompanied by “punch lines,” which amount to exclamatory lines from the film’s script. For example, one still captures Barbara Stanwyck saying, “I know you saved my life--but don’t try to save my soul!”

While Warner Brothers tried diligently to tie Cather’s name into their promotions, critics responded by separating her name from the film. Critics such as the one from the Evening Post realized that the “picture product...reduces the elements [of the novel] to the lowest common denominator” (Oct. 4, 1934). The Herald Tribune’s reviewer, Richard Watts, Jr., said that “Even if the photoplay called ‘A Lost Lady’ didn’t pretend to be an adaptation of Willa Cather’s genuine American masterpiece, one of the finest novels ever written in this country, it would still be a highly unsatisfying motion picture.” Film critics reviewing A Lost Lady understood that Cather had little, if any, control over the adaptation of her novel, and in their reviews they note a difference between Cather’s authorship of the novel and the authorship of the film. The tension here between critics and their attack of the film adaptation reflects Cather’s complicated position in her culture at the time. Middle-brow film critics wanted to save her reputation from “the

lowest common denominator” and place her into a more respectable upper middle-class status, even while her name was widely known and celebrated.

While there is no known direct response by Cather to the 1934 film, Alfred Knopf, her publisher and close personal friend, says that “She used to say to me that if she had wanted to write a play or a motion picture she would have written a play or motion-picture script” (38). He further relates that

The experience [of the 1934 A Lost Lady adaptation] was so disillusioning that she determined never to risk repetition. One day Benjamin H. Stern, our close friend and long-time lawyer, who also represented her for a number of years, told me in his office that he had an offer from Hollywood that ran into six figures. Ben’s office was on the thirty-fifth floor of the French Building and I immediately told him that would as soon jump out the window as mention this offer to Miss Cather. I added that I thought if he wished to retain her good will, that he should not mention it to her either. He didn’t. (38)

Other offers did come in, however. In 1936 Cather wrote to Zoë Akins that she did not approve of a dramatic adaptation of A Lost Lady written by Daniel Totheroh, noting that he didn’t understand in the least Mrs. Forrester’s character (Dec. 15, 1936 Huntington). That same year Cather wrote to Helen Sprague that young contemporary writers were caught up with the idea of being a writer, attaining celebrity status, and getting into the movies. As far as Cather was concerned, this was a passing fad (8 March 1936). After the release of A Lost Lady, she also rejected all offers for radio and phonograph renditions of her work, some of which could have been financially lucrative, claiming that the actors

turned her work into sentimental nonsense (Cather to Woolcott, 8 Feb. 1935 Harvard).

Toward the end of the '30s, as Cather's health declined and as she suffered from the deaths of her brother and other loved ones, her attention turned to how she could protect her image after her death. While living, Cather could easily say no to radio and film productions, but after her death, who could possibly care for her work as much as she, the artist? The temporary answer lay in her will, where her lasting statement stands to the executors of her estate a prohibition on stage productions, motion pictures, radio broadcasts, and other reproduction methods discovered thereafter. Although not perfect, such a stipulation ensured that for at least seventy-five years beyond her death, Cather could employ some artistic control over her art.

What emerges after the release of A Lost Lady is Cather's retreat from the public spotlight. By the mid-thirties, as L. Brent Bohlke notes, Cather felt so "completely besieged by the movies, attorneys, investment representatives, and relatives" that she "finally resorted to having her telephone shut off during off during her working hours and having her secretary write formal letters in place of the personal responses she would rather have made" (xxv). In this protected, personal space, Cather turned to her work. Though out of the public spotlight, she maintained her literary presence through projects such as the Autograph Edition of her collected works and her controversial essay collection, Not Under Forty, which both served as capstones to her career. In solidifying her aesthetics, especially through her Not Under Forty, Cather brought to her public a way of reading her writing, a set of principles by which to judge her work.

Throughout Cather's career she showed a keen sense of attention to the most minute of details. Knopf relates that Cather interested herself in almost every aspect of

her books' design, from the selection of the paper to the typeface to advertising copy (Knopf 14). With a loss of the artistic control central to Cather's artistic principles, the 1934 adaptation of A Lost Lady reveals how her culture capitalized on her name and literary reputation, as well as how far she would go to protect her work, even when that meant a loss of what could have been generous income. Cather's celebrity was vexing for her: on the one hand it provided the stability and comfort to write as she pleased; and on the other it tired her to see her work and name misused and manipulated for material, rather than artistic purposes.

Acknowledgements

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Letters from Ferris Greenslet to Willa Cather (shelf mark bMS Am 1925 341) are quoted by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, and Houghton Mifflin.

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