

World War II: The Impacts on Female Figures in Movies

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Abstract: This paper discusses the impact of World War II on the depiction of female figure in film industry, particularly how women's social expectancy is reflected in turns of movie. During World War II, women were encouraged to enter the workforce, leading to portrayals of independent female figures, but post-war movies reverted to traditional domestic ideals. By analyzing both pre-war and post-war films, this study examines the depicted women figure showed in film industry before World War II and after. The films *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *It's a Wonderful Life* were chosen to be examine since they do not embody any sexism ideologies. The analysis reveals that the female expectancy and social roles surprisingly retrograded back to traditional domestic character. While in pre-war movie *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, there is independent business woman like Babe Bennett, all the female characters in *It's a Wonderful Life* remain traditionally portrayed as housewives. These findings suggest that independent powerful women figure was not a enduring image and underscore that the influence of World War II on women's figure in films is over evaluated.

Keywords: World War II, film industry, gender norms, sexism, social expectancy

1. Introduction

World War II was often regarded as a trigger for increasing the participation of women in society, raising their social status by providing them with a chance to contribute. However, it is often neglected that in the post-World War II period, due to the demand for reconstruction, women were expected to return to their original social roles, which were domestic. Movies, as a reflection of society, can serve as a powerful medium to help us analyze this shift—from partial women started to join workplace to all women expected to be stay-at-home spouses.

In December 1941, the United States joined World War II. Numerous soldiers were sent to Europe to fight against Germany and Italy. The war escalated to a point where even women were drafted into the army, and the economy lost many working-age men. Factories needed men, farms needed men, and bakeries needed men. At this point, society realized that women could be a substitute. From then on, the women's employment rate increased unprecedentedly. In 1940, women's employment was only 28%. However, during World War II, at its peak, the rate reached 34% [1]. Posters and movies during World War II also embodied the increasing sense of need. With the vast influence of movies and posters, the government portrayed a new female figure to encourage women to leave the home and engage in society. For instance, "Rosie the Riveter" is a well-known collaboration between Hollywood and the US government to encourage women to join the workforce and the army.

When the war ended, soldiers were sent back home. Women were still needed but were expected to return to a different role: the home. After the war, reconstruction was urgent; the country needed

more population growth. Therefore, families were encouraged to have many children. The government established several laws, such as the Child Tax Credit (CTC), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (Medicaid and CHIP), and the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). All of these laws supported families by helping them bear children and providing financial assistance to raise them. Moreover, the government published the G.I. Bill, giving privileges to veterans in fields such as job training and priority in securing employment. As a result, the stress of family living expenses was reduced, and most families no longer needed women to work. Women were expected to return to traditional domestic gender norms. Thus, in response to the government's call, women eventually returned home and resumed the traditional roles.

Early historians, when discussing the effect of World War II on the shift in women's roles, often ignore the sudden negative change and focus more on the gains. In Claudia Koonz's work "Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War II on Women Workers," she highlighted that the war opened up job opportunities for women and, in the long term, provided positive benefits for women, but she paid little regard to the decline [2]. However, when discussing the effects of World War II, it is essential to identify the immediate post-war shift. If women's social roles five years later were different from their roles before the war, it is not credible to attribute this shift solely to the war. As a result, more historians now focus on the immediate post-war impact. Claudia D. Goldin, for instance, discussed the effects in her work "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment" detailedly [3]. She acknowledges the fact that women gained more job opportunities and greater participation in society. However, she also highlights the limitations of job availability for women and the layoffs that followed the end of the war. Thus, she holds a balanced view of the effect of World War II on women.

To explore the shift in women's roles caused by World War II, this research involves analyzing films from two periods: prewar and postwar. Two comedy films were selected for analysis to ensure the depiction of female figures is generalizable. The films chosen are *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. These films were chosen first because they do not exclusively embody feminist or anti-feminist ideas. Second, they were filmed by the same director, which is helpful for use to interpret the change of female figure under the effect of WWII.

2. Film analysis

2.1. Film1

Mr. Deeds Goes to Town is a famous comedy filmed in 1936. The movie follows Longfellow Deeds, a man from a small town who unexpectedly inherits \$20 million and moves to New York City. There, he faces legal and social challenges as his rural, virtuous values clash with the urban greed and corruption surrounding him. The movie presents various female characters with distinct characteristics, linguistic styles, and career roles. In this paper, the analysis will not only focus on the characters but also the plot. The characters' lines, actions, and outcomes provide clues for understanding their roles. It is surprising that in this movie, there are many female characters with completely opposite characteristics.

The main female character, Babe Bennett, is different from the typical female stereotype. She is not a housewife; she is a newspaperwoman who creates headlines unscrupulously. Unlike the stereotypical women of earlier times, Bennett is a tough woman. Her tone is firm, and she speaks quickly, unlike other female characters in the movie. These characteristics reflect her personality. She is an independent woman, confident in her abilities. After Deeds arrives in New York, they plan to send Bennett to him as a spy in order to make some scandals. But before that, when her fellow reporters ask, "What are you gonna do?" she confidently replies, "Never mind, follow me." [4] A

woman dominating men was quite uncommon in the 1930s, reflecting the courage and power that come from her capabilities.

A character completely opposite to Bennett is Jane Faulkner, the housekeeper of Mr. Deeds' house in Mandrake Falls. She represents the typical woman of the 1930s: soft, polite, and domestic. When John Cedar, the lawyer trying to gain control of Deeds' fortune, and other lawyers visit, Jane receives them. She asks, "Could I get you a cup of tea?" [4] This is a typical example of femininity—always subordinate when interacting with men. The word "could" makes her words more euphemistic and accommodating, which contrasts with Bennett, who rarely uses modal verbs. Moreover, when Cedar, Cobb, and Deeds discuss money, Jane shows little interest in the topic; the only thing she cares about is whether Cedar and the lawyers are staying for lunch. Additionally, when Cedar asks Deeds about his relationship, Jane suddenly becomes talkative, showing significant interest [4]. This reinforces the stereotype that women are primarily interested in gossip.

Having analyzed the two main characters, it is also essential to consider the figures of other supporting characters. When Deeds shares supper with Bennett, the women's attire is uniform: fur, gloves, small hats, lace-edged clothes, and none of them wear pants—they all wear dresses. Another scene worth discussing is when Bennett returns home to chat with her aunt, Emma. When Bennett tells her that she feels guilty and has fallen in love with Deeds, Emma recalls Charlie and starts crying [4]. This scene portrays women as emotional beings.

When Cobb asks Deeds how he plans to spend the evening, the first thing that comes to his mind is sex. He objectifies women, describing them as products—tall, short, white, dark, hard, soft. [4] This objectification suggests that the association between women and sex is deeply ingrained. Another noticeable feature is that most employed women hold jobs that do not require any skills or education. For instance, in Cedar's law office, none of the women are employed as lawyers; they are all receptionists or errand assistants.

Lastly, the analysis wants to highlight Bennett's name—Babe Bennett. Despite being an independent, strong businesswoman, she is still given the name "Babe." The use of "Babe" is problematic as it evokes an image of softness and dependency, often associated with stereotypes of women. This ambiguous name contrasts with Bennett's character, who is independent, assertive, and far from the conventional portrayal her name suggests.

In conclusion, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* shows that during the pre-WWII period, women were encouraged to work and were portrayed in more diverse roles, such as businesswomen—independent and tough. However, these improvements were limited—the jobs women could take were mostly unskilled, their toughness was not expected to exceed that of men, and their independence did not equate to living without a man.

2.2. Film 2

It's a Wonderful Life is similarly a classic comedy filmed in 1946. It tells the story of George Bailey, a small-town man who repeatedly sacrifices his dreams for his family and community. Facing personal and financial hardships, George contemplates suicide, but an angel shows him how his life has positively impacted others. The film contrasts George's selflessness with his personal struggles, emphasizing the value of community and the profound impact one person can have. This movie, compared to *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, does not provide diverse female figures; instead, the female characters are quite similar.

In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, Babe Bennett is an exceptional character who counters female convention. However, Mary Bailey can be considered a very traditional woman. From her appearance, she wears a long dress, has curly, fashionable hair, and wears small high heels. This suggests that Mary is someone who follows trends, reinforcing the stereotype that women are preoccupied with adorning themselves. Her behavior also suggests she is a stereotypical woman. When she sees George

Bailey, she suddenly becomes excited, starts capering, and acts harshly [5]. This behavior links to the stereotype that women do not hide their emotions and engage in petty actions. Another example is when Mary was a little girl, and she visited the store where George worked. She sat there, admiring George while thinking about what dessert to order. When Violet tricked George and left, Mary stuck her tongue out at her [5]. This scene evokes an image of two girls quarreling out of jealousy, reinforcing the idea that women are dependent on men. Not only in appearance, language, and actions, but Mary's personality and thoughts also demonstrate that she is a typical woman. One noticeable aspect of Mary is that she has never contradicted George since their marriage. This suggests that Mary believes she should not and cannot hold opposing opinions to her husband in order to be a considerate wife. This mindset reinforces the idea that all women should be good wives, and obedience to one's husband is the path to achieving this. Other essential facts about Mary are that she never had a job. She only worked during World War II for a short time, which work she did was needlework, and in the alternative future, where she did not married George. Additionally, she gave birth to four children. These two facts further reinforce her role as a typical housewife.

There are also some noteworthy scenes that further develop Mary's character. For instance, when young Mary said she had never seen the magazine young George showed her, George replied, "Of course you haven't. Only us explorers can get it." [5] This line expresses a strong sense of superiority toward women, implying they are too weak to be explorers. Later, young George said, "I will have a couple of harems, and maybe three or four wives." [5] This line implies that men are always the center and women are there to serve them, thus placing women in a lower status. Another scene is when George's younger brother Harry is preparing for his graduation ceremony. George and Harry make a lot of noise upstairs, prompting their maid Annie to say, "That's why all children should be girls." [5] This line reflects the belief that girls are quiet and demure. Finally, there is a scene when George comes home on Christmas Eve, here, the scene shows that he didn't participate in the Christmas decorations, didn't make any meals, and didn't even know that his daughter, Zuzu, was sick []. This suggests the traditional family structure, where the wife takes care of everything in the home, including the children, while the husband is only responsible for earning money.

In conclusion, the portrayal of female characters in *It's a Wonderful Life* reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, particularly through the character of Mary Bailey. Her submissive nature, lack of a career, and primary role as a housewife and mother reflect the expectations of women in a traditional family structure.

These two movies, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* from pre-wartime and *It's a Wonderful Life* from post-wartime, portraits females similarly. Though in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, the main female Character, Babe Bennett, is an independent woman whose personality and behavior is contradicted to stereotypical woman, the majority female figures are all depicted stereotypically. They are all emotional, dependent, seeking for a husband, soft speaking, less likely to rebel. Not like the female figures that people are used to during World War II, tough, strong, confident, independent, the post-wartime figure is more similar, or weaker and more typical than the pre-wartime.

3. Conclusion

Examining films like *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *It's a Wonderful Life* reveals how WWII and its aftermath shaped film industry's portrayal of women, reflecting society's fluctuating expectations of female dependence and domesticity

In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, most female characters conform to traditional roles, but there are exceptions, such as Babe Bennett, who is portrayed as independent and unconventional. This indicates that, even before the war, there were some shifts away from stereotypical depictions of women. However, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, almost all female characters are depicted through traditional, domestic stereotypes. While it is possible that women like Bennett still existed after the

war, the majority of female characters were shown to have returned to traditional domestic roles, more so than before the war.

The shift in film portrayals from independent wartime women to traditional domestic roles after the war suggested that wartime portrayals were more of a cinematic response to temporary societal needs than a lasting transformation in women's roles.

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