

# The Analysis of Female Characters in the Golden Age of Hollywood

Zishi Kou

Beijing Foreign Languages School, BFSU, Beijing, China

kouzishi@stu.cpu.edu

**Abstract.** The United States experienced a 25% unemployment rate in 1929 as a result of the Great Depression. More than 5,000 banks in the United States announced closure, and more than 80,000 businesses filed for bankruptcy as a direct result of the Great Depression. Everyone was drowning in the woes of being unemployed. However, Hollywood movies provided a pastime for people who were suffering every day during the Great Depression. Although the 1930s was the worst time for the U.S. economy, it was the golden age of Hollywood. The 1930s to the late 1940s are referred to as the Golden Age of Hollywood, in which Hollywood dominated the film industry. Women on screen have many images, but all these female portraits cannot be separated from men. Women's life at that time was inextricably linked with men's. This paper analyzes women's images from the Golden Age of Hollywood movies. The purpose is to explain how the portrayal of women on screen reflects the status of women in society at the time and what factors led to such a portrayal of women on screen. The paper found that the most impactful factors are women's jobs taken by men during the Great Depression, the dominant social consciousness of masculinity, and the desire for male voyeurism.

**Keywords:** The Golden Age of Hollywood; Feminine; Film studies.

## 1. Introduction

In 1929, the Great Depression made the U.S. unemployment rate as high as 25%. As a direct result of the Great Depression, more than 5,000 banks in the United States declared close down, and more than 80,000 businesses went bankrupt. Everyone was sinking in the sorrows of unemployment. Plus, the act of Prohibition and people were not allowed to drink, so the whole society was in depression, and people had no hope for the future. Confusion and anxiety permeated American cities, but the hardships of life stimulated people's desire for entertainment. The ivory tower created by Hollywood temporarily allowed people to forget real life's worries and pains. Although the 1930s was the worst time for the U.S. economy, it was the golden age of Hollywood. The early 1930s to the late 1940s are referred to as Hollywood's "Golden Age", a time when the studio system was at its pinnacle and dominated both the critical and box office success of motion pictures. The first film with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, was released in 1927, marking the beginning of the Golden Age. In 1935 the first color print appeared, *Becky Sharp*, and the 1936 film *Gone with the Wind* improved the color print technique. Technological effects were added to the 1933 film *King Kong*. The first wave of feminism in the world took place from the late 18th century to the 1920s. This first wave of feminist thinking ended temporarily when Congress rejected a constitutional amendment to protect child labor in 1925. With the end of the first feminist movement, women were relatively given the right to education, employment, and the right to vote that they deserved. However, the United States was still a society in which the dominant discourse was male-dominated. This extraordinary phenomenon was projected into society and culture, and the image of women in Hollywood movies during this period was greatly weakened. This was specifically reflected in the numerical neglect and narrative marginalization of women in Hollywood films. In *'Casablanca'*, for example, there are 50 characters in the film, but only 11 are women, and men are 3.5 times more than women; in *'Gone with the Wind'*, there are 62 characters, but only 20 are women, and the ratio of men to women was extremely imbalanced [1]. The typical image of women in mainstream Hollywood films of the golden age was kind, beautiful, elegant, hesitant, weak, and helpless; females serve as erotic objects and men's desires and fantasies. As Laura Mulvey points out in her article: A woman displayed as a sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic

spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire [2]. More importantly, the image of women on the screen is disguised as a constraint on female celebrities to break through their gender and achieve the right to occupy the film and television discourse. In the 1890s-1910s, the film industry was still a nascent field, which meant women had an equal position in making a film. Nevertheless, the advent of the Great depression let Hollywood enter the golden age and face the financial crisis. In the patriarchal society of the time, there was an inveterate belief that men were more likely to take a risk than women, and women were more risk-averse than men. To profit in the film industry, companies prefer to cooperate with men rather than women. Therefore, men had more opportunities to direct films than female directors. By 1925, only one female director, Dorothy Arzner, insisted on making films [3]. The interpretation of women's images on screen reveals the social climate of the time, the status of women, the stage of feminist development, and their contribution to the future feminist movement. The paper will first introduce the background of the Hollywood film industry of the 1930s and its impact on the role of women. Secondly, the essay will summarize the characteristics of female characters in the Golden Age of Hollywood and illustrate them with examples from 'Grand Hotel', 'Gone with the Wind', 'Casablanca', 'The Gold Rush', 'Camille', 'Waterloo Bridge', 'It Happened One Night', and 'Mrs. Miniver'. Finally, the article will conclude with an analysis and summary of the society and women of the time based on the statement of the female figures mentioned previously.

## 2. Films in the Golden Age

The background of the Golden Age of Hollywood is very complex. On September 3, 1929, the U.S. stock market plunged. The United States ushered in the era of the Great Recession. Numbers of businesses in the cities went bankrupt, and factories closed, leading to massive layoffs, widespread unemployment, and 28% of the country without any income. The crisis swept through all levels of the population, including the upper class, the middle class, and the bottom of society, and no one could escape the disaster caused by this crisis. The crisis not only cut off the extravagant life of the rich but also crushed the hopes and dreams of the poor. People's desire for entertainment and Thomas Alva Edison's invention of the talkies propelled Hollywood into a golden age.

In the 1920s, the first wave of feminism in the world ended. The 1920s-1930s was not only the interval between World War I and World War II but also the low point of feminism. During the late 1920s and up until World War II, the status of women in the United States was downward. Not only were women discriminated against in employment, but their position in the home was also inferior, and women remained the property of men. The first feminist movement led more women to gain access to education and more employment opportunities. Women could also work in factory textiles or clerical jobs, and the number of women employed had risen considerably. This transformation was partially reflected in Hollywood films of the period. Overall, however, women were still portrayed in an unequal light. Western society was still a male-dominated society.

The ensuing Great Depression of the 1930s caused many men to lose their jobs. The loss of men led them to enter what was originally a female profession, and many companies hired in preference men. Then women were forced to return to their former status as housewives. The phenomenon shows that even though women gained their right to education, employment, and voting through the first feminist movement, women were still in a disadvantaged position and limited by a male-dominated society. In the Hollywood movies of the Golden Age, more women did not have to worry about money because they did not have a fixed career, and most women were trapped by love. In 'Gone with the Wind', Scarlett O'Hara is a rebellious and reckless rich girl who dares to oppose worldly tradition. She has no worries about making money, but in her love life, she is also uncertain, painful, and struggling to pursue Ashley Wilkes. In 'It Happened One Night', Ellie Andrews is also a rich girl. Without employment issues and money concerns, her life revolves around love and marriage. Ilsa Lund's job in 'Casablanca' is unknown; the only information is that she is Victor Laszlo's wife and Rick Blaine's lover [4].

The male gaze took control of female images on the screen, indicating that women were in a weak position in the Hollywood golden age. As Lura Mulvey implies in her writing: Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen [2]. Men gain psychological satisfaction by gazing at women in movies who match the object of their sexual desire. During the Golden age of Hollywood, women on the screen were constantly manipulated by men. In most cases, female characters did not have the power to determine their destiny; their lives were defined by the male characters with whom they were closely associated. Their values, their lives, were concentrated around men. For example, in 'Casablanca', Ilsa falls in love with Rick and wants to live with him in Paris. However, when she learns that her husband Victor is still alive, she has to go back to his husband. When Eliza encounters Rick the second time, she struggles fiercely with her desire to be with him. Rick helps Victor get a visa letter to leave Casablanca and insists that Ilsa leave the city with Victor. In the end, Ilsa leaves. Thus, it seems that the protagonist is Ilsa, but she is dominated by male characters all the time. Ilsa has no initiative in her own life and is always being dominated by men.

### **3. The portrayal of women in film**

#### **3.1 The subordinate position**

Women in Golden Age Hollywood films were in a subservient position. They developed their lives around men. In the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood created its genre films. The portrayal of women in Hollywood films was also typological. Most women were beautiful, kind, elegant, hesitant, soft, and naive, with a few women having strong personalities. For example, Melanie in 'Gone with the Wind' is gentle, demure, timid, and understanding in front of her husband. The softness of her character makes Melanie always dependent on men, that is, her husband. Georgia, the dancer in 'The Gold Rush', is beautiful and weak. Ilsa in 'Casablanca' is indecisive about her choice of husband and lover.

Secondly, most women on the screen do not have stable careers and rarely have decent jobs. They were not financially independent but did not need to worry about money. In the society of that time, most of them were men who served as the family's financial problems, and women generally did not need to support themselves through their own hands. They were always glamorous as bar dancers, homemakers, or rich maids who did not have to work and were waiting for a son-in-law. In 'Camille', Marguerite is a prostitute who earns remuneration by selling her body. Flaemmchen in 'The Grand Hotel' dislikes Preysing but is willing to work for him to have sex with Preysing for money [5], and Ellie Andrews in 'It Happened One Night' is a rich girl who does not need to worry about money.

The third is that women's values and their lives revolve around men. For example, in 'Casablanca', Ilsa falls in love with Rick and wants to live with him in Paris. However, when she knows that her husband, Victor Laszlo, is still alive, she has to go back to his husband. When Ilsa encounters Rick again, she feels a fierce internal struggle and wants to be with Rick. Rick helps Victor get a visa letter to leave Casablanca and insists that Ilsa leave the city with her husband. In the end, Ilsa leaves in tears. Thus, it seems that the story's main character is Ilsa, but the male characters dominate her. Ilsa has no initiative in her own life and is always dominated by men. The tragic and turbulent life of Myra in 'Waterloo Bridge' is due to Roy Cronin. Myra wanted to see her lover one last time; Myra missed a ballet performance and lost her job. Upon hearing the news that Roy was mistakenly listed as killed in the war, Myra suffers a mental breakdown and is reduced to a prostitute. When she meets Roy again, who is still alive, Myra has hope for her life again. Nevertheless, she eventually commits suicide because she cannot face Roy.

#### **3.2 The sacrificial image**

Another kind of portrayal in Hollywood movies is the sacrificial image. The female image served to bear the contradictions of social reality conflicts. People transfer social pressure, war, and

conventional beliefs to women. Ending the story with a woman's death, let the woman carry the deep conflict of perceptions.

The 'Waterloo Bridge' is a masterpiece of the Golden Age of Hollywood. The movie tells the story of Captain Roy Cronin, who met ballerina Myra on furlough and then fell in love and engaged each other for life. Ballet dancer Myra and officer Roy met on a railroad bridge and fell in love, but due to the harshness of war, Roy was called back to the army to join the war effort when they decided to get married. To see her lover one last time, Myra misses a ballet performance and loses her job. Soon after, Roy is on the list of those killed in battle. Myra is so devastated that she becomes a prostitute. When she meets the alive Roy again, Myra has hope for her life again. In the face of the honor of Roy's family and the trust of his family, the kind-hearted Myra is unwilling to continue to deceive him, so she leaves quietly before her wedding and ends her life on the Waterloo Bridge, where they first met. The pressures of the times and the societal conflicts are shifted to Myra, in whom there are episodes of suffering and sacrifice. For example, Myra loses her job because she goes to the station to meet Roy; Myra thinks Roy is dead and grieves and becomes a prostitute. Eventually, the movie ends with Myra's death.

'Waterloo Bridge' was set in 1917, during the First World War in the United States. Roy and Myra decided to get married immediately because of the war. Because of the war, the two could not get married. Myra chose to leave Roy for the sake of his family's honor and ended her life on the Waterloo Bridge. Roy and Myra's love is finally lost to the war and social class. Myra is undoubtedly a victim of the war, orthodoxy, and the times.

### 3.3 Resilient tough image

There was also a non-traditional image of women in Golden Age Hollywood that was brave, passionate, independent, and unrelenting.

The protagonist in 'Mrs. Miniver' represents this small portion of unconventional women's figures. In the summer of 1939, Clem and his wife, Mrs. Miniver, live in the English suburbs, happily married for many years with three children. Clem's oldest son, Vin, falls in love with Carol, the granddaughter of the founder of the Flower Guild, and the two soon fall in love. When the war began, Vin wanted to serve his country and rushed to the front while Clem participated in the volunteer army. Mrs. Miniver, on the other hand, was in the back support. One day, a wounded German pilot broke into Mrs. Miniver's kitchen. Mrs. Miniver, with her bravery and wisdom, assisted the police in successfully apprehending him. On the way to Mrs. Miniver and Carol sending Wayne to the garrison, they were hit by an air raid.

The main character Mrs. Miniver is portrayed as brave, strong, intelligent, and calm. A classical scene is when Mrs. Miniver finds a Nazi pilot in the kitchen. The maternal feelings make her want to take care of the young man, who is about the same age as her son. She even says to the pilot, "Let me help you." However, she overcame her feminine tenderness, disarmed him, and reported him to the police. Mrs. Miniver did not fear or cry in the face of the German enemy. She solved the problem with composure, calmness, resourcefulness, and courage. She showed a tenacious spirit of resistance in front of the German invaders who could never occupy England. Her image differs from the traditional soft, hesitant, and fragile woman. As a wartime woman, she challenges the notion that women are "weak". It also reflects that during World War II, women were the backbone of the family and a warrior.

'Gone with the Wind' tells the story of Scarlett, the daughter of a southern farm Tara, on the eve of the American Civil War, who falls in love with George Ashley, the son of another farmer. During the war, Scarlett becomes a widow, loses her mother, and takes up the burden of life, no longer being a young lady; after the war, she becomes a wife twice and marries Reed, a speculator who has loved her for many years. However, even after the hardships of life, Scarlett's feelings for Ashley remain unchanged. The death of Ashley's wife, Melanie, gave Scarlett a chance to have Ashley, who had her heart set on her for many years. On the other hand, her husband Reed loved her dearly. Later, Scarlett

and Reed's daughter Bonnie fell to her death on a horse. This incident made Reed disheartened, and Scarlett realized that the person she loved was Reed.

Scarlett is portrayed as an unconventional woman who dares to break the traditional prejudice of "male superiority over female" [6]. She is beautiful, tough, brave, rebellious, responsible, and optimistic. Most women in that society "spent their whole existence waiting", "she was waiting for the allegiance and approval of men, she was waiting for love, she was waiting for the gratitude and praise of her husband or lover" [7]. Nevertheless, Scarlett dares to pursue love instead of waiting passively. She did not give up after one unsuccessful confession. she did not give up after one unsuccessful love confession. Even after Ashley's marriage to Melanie, she repeatedly and indefatigably expressed her intensive love for Ashley. When Ashley rejected her love, Scarlett became angry and slapped Ashley with her hand. Scarlett's behavior was not what was expected of women at the time. Society generally believed that women should be ladylike and gentle at that time. According to common sense, in the society of that time, Scarlett should feel ashamed and self-condemned about her behavior. However, the self-respecting Scarlett did not give in to men. Instead, she confidently believed that she and Ashley could be together [8].

Melanie gave birth and could not find a doctor; Scarlett then delivered the baby by herself and saved the lives of Melanie's mother and child. It can be seen that Scarlett is very strong. In the absence of a doctor, the inexperienced Scarlett, to preserve Melanie's mother's and child's lives, summoned up her courage and calmly helped Melanie give birth to a son successfully. Scarlett's mother died, her father went crazy, and the family was starving. The usually well-bred young lady carries a basket to the ground daily to dig for what they can eat. To protect themselves, Scarlett shot a Yankee who broke into the estate to misbehave and then used the horses and money obtained to solve the urgent needs. Scarlett later also rescued soldiers who were hungry, sick, and homeless. Not only that, but Scarlett also bought two lumber mills that had closed down and ran them on her own. The things that Scarlett did reflects her independent personality. She did not depend on others; she had her ideas but also dared to pursue them. She dared to take responsibility, and when the family was down, she stepped up and did her best to turn the family situation around.

#### 4. Analysis

Based on the theories above, women on screen have multiple images. Women could be portrayed as gentle or sacrificial. However, what remains the same is that their function or meaning is not their own. Their meaning is devoted to men or society.

"Since ancient times, this has been a man's world" [6]. In the context of a patriarchal society, women should be beautiful, gentle, considerate, ladylike, and understanding to satisfy the male aesthetic. "How women want to be beautiful, how women want to be thin. This is a male culture of control over the female psyche and body; that is, the woman's body is no longer the woman's own. Because of the female body, to see if we are up to par with the male eye" [9]. However, it is this character that makes women subordinate to men. Ilsa in 'Casablanca' is a typical representative of Hollywood women. Her personality is weak and indecisive. She wants to spend the rest of her life with Rick, but she has to leave him for her husband. Men dominate Ilsa's life. Men decide whether she stays or goes, not herself. Women's gentle, ladylike nature allowed men to manipulate women's behavior and control their lives. The weakness of women's character made them untenable in the extremely patriarchal society of the time, which led to their subordinate status.

During the Great Depression, immediately before the war, women were expected to leave paid jobs to men, who were assumed to be the breadwinner in every family [10]. The men who lost their jobs had to take the women's jobs. So, women during this period, having lost their jobs, could not support themselves. Therefore, to live, women had to rely on men to earn money to support their families. The image of women's economic dependence on men during this period is also reflected in the Golden Age of Hollywood movies. Most of the women in the movie do not need to know the source of money. In 'It Happened One Night', Ellie is a rich girl. She has no worries about making

money, but her life is not up to her either. Her father forced her to marry a playboy she did not like, and she jumped overboard to escape unwillingly. This shows that although women did not have material worries at that time, their lives were not up to them, and they were still at the mercy of men. In addition to the rich family, some women work alone, but the female characters are engaged in real-life work labeled as "male". In 'Camille', for example, Marguerite is a prostitute. Only by selling her body to men can she get money to maintain her life. Women's economic dependence is one of the factors that makes them subordinate to men.

Women are at the center of the screen. Films often focus on women and often end with women. The female figure is used to take on the social conflicts of history. The economic conflict, political repression, social pressure, and social trauma are transferred to a woman. The focus is on the tragic experiences, the tragic lives, and the sacrificed episodes of women. The story of war, the story of a great man, often ends with the death of a woman. The grave of one woman buries the disaster of an entire era. The 'Waterloo Bridge' is set in 1917, during the First World War in the United States. The story of war, the story of a great man, often ends with the death of a woman. The grave of one woman buries the disaster of an entire era. Roy Cronin and Myra Lester decided to get married immediately because of the war. They cannot get married because of the war. Myra chose to leave Roy for the sake of his family and honor and ended her life on the Waterloo Bridge. The love of Roy and Myra was finally lost to the war and social class. Myra is undoubtedly a victim of war, a victim of orthodoxy, or a victim of the times. A woman's sacrifice to end the movie, a woman's sacrifice to preserve the honor of a family. Myra is just a microcosm. There were innumerable other sacrifices in the society of the time. Women returned to their families because they had no jobs, and the patriarchal culture gave women the image of angels: good wives. Thus, the family became the whole world for women. People can see women's beautiful faces and sexy bodies but cannot see their hearts. Simone de Beauvoir believes: 'Women are formed gradually. No predetermined fate, physical, psychological, or economic, can determine the image of the human female in society. The people who determined the people between men and castrated men with the so-called femininity is the whole system of civilization.'

Men's scopophilia is another factor contributing to women's typecast figure. As Laura Mulvey claims that: The woman displayed as a sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle, and women play to and signify male desire. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order [2]. Women's appearance is coded to achieve a strong visual and sexual effect so they can be said to have the connotation of being seen [2]. During the Golden age of Hollywood, women served as erotic objects rather than characters that could lead the story. Their function and meaning do not belong to themselves. Women's existence is to fulfill men's demands, no matter the women on screen or women in reality.

These stereotypical images of women are the norms of behavior that men impose on women according to their values. They believe women should be dedicated to the family and society and subservient to men. As a result, most women in Hollywood films are gentle and family-oriented. They are forcibly deprived of their rights and subordinated to men's moral and behavioral codes. [1] The gentle and delicate woman is born in the constant shaping of patriarchy in society and culture. In this process, male culture completes the emasculation of the female spirit. 'The woman is a puppet without a soul, a body that has been castrated physically and spiritually' [11].

In the films of the Golden Age of Hollywood, a few women were the opposite of the traditional female figure. Mrs. Miniver, a wife but also a warrior, is a housewife who takes care of her family and is calm and collected in the face of a Nazi pilot. She has the image of a housewife taking care of her family and the calm and collected side to face a Nazi pilot. Scarlett is brave and tough. In love, she does not wait like a traditional woman but takes the initiative. Faced with her family's downfall, she stepped forward and took the responsibility to carry the burden. Both films were born during World War II.

During World War II, men went to war, and women were required to fill in men's jobs, which included many things previously considered unsuitable for women to do. Not only did women have

to take care of their families, but they were also asked to work in factories that made bombs and airplane parts. Even after the world's first wave of feminism, more and more women in the United States became involved in social work and began to fight for their place in society. However, it was World War II that raised the status of American women in society. Before the war, most women in the United States worked traditionally female jobs, such as nurses and teachers. However, since Pearl Harbor, American women began to appear in various social positions that were not open to female employees before the war. Women's status improved during World War II, and women became aware of their abilities to work. They could stand up for themselves, work like men, and pursue what they wanted. Hence, the images of Scarlett and Mrs. Miniver show the women of the World War II era. They dared to resist the oppression of the patriarchal society, implying the awakening of women's consciousness and the promotion of women's status during World War II.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper selects films from the Golden Age of Hollywood in the early twentieth century. It analyzes the expression of feminism in images and the status of women in society in the Golden Hollywood period by studying the images of women in their films. The typecasting and other characteristics of women in Hollywood films of the golden age of the early twentieth century are obvious, and most of their characters are delicate, gentle, hesitant, and unable to make their own decisions about their own lives. Women have a subordinate status because women's jobs were taken by men during the Great Depression, the dominant social consciousness of masculinity, and the desire for male voyeurism. A minority of films show the image of women as resilient, brave, and fearless. This tough figure cannot be separated from the improvement of women's status during World War II. Overall, the image of women in Hollywood films of the Golden Age is generic and typical. However, the few images that dare to break through the "male superiority" reflect the development of feminism in a certain period.

## References

- [1] Zhang Shuo. Feminist Awakening and Development in the Image: A Study of the Image of Women in Two Golden Age Films of Hollywood in the Twentieth Century [J]. *Film Review*, 2011, (6): 4.
- [2] Mulvey L. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema [M] // *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1989: 14-26.
- [3] Seger L. When women call the shots: The developing power and influence of women in television and film [M]. IUniverse, 2003.
- [4] Yao Gang, Wang Aihua. A study on the characteristics of women's films in the Golden Age of Hollywood [J]. *Film Literature*, 2013, (17): 2.
- [5] Li D. Grand Hotel: Portrayal of Women in Golden Age Hollywood [J]. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 2014, 4(4): 303.
- [6] Deng Yufen. Scarlett: The dream and the person who cannot leave: A feminist interpretation of *Gone with the Wind* [J]. *Journal of Hunan Institute of Science and Technology*, 2005, 26(2): 3.
- [7] De Beauvoir S. *The second sex* [M]. Knopf, 2010.
- [8] Niu Jilian. A resounding rose in war: Scarlett's image in *Gone with the Wind* from a feminist perspective [J]. *Popular Literature and Art: Academic Edition*, 2009, (1): 1.
- [9] Bu Wei. *Women and Media* [R]. Lecture Room: CCTV Science Education Channel, 2003.
- [10] Weatherford D. *American Women During World War II: An Encyclopedia* [M]. Routledge, 2009.
- [11] Wang Dongmin. *Natasha-an analysis of the emasculated female figure* [J]. *The House of Drama*, 2014, (16): 1.