

## ABSTRACT

“What’s the Matter with Bigamy?”  
The American Family in the Wartime Comedies of Preston Sturges

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The 1940s comedies of writer-director Preston Sturges are known for their satirical narratives and eccentric characters. They were made during a period in Hollywood history when filmmakers adhered to the strict Production Code, ensuring that movies projected a wholesome image of American society. The purpose of this study was to explore the reflection of America during World War II as a troubled and disordered society through the unconventional depictions of the American family in five Sturges films: *The Great McGinty* (1940), *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* (1944), and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944). Content analyses revealed a pessimistic viewpoint that defied the moral principles of the Production Code and the typical representations of American society in popular wartime films. Sturges’ depiction of the family is one of disunity and deception, in contrast to the cheerful surfaces of his narratives.

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The American Family in the Wartime Comedies of Preston Sturges

by

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A Thesis

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

In times of major social strife, Americans have long turned to the movies for escapist fare. The movies are, at least according to popular ideal, a means through which personal problems can be briefly forgotten while images of joy and action flicker on the screen. Like any art form, however, there is more to film than the surface level of entertainment. When audiences sit in front of a screen, not only are images projected to them, but they project their own beliefs, ideologies, and dreams onto the film they are watching. Likewise, film as a medium is twofold in its power of representation. It is on the one hand an influential tool through which filmmakers may express their views, beliefs, and agendas, and on the other hand it serves as a reflection of the society from which it is produced.

Perhaps no other period in American film history exemplifies the public's need for escapist entertainment as well as the Depression. In 1933, in the midst of financial crisis and social disorder, 60 to 80 million Americans attended the movies each week, turning the industry from a "dream factory" to a necessary second life of fantasy (Klein, 2001, p. 92). Through movie stars, Art Deco, and life-affirming endings, moviegoers vicariously lived the lives they wished for but had no hope of attaining in that tumultuous decade. Seizing the opportunity to profit from audiences' dependency on the cinema, movie moguls capitalized on the popular genres, spinning out reworked storylines that consistently appealed to Depression-era audiences. As Maury Klein (2001) writes, "[The producers'] task was to divine the longings and ambitions of their audience, reduce their

findings to a formula, and repeat the formula in film after film” (p. 88). Such divining created a homogenization of themes in American films of all genres, reinforcing a particular set of values that were attractive to moviegoing audiences.

Escapism, however, was not Hollywood’s immediate reaction to the Depression. Films in the early 1930s frequently explored issues that were pertinent to audiences of the era, including poverty, desperate living, and crime. Gangsters and prostitutes were the heroes of a number of popular movies from 1930 to 1933, before the existing Production Code, which placed strict regulations on American film content, was fully enforced. Films like Mervyn LeRoy’s *Little Caesar* (1930) and William A. Wellman’s *The Public Enemy* (1931) featured Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, respectively, as lower class criminals who rise to lives of wealth and luxury through theft and murder. Josef von Sternberg’s *Blonde Venus* (1932) starred Marlene Dietrich as a devoted wife and mother who resorts to prostitution to earn the money for her sick husband to seek treatment abroad. These films did not necessarily glorify their protagonists’ lifestyles. The gangster films end with the inevitable deaths of their protagonists, and Dietrich ultimately returns to the arms of her husband after nearly losing everything. However, the films presented a considerably bleak reflection of the dire straits many Americans were left in after the stock market crash and the extreme lengths to which they would go in order to survive. Perhaps more importantly, these films reflected “the inefficiency of once-sacred values” in an “amoral society” (Roffman & Purdy, 2001, p. 93).

With the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, however, the national mood took an upswing, and Americans were once again filled with pride in their country as they looked forward to the fruits of the President’s New Deal. Following the nation’s

general mood, filmmakers also changed the overriding tones of their movies, halting their assaults on traditional values and making films with more positive, upbeat messages. Genres both old (the western) and new (the musical) succumbed to a “potency for myth making,” emphasizing the virtues of hard work, honest relationships, and simple living that characterized American life before it became “scrambled by the baffling complexities of war, industrialization, and depression” (Klein, 2001, pp. 90–92). At such a time, it was risky to challenge these myths and potentially drive away audiences who showed up at the box office to escape their worries, so the movie studios willingly catered to this need for escapism. Hollywood’s aim to reinforce the positive ideals of American life was acknowledged in a 1934 statement from Will Hays, President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), which enforced the Production Code:

No medium has contributed more greatly than the film to the maintenance of the national morale during a period featured by revolution, riot and political turmoil in other countries. It has been the mission of the screen, without ignoring the serious social problems of the day, to reflect aspiration, optimism, and kindly humor in its entertainment. (Bergman, 1992, p. 167)

The popular genres of the decade embodied this optimism and, one could say, nostalgia for good old American ambition.

From this period emerged the backstage musical, with its eternally cheerful stories of down-on-their-luck ingénues making it big on Broadway in spite of their financial woes. The optimistic innocence alluded to by Hays is summed up perfectly in a memorable line from Lloyd Bacon’s *42nd Street* (1933), the most famous of the backstage musicals. As novice Peggy Sawyer (Ruby Keeler) is about to go on stage in her starring debut, desperate director Julian Marsh (Warner Baxter) takes her aside and



tells her, “You’re going out a youngster, but you’ve got to come back a star!” The idea that any youngster with a dream could go out there and become a star was a popular sentiment of the time. As the musical constructed a mythical present, the western evoked a mythical past in which the open landscapes symbolized freedom and offered escape “from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice” (Tompkins, 1992, p. 4). These uplifting myths promoted old-fashioned values of family and society that were comforting for Depression-era audiences, and the unquestioned foundation of American life was the stability of the family (Rozgonyi, 1995).

Whether or not these values correlated to a realistic reflection of American culture did not matter. Audiences were receptive to the ideas being fed to them on movie screens, regardless of how unrealistic they may have been. Hortense Powdermaker (1964) argues that movies possess an inherent verisimilitude, as opposed to other creative outlets such as the theatrical stage. Because the actors and settings of a movie appear real and “natural,” audiences more readily escape into this world, “bringing with it conscious and unconscious absorption of the screen play’s values and ideas” (p. 61).

The genre that bloomed most significantly in the 1930s was the screwball comedy. While some have argued that this genre in fact called attention to many of the social and economic problems of the time, such as unemployment and alienation, Andrew Bergman (1992) argues that these movies contributed to the myth making by “unifying what had been splintered and divided” (p. 133). As he writes, “Their ‘whackiness’ cemented social classes and broken marriages; personal relations were soothed and social discontent quieted. If early thirties comedy was explosive, screwball comedy was implosive: it

worked to pull things together” (pp. 133–134). In what is generally considered to be the first screwball comedy, Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934), the social classes are joined when a struggling newspaper man (Clark Gable) and a runaway heiress (Claudette Colbert) fall in love. This established the popular screwball formula of a lower-class man succumbing to the charming but madcap shenanigans of an upper-class woman, which is evident in later films like Gregory La Cava’s *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). As Bergman (1992) notes, these films may have been outrageous in their stories, but they adhered to the same optimistic ideals of the musical and the western, suggesting that, at the end of the fighting and the discomfort, there is love, marriage, and happiness.

By the early 1940s, American audiences had another reason to escape into movies. As World War II loomed in Europe, American comedy continued to produce cheerfully artificial images that temporarily alleviated the growing concerns of international crisis (Higham & Greenberg, 1968). After the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the incentive to produce optimistic, pro-America films intensified. As in the previous decade, there was a growing surge of patriotism in the United States that Hollywood could not ignore, and if pandering to this sentiment brought in profits, then the studios readily complied. As a result, the majority of war or politically themed films produced during this era were “simplistic melodramas, glorifying war and democracy ... while vilifying the enemy as the representatives of barbarism” (Willett, 1981, p. 60). Likewise, Hollywood’s home-front movies avoided serious treatment of real social problems caused by the war, choosing instead to either ignore them or help audiences laugh at them (McLaughlin & Parry, 2006). The popular films of the 1940s retained the myth making of the 1930s and

continued to promote an idealized image of the American community during “a war that had eroded the moorings of family, church, and community” (Leff & Simmons, 2001, p. 129).

But with this new decade came another point of view, one that brought a fresh spin to the delightful but increasingly monotonous optimism of the popular cinema. Writer and director Preston Sturges emerged with a unique approach to comedy, one characterized by slapstick, frenetic pacing, and a lighthearted eccentricity that made his films irresistible to wartime audiences. Sturges had been working in Hollywood throughout the 1930s as a screenwriter, penning works as diverse as the downbeat *The Power and the Glory* (1933), which some consider a precursor to *Citizen Kane* (1941) in both story and structure, and the screwball comedy *Easy Living* (1937). He displayed a particular talent for comedy, writing, in addition to *Easy Living*, such films as *The Good Fairy* (1935) and *Remember the Night* (1940), as well as the hit play that inspired *Strictly Dishonorable* (1931). His approach, according to Donald Spoto (1990), “was always rigorously non-intellectual—almost anti-intellectual” (p. 137). This unorthodoxy carried over to his directorial work, and from his debut in 1940 with *The Great McGinty*, Sturges crafted movies that were nuttier, screwier, and more outrageously manic than any of the screwball comedies that had preceded them.

This screwiness camouflaged a darkness, however, that seemed keenly aware of the tense atmosphere of American society and the troubled social lives of movie audiences. Beneath the pratfalls and the witty dialogue, Sturges’ films were laced with a biting criticism of respected social structures and conventions of propriety. As Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg (1968) write, Sturges was determined “to achieve a happy

ending the gullible public would swallow like ice cream; woman not only gets man, but millions; not only sex, but sex with someone who has a handsome face” (p. 155). Sturges was remarkably productive throughout the decade, writing and directing 11 films from 1940 to 1949, all of which shared a giddy irreverence and energy that raised eyebrows but kept viewers laughing too hard to be offended.

Sturges continues to be acknowledged today as one of the most influential American comedy directors. Four of his films—*The Lady Eve* (1941), *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), and *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* (1944)—were selected by the American Film Institute for its list of the 100 Greatest American Comedies in 2000. His work has been critiqued and discussed by such influential critics as Manny Farber, James Agee, and Andrew Sarris, and he has been the subject of numerous biographies. Yet, there are precious few critical analyses of his work as a product of or answer to the overriding political and social atmosphere of the 1940s, save for the occasional work by a select few critics labeling him the “anti-Capra” (Bazin, 1982, p. 40). Particularly neglected is his subversion of the optimistic American values propagated through the vast majority of popular Hollywood films from the 1930s through the 1940s, especially those values pertaining to the family unit as the chief element of social strength and wellbeing.

The purpose of this study is to explore the reflection of American society in the 1940s through the subversive and unorthodox depictions of the American family in the wartime comedies of writer-director Preston Sturges, with recognition of the ways in which he used the enforcement of the Production Code to his advantage in promoting an

image of American society that was truly reflective of the general zeitgeist while clashing greatly with the accepted myths of the Hollywood formula.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of Literature

The biographical information available on Preston Sturges is plentiful. No less than five major biographies have been written, as well as his own autobiography constructed and edited from his personal notes by his last wife, Sandy. If there is one thing that unites all of these biographies, it is their focus on the unbelievable eccentricity of Sturges' life that matches the mania of his films. It is easy to formulate a connection between the seeming abandonment of traditional family values in his movies and the unorthodox way in which he was reared.

Born to Mary and Edmond Biden on August 29, 1898, Edmond Preston Biden was brought up in various cities and countries as his mother traveled with him to Europe and across America for several years, introducing him to a variety of lifestyles and oddball characters during this time. His parents divorced in his early childhood, and Mary fled to Paris with a great thirst for high art and culture, taking Edmond Preston with her. There, she met the famous dancer Isadora Duncan, sparking up a friendship that would open doors for her and Edmond Preston to the European art scene (Spoto, 1990; Ursini, 1973). In 1902, Mary wed a Chicago stockbroker named Solomon Sturges, who adopted Edmond Preston and gave him his last name. Young Sturges remained close to Solomon for the rest of his life, acknowledging him as his true father figure and remaining permanently estranged from Edmond Biden (Curtis, 1982; Spoto, 1990).

Throughout her life, Mary (later adopting the moniker Mary Desti) floated from one husband to another, alternately searching for love and opportunity, a characteristic

that seemed to rub off on her son's fictional heroines years later. Indeed, in *Madcap: The Life of Preston Sturges*, Donald Spoto (1990) paints Mary Desti as if she were a Sturges heroine:

... she was ... enormously appealing, with a vibrant humor and relentless energy. She also seemed to cultivate an iconoclastic, almost aggressively sexual manner. When the very marriageable and very suitable Solomon Sturges entered her life, she saw an attractive potential mate who might be a good provider. (p. 6)

Andrew Dickos (1985) acknowledges as well in *Intrepid Laughter: Preston Sturges and the Movies* that Mary Desti's life was "mirrored through Preston Sturges' eyes, both as a young observer and sometime participant and, much later, as an autobiographer" (p. 1). His mother remained a constant, dominant figure in his life, although they never shared a conventional mother-son relationship. He was always "at the whim of his mother's moods, superstitions, and equivocal social position," writes Diane Jacobs (1992) in *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges*. As an adult, Preston Sturges also went through a series of wives, his marriages generally ending as he became disillusioned with what initially seemed like a great romantic adventure (Spoto, 1990).

According to the biographies, Sturges' outlook on life was influenced by a childhood filled with eclectic adult figures, a variety of cultural backgrounds, and a stream of unsteady relationships with virtually every person in his life. Perhaps because Sturges seemed like the protagonist in one of his own films—always finding success without true happiness and forever failing at remaining a faithful husband and father—historians find equating his personal life with his creative output irresistible. Spoto (1990) especially constructs his biography as if emulating a Sturges screenplay, seizing every opportunity to draw the parallels between his subject's life and oeuvre. At one point he writes, "There were dramatic, zany scenes and a colorful supporting cast in his

life, but that life did not often have as much coherence as his later screenplays” (p. 40). In a similar vein, Dickos (1985) asserts that Sturges “lived a life that could fuel a score of pictures with wonderful story lines and complications to rival even his own masterpieces” (p. 1).

Sturges’ autobiography was in fact not finished during his lifetime. It was constructed by Sandy Sturges from notes that read more like lengthy diary entries: very personal, amazingly detailed, and as episodic as the biographies. His last sentence of a seemingly endless amount of notes was, “Over the years, though, I have suffered so many attacks of indigestion that I am well versed in the remedy: ingest a little Maalox, lie down, stretch out, and hope to God I don’t croak” (Sturges, 1990, pp. 339–341). This is followed by an appropriate script direction to “fade out” and the note, “About twenty minutes later, August 6, 1959, Preston Sturges died of a heart attack at the Algonquin Hotel” (p. 340). The clever use of “fade in” and “fade out” to open and close the book indicates that even Sandy Sturges could not resist seeing the parallels between her husband’s life and his incredible movies.

The analytical writing on Sturges’ work appeared almost as immediately as he began directing. One of his most prolific critics was Manny Farber. As early as 1942, Farber expressed strong views of Sturges in a relatively brief article for *The New Republic*, calling the director “essentially a satirist without any stable point of view from which to aim his satire ... invariably mean” and “contemptuous of everybody except the opportunist ... and the unscrupulous little woman who, at some point in every picture, labels the hero a poor sap” (p. 827). In that same article, he offers praise for the grave subtext of Sturges’ second film, *Christmas in July* (1940), acknowledging that behind its



“Cinderella story” lay a social criticism “as hard and clear ... as has come out of Hollywood” (p. 827). He also briefly addresses how Sturges was able to get away with much of his satire by seeming to pander to others’ desires:

He champions nothing, and he gives his employers enough of what they want in the way of box office—his pictures always have their full share of leg art, strip tease and Hays-office morality to pad his own idea of life. That the invariable fairy godfather of each picture is not only expressive of his own cold-blooded cynicism but of typical Hollywood fantasy is an example of how this works. Another phase of his attack is shrouding in slapstick the fact that the godfather pays off not for perseverance or honesty or ability but merely from capriciousness. (p. 827)

This article was published only two years after Sturges made his directorial debut—by this time, he had directed five movies—but in its brevity Farber gauges the films with considerable depth, recognizing Sturges as a filmmaker worthy of serious criticism even if he did not entirely admire the films.

Farber expanded these ideas further in 1954, when Sturges’ career was essentially over. Writing with W. S. Poster, Farber comes to a somewhat contradictory conclusion, at once pointing out the flaws in Sturges’ work while highlighting his importance in American film. They describe him as an “extreme embodiment of the American success dream,” writing that “The image of success stalks every Sturges movie like an unlaidd ghost, coloring the plots and supplying the fillip to his funniest scenes” (pp. 89–90). They saw a consistency in the director’s unsentimental tone throughout his career, despite the fact that some critics believed he was softening. Siegfried Kracauer (1950), for instance, agreed with Farber’s assessment of the use of slapstick to make more settling the dark undertones of Sturges’ films, saying that much of what made *The Great McGinty*, which “satirizes a society in which honesty does not pay,” such a success was its comedic structure (pp. 12–13). He believed, however, that the films lost their hard edge by the

mid-1940s, with *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944) and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944) in particular forgoing the bite of Sturges' earlier films for a more optimistic view of society in which human integrity wins out in the end. Farber and Poster (1954) counter this when they write that Sturges "does not give a tinker's dam whether the world does or does not yield to candor" (p. 92). In their view, Sturges' satire is drawn from evoking feelings about American society through the varied and ever changing foibles of its citizens, and if the plots became sentimental, it was not because Sturges himself was sentimental, but rather because he was using the convention of sentimentality as a part of his greater satirical design. Similarly, André Bazin (1982) believed that Sturges used familiar conventions in such a way as to reveal them and then destroy them.

As with the biographers, Farber and Poster (1954) eventually draw Sturges' personal life into the analysis, attributing his perspective of an ever-moving society and his inventive use of conventions to the split sensibilities of his bohemian mother and conservative stepfather. The tendency to view the films within the auteurist context of Sturges' family background is one that has characterized much of the available criticism of his work. In the opening paragraph of his 1944 piece on Sturges for *The New York Times Magazine*, Bosley Crowther credits Sturges' "aggressively dilettante mama" for her son's "revulsion to the fopperies of upper-case Art" (p. 14). James Agee (2000) had previously followed his 1944 review of *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* for *Time* with a brief summation of Sturges' early life, writing, "Sturges' brilliant, successful yet always deeply self-sabotaging films suggest a warring blend of the things he picked up through respect for his solid stepfather, contact with his strange mother, and the intense need to enjoy himself" (p. 330).

Andrew Sarris (1998) later referred to such criticism as “unusually Freudian” (p. 317). Richard Schickel (1985) went even further in the first sentence of his article “Preston Sturges: Alien Dreamer” for *Film Comment*, writing, “It’s time to set aside all those pop-Freudian explanations of the life and art of Preston Sturges,” going on to blame Agee for starting this trend of “fly-by-the-slicks psychologizing” (p. 32). Rather, Schickel puts forth the idea that it was not Sturges’ family but his alienation from American society that influenced the unique perspective of his films. Because the director was away from the United States for such a significant amount of time as a child and was never totally immersed in American culture as other American children were, he became struck by the assumptions, clichés, and premises that his fellow Americans took for granted. Schickel also maintains that Sturges was not a social critic at all, but instead “an uncommitted observer, bemused and compassionate, but without any cures in mind for the conditions he observed” (p. 33). He saw Sturges’ films not as negative exposés of corruption and dishonesty, but as acknowledgements of the individualist nature of American citizens. The message in Sturges’ films was that rather than conforming to one generalization perpetuated by Hollywood, it is best to agree that everyone is “some kind of weirdo” and it is absolutely necessary to “[laugh] at each other—ruefully, and not unkindly” (Schickel, p. 35). In a piece for *Sight & Sound*, Philip Kemp (2000) agrees that Preston Sturges was not a satirist, as satire requires scorn for its subjects and Sturges had too much fun in his movies to dislike his characters.

In reality, there have long been two schools of thought on Sturges’ films that have, appropriately, generated a sense of chaos in the critical world. More than 20 years after Sturges directed his last hit, Michael Budd (1968) championed the rediscovery of his

films because they are so thoroughly American. He accused critics of the past, such as Agee, of being “particularly incompetent to deal with them, impatient with their faults while largely blind to their virtues” (p. 22). Years before Schickel wrote his piece, Budd espoused that Sturges’ films neared the essence of the American aesthetic attitude at an unconscious, self-denying level. Like Schickel, he saw Sturges not as a focused satirist or revolutionary, but as a filmmaker intrigued by human silliness with no plan to amend it. Three decades after Sturges’ period of success in Hollywood, Dan Ackerman (1976) took the opposite approach, recognizing the ways in which Sturges’ films subverted the formulae that other filmmakers took so seriously. After it became an almost moral duty for Hollywood to produce uplifting stories of success during the Depression, Sturges called attention to the falsity of this depiction. His movies were filled with characters who achieved some level of importance or greatness either by accident or through dishonest means. As Ackerman observes, “Sturges criticizes the American Dream by portraying its realization in grotesquely unbelievable terms” (p. 80). He points out as well that the world of Sturges’ films is full of opportunity and transformation on the surface, but the social reality of this world is based only on appearance. This echoes Penelope Houston’s (1965) claim that the “one consistent element running through Sturges’ films ... is a view of life as some gigantic game of false pretenses” (p. 132).

Whether Sturges was the shrewd satirist or the ambivalent observer may never be agreed upon by critics. What critics have generally agreed on, however, are the major themes of his work: success, as observed by Farber and Poster (1954), and false pretenses, as pointed out by Houston (1965). In his dissertation *Satires and Sideshows: The Films and Career of Preston Sturges*, Raymond J. Cywinski (1981) identifies and discusses

both of these central themes. Success, he writes, is not just one of Sturges' recurring themes, but "the elemental lifebreath-and-blood that suffuses Sturges' life and work" (pp. 58–59). It is at the core of all of the director's films except his last three: *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (1949), and *The French, They Are a Funny Race* (1955). Cywinski reveals that success comes to Sturges' characters either through their own cleverness and manipulation or through pure chance or miracles, never from hard work or perseverance. He posits that this suggests a darker side to Sturges' view of success in the real world:

The resolutions, far from being standard commercial cop-outs as some critics aver, may actually testify to the opposite—a part of Sturges that believes ultimate success is impossible, or at least very fleeting. A world in which people succeed only through luck or miracle implies, first, that most people don't, and also, that one's actions have little effect on anything other than one's own immediate experience. (p. 67)

The theme of false pretenses and mistaken identities is not given as much space in Cywinski's dissertation as he devotes to success, although he stresses that Sturges used the convention of false identities in a way that took it to "dimensions of a world-view" (p. 69). While Cywinski does not expound upon the implications about the falsity of family relationships involved with this theme, this establishes a slight precedent for what will be analyzed in greater depth in this study.

Importantly for this study, Cywinski (1981) focuses on the connection between Sturges' films and the socio-political conditions of the era, particularly the Depression years that immediately preceded his directorial career. These years were a time of great inventiveness for many Americans who resorted to all manner of bizarre and unusual ways to make money. A "kind of loony improvisation" emerged from the desperation of these years, and "Sturges' films, more than any of their era, seem to have their station

finely tuned-in to the chaotic spirit and peculiarly manic futility of those years” (Cywinski, p. 85). This observation is a significant departure from the typical critical debate over whether or not Sturges was a true satirist and the frequent psychoanalysis of his films. It grounds the films more firmly within their proper social context and acknowledges film as a cultural text capable of reflecting the values and beliefs of its respective society, regardless of whether the author behind them is the mean-spirited revolutionary or the wide-eyed alien that Sturges’ critics alternately accused him of being.

By far the most exhaustive critical study conducted on Preston Sturges’ work is Jay Rozgonyi’s 1995 book *Preston Sturges’s Vision of America: Critical Analyses of Fourteen Films*. Analyzing ten films written and directed by Sturges (all except *Unfaithfully Yours* and *The French, They Are a Funny Race*) and four only written by him, Rozgonyi’s book explores the films more thoroughly and deeply than any previous research available. A chapter is dedicated for every film discussed, providing synopses and production information, historical context, and discussion of the major themes in each film. Rozgonyi stresses that by and large the one characteristic shared by Sturges’ diverse and eclectic works is that they expose the mythology about American society that moviegoers readily accept as truth. He breaks down these myths as follows:

America and its citizens are special and somehow above the common shortcomings of others; America has an equitable, classless system that allows people to accrue wealth and achieve success solely on the basis of their own hard work; most people are ethical and well-intentioned, and honesty always pays off while dishonesty is invariably punished; and all citizens are treated justly and equally under the law, no matter what their economic status may be. (p. 2)

These are the very myths that were perpetuated in Hollywood films throughout the Depression and were still largely prevalent in the early 1940s as World War II became an imminent threat. While Rozgonyi explores various aspects of American life in his

analyses, he is one of the very few to assess the depiction of the family unit in Preston Sturges' oeuvre explicitly. "In film after film," he writes, "[Sturges] presents family units that not only offer little comfort for the children, siblings, or parents involved, but that actually hold their members back from achieving personal or professional happiness" (p. 170). He identifies the common source of this dysfunction as the unstable marriages at the core of the characters' relationships, although this is not always the case. Whatever the cause, however, the sanctity of the family is continuously torn down, and thus "one of the primary building blocks of American mythology" is ridiculed and exposed as being far from the ideal that Hollywood held up at the time (Rozgonyi, p. 173).

There is useful research on the representation of the American family unit in genres other than comedy in the 1930s and 1940s that provides both a foundation and a point of contrast for this study. In "Everybody Sing: Family, Community and the Representation of Social Harmony in the Hollywood Musical," James Buhler (2008) analyzes the place of the family in classical musicals. He chiefly focuses on the family as a microcosm of the greater community and how this community is created, restored, and remade through the films' use of music. Buhler points out that the majority of popular classical musicals dwell on romance and courtship over family, with most films ending in marriage or the promise of marriage before the couple produces a family. The couples at the center of these films (Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, for instance) represent the promise of a new community, and if their courtship is successful, then so is the creation of that community. In the case of a family-centered musical such as Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), the focus lies more in the sustaining of a community rather than its initiation, but the film still emphasizes courtship over the broader relationships of

the whole family as Judy Garland's character emerges as the star and her romantic pursuit of the boy next door becomes the central storyline. Buhler cites a number of films of the era, particularly in the 1930s, that feature incomplete or dysfunctional families. However, the driving motivation of these musicals is to mend the broken family unit, and the music "serves a restorative function, a magical balm to heal the wound that fragmentation inflicts on families" (Buhler, p. 38).

Christopher Sharrett (2008) makes the case that, at its core, the western "has a contempt for the family and community viewed as centres of domestic, feminine values, and for civilization ... as symbol of total depravity" (p. 122). This contempt is only overtly presented onscreen in the postwar years, however. Sharrett cites King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) as the beginning of a re-evaluation of the family in the western genre that he refers to as the "Rise of the Monstrous Family" (p. 127). This rise continues throughout the 1950s with depictions of the family under constant threat from changing social conventions and sexual interlopers. Even in westerns of the 1930s, however, there are strong, subversive hints of dissatisfaction with the conventional family unit. Sharrett uses John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) as an instance, citing the final scene, in which the outlaw Ringo Kid (John Wayne) and prostitute Dallas (Claire Trevor) ride away to start a new life together, as running particularly "counter to the ostensible values of the western" (p. 121). What keeps the film from becoming an outright attack on family conventions is the surface level of respect it pays to them in its idealization of women and in the sentimental scene involving the birth of a child. However, according to Sharrett, these do more to mask the genre's dark undercurrents that were finally exposed more obviously after World War II ended. This subversive use of conventions is



mirrored in Preston Sturges' films, but the difference lies in that this is characteristic of the western genre in general while Sturges' films are uniquely marked among classical comedies.

While the literature reviewed provides multiple perspectives on the work of Preston Sturges and differing opinions about what is reflected in it, the intent of this study is to focus more closely on the contemporary social climate of Sturges' career rather than on his past. Most of the preceding critical analysis has been psychological in nature, concentrating on the ways in which Sturges' past influenced his films. Breaking away from this approach, which was popularized by Agee and Farber, and building on what Cywinski and Rozgonyi broached in their writings, this study will be concentrated less on speculation about Sturges' personal attitudes and idiosyncrasies and more on the actual content of his movies, their defiance of the Hollywood mythology, and their eccentric but honest reflection of American social conditions. Unlike the previous research, which generally presented individual analyses of Sturges' films and addressed various themes unique to each individual film, this study will examine a specific subject as it is developed and represented throughout Sturges' oeuvre during the war years.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the reflection of the troubled American family during World War II through content analysis of five comedies written and directed by Preston Sturges, with recognition of his need to abide by the strictures of the Production Code to express this representation. The films selected for this study are: *The Great McGinty* (1940), *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944). These films were selected because they feature familial relationships that are central to their narratives and were made during the time frame of World War II (1939–1945).

#### *Plot Synopses of the Selected Films*

##### *The Great McGinty*

Preston Sturges' directorial debut *The Great McGinty* is a political satire about the rise of Daniel McGinty (Brian Donlevy) from homeless bum to state governor through the manipulations of a corrupt political machine. Beginning in an unnamed banana republic, the film introduces McGinty as a bartender in a rundown saloon. A young banker named Thompson (Louis Jean Heydt), who has fled the United States for an act of dishonesty after years of faithfully serving his bank, attempts to commit suicide in the restroom. After preventing him from doing so, McGinty tells him the story of how he became the governor.

While standing in a soup line several years earlier, the homeless McGinty is offered \$2 for putting in a fraudulent vote in a mayoral election. Rather than stopping at one vote, McGinty votes under false names at 37 different locations to make \$74. Impressed by this cunning savvy, the political Boss behind the scheme (Akim Tamiroff) hires McGinty as one of his henchmen. He later proposes that McGinty run for reform mayor, believing that his tough persona and fresh face may appeal to the public. In order to be successful, however, the Boss suggests that he get married to draw in the women's vote because women are attracted to family men. Catherine, a secretary (Muriel Angelus), volunteers to marry him, although she waits to inform him until after the wedding that she has two children from a previous marriage.

McGinty and Catherine live separately for the first few weeks of their marriage, sleeping in separate bedrooms and carrying on a professional relationship. Only after he discovers that she is still seeing her former lover, George (Allyn Joslyn), does McGinty express his love for her. He accepts her children as his own, and they live happily as a family until he is elected governor. At this point, Catherine urges him to use his authority to do some good for the state rather than carry on the corrupt orders of the Boss. When McGinty comes clean about his past corruption, both he and the Boss are sent to prison. They later escape to the banana republic, but not before McGinty encourages Catherine to divorce him and marry George to ensure that she and her children are looked after.

### *The Lady Eve*

Returning home after a year in the Amazon, snake expert and ale company heir Charles Pike (Henry Fonda) meets beautiful cardsharp Jean Harrington (Barbara Stanwyck) on an ocean liner. Together with her father Harry (Charles Coburn) and their

partner Gerald (Melville Cooper), Jean entices rich men to play cards and fleeces them for their money. She intends to do the same with Charles, but she falls in love with him instead, choosing to give up her criminal lifestyle to marry him. Charles' chaperone, Muggsy (William Demarest), sees through Jean's initial deception and presents him with evidence that she is only interested in his fortune. Charles confronts Jean and breaks off their romance.

Determined to take revenge on Charles, Jean poses as "Lady Eve," the noble niece of Sir Alfred McGlennan Keith (Eric Blore), a fellow swindler and acquaintance of the Pikes. She secures an invitation to a party at the Pike residence where she seduces Charles, who is unaware that she is actually Jean. The two get married, and on their wedding night, she fabricates sordid tales of past promiscuity in order to humiliate him. He immediately asks for a divorce and agrees to pay her a large settlement, much to her father's delight, but she realizes how much she loves him and cannot accept it. In order to win him back, she meets him again on the ocean liner, this time as her true self. He willingly takes her back, finding her criminal activity forgivable in light of "Eve's" promiscuity, and still never realizes that they are the same woman.

### *The Palm Beach Story*

Following a frenetic opening sequence depicting the marriage of Tom and Gerry Jeffers (Joel McCrea and Claudette Colbert), *The Palm Beach Story* picks up five years later as they are struggling to make ends meet and are in danger of being evicted from their duplex. Tom is a floundering inventor whose latest design is an airport suspended above the ground. Gerry meets a prospective tenant in the duplex, an elderly sausage magnate who calls himself the Wienie King (Robert Dudley). Sympathetic to her plight

and attracted to her beauty, he gives her \$700 to pay off her debts. She realizes that she can use her good looks to her husband's advantage by trading sexual services with businessmen for opportunities for Tom. He rejects this idea, and so she decides that a divorce is best for both of them, as he cannot satisfy her expensive desires and her materialism is holding him back. She heads off to Palm Beach for a quick divorce by train, but he flies out to meet her there and win her back.

On the train, she meets John D. Hackensacker III (Rudy Vallee), a multimillionaire who enjoys buying gifts for women. In Palm Beach, he introduces her to his sister, the Princess Centimillia (Mary Astor). Tom arrives the same day and quickly becomes the object of affection for the princess, despite the fact that she is married and is having an affair with foreign boy toy Toto (Sig Arno). Introducing Tom as her brother rather than her husband, Gerry devises a scheme to marry Hackensacker and have him finance Tom's airport. Hackensacker agrees, but Tom wants no part of the deception.

One night, while Hackensacker serenades Gerry, she falls in love with Tom again, and they decide to abandon their scheme and return home. Hackensacker and the princess are disappointed when they learn of the Jeffers' true identities, but Gerry informs them that they both have identical twins. In the final scene, a triple wedding takes place, with Tom and Gerry reunited, Hackensacker marrying Gerry's twin (Claudette Colbert), and the princess marrying Tom's twin (Joel McCrea), with Toto standing by her side.

### *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*

*The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* is set in a small, rural town of Morgan's Creek just as the young servicemen are about to depart for the war. Trudy Kockenlocker (Betty

Hutton), a fun-loving girl, believes it is her patriotic duty to attend the farewell dance and kiss the boys goodbye, much to the chagrin of her overprotective father, Constable Kockenlocker (William Demarest). Her nebbish childhood friend Norval Jones (Eddie Bracken), who is in love with her, was turned down by the army for his nervous tendencies and resents her interest in the soldiers. When her father forbids her to go to the dance, she uses Norval to get her out of the house, having him ask her out to the movies and then going to the dance on her own. The next morning, she comes back drunk and disoriented. She notices a curtain ring on her ring finger and vaguely remembers someone at the dance suggesting they all get married. She comes to the conclusion that she and a soldier married under false names, but she has no memory of who he was or what he looked like.

Several weeks later, she discovers that she is pregnant. With no idea who the father is and fear of becoming a public outcast, she and kid sister Emmy (Diana Lynn) concoct a plan to make Norval propose to her. If she marries him, then no one will question where the baby came from. However, when Norval reveals how long he has loved her and all the things he has done to be near her, Trudy genuinely falls in love with him and cannot bring herself to deceive him. She tells him of her unwanted pregnancy. Together, they decide to have a fake marriage using the alias she remembers the soldier using (“Ratzkiwatzki”). Once they have the marriage license, she can divorce “Ratzkiwatzki” and marry Norval legitimately. They are caught, however, by the Justice of the Peace, and Norval is sent to jail for kidnapping.

Trudy eventually tells her father what happened, and he helps Norval to escape from jail. The Kockenlockers leave town so that Trudy may carry out her pregnancy

away from the gossip and judgment of the small-town folk, but when Norval returns to Morgan's Creek to look for her several months later, he is thrown back in jail. The Kockenlockers go back to Morgan's Creek to plead for his innocence, but Trudy goes into labor and gives birth to sextuplet boys. Excited by the news, a reporter phones the state governor, who is none other than Daniel McGinty (once again played by Brian Donlevy). He and the Boss (Akim Tamiroff again) drop all charges against Norval, nullify Trudy's first marriage to "Ratzkiwatzki," and make Norval a colonel in the army, essentially covering up the scandal in order to use the birth of the sextuplets to draw worldwide publicity for their state. Norval is released from jail to claim Trudy as his wife, but upon seeing the sextuplets, he runs away in panic. A final epilogue reads that Norval eventually accepts the children, "for, as Shakespeare said: '... some have greatness thrust upon them.'"

### *Hail the Conquering Hero*

Woodrow Lafayette Pershing Truesmith (Eddie Bracken) is a young Marine and the son of a great World War I hero. Ashamed to go home after being discharged from the service due to chronic hay fever, Woodrow works in a shipyard but leads his mother (Georgia Caine) to believe he is fighting in World War II so as not to bring shame to their family. He encounters a group of Marines one night in a bar and tells them of his situation. Appalled by Woodrow's deceit of his mother, a Marine named Bugsy (Freddie Steele) calls Mrs. Truesmith and tells her Woodrow is on his way home. The other Marines concoct a story of Woodrow being wounded in battle with honorable discharge, in spite of Woodrow's protesting.

When they arrive in Woodrow's hometown of Oak Ridge, the group is met with much publicity as everyone comes out to celebrate the "conquering hero." His former girlfriend Libby (Ella Raines) is now engaged to the mayor's son Forrest (Bill Edwards), but she keeps this a secret for fear of spoiling the occasion. The rest of the townsfolk elevate Woodrow to a level of celebrity that he knows he does not deserve, and with his every effort to suppress it, the people only admire him more. They decide to have him run for mayor against the incumbent, Everett Noble (Raymond Walburn), leading to complications in Libby and Forrest's engagement. Unable to stand the pretense any longer, Woodrow publicly confesses his deception and withdraws from the mayoral race. His truthfulness touches the townsfolk, and they enthusiastically elect him mayor anyway. Libby leaves Forrest and returns to Woodrow, and the rest of the Marines leave the town, satisfied that Woodrow and his mother are reunited and happy.

### *Critical Approach*

The five selected movies will be analyzed from a narrative standpoint, following the evolutions of the familial relationships throughout the course of the narrative. The relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and siblings will be examined, with attention to how they interact with each other, any deceptions involved in their relationships, and how family members generally aid or hinder each other's goals. The films will also be approached within the context of their social and political background, taking into consideration the impact of World War II on the film industry and on American society. Prominent motifs concerning the family unit that are carried through two or more films will be identified and discussed. The combination of narrative



analysis and historical contextualization will allow an understanding of the ways in which these films reflect the society that produced them.

The guidelines of the Production Code will be used to decipher where Sturges adheres to the regulations pertaining to the representation of American society, where he defies them, and where he subverts them. The Production Code was adopted in 1930 as a form of self-censorship within the Hollywood film industry amid growing social concerns that movies were becoming too risqué and promoted immoral lifestyles (Leff & Simmons, 2001). Three general principles, as cited on pages 286–287 in Leff & Simmons, formed the basis of the Code’s regulations and philosophy:

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

These strict guidelines affected Hollywood film narratives by prohibiting the onscreen presentation of objectionable subjects, such as prostitution and drug use, and by encouraging the promotion of positive, life-affirming morals. Examining Sturges’ defiance and subversion of the Production Code in his narratives will help reveal the films’ rejection of the popular sentiments promoted in mainstream wartime films.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

Throughout the five selected films, there were five recurring motifs: marriage as a deceitful pretense, divorce as a solution to domestic problems, unusual parent-child relationships, absent and surrogate parental figures, and the use of relatives as commodities. Preston Sturges' treatment of marriage and divorce had the most overt relevance to the restrictions of the Production Code in relation to "correct standards of life." In a broader sense, Sturges consistently defied the Code's principle against sympathizing with crime and corruption.

#### *Marriage as Deceitful Pretense*

In order to uphold its three general principles, the Production Code contained 12 categories of applications that Hollywood filmmakers were expected to follow: Crimes Against the Law, Sex, Vulgarity, Obscenity, Profanity, Costume, Dances, Religion, Locations, National Feelings, Titles, and Repellent Subjects. Of these, none was more detailed than the section on sex, which began with the statement, "The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld" (as cited in Leff & Simmons, 2001, p. 287). For Sturges, the institution of marriage was a frequent source of humor that was derived not from the typical conventions of romantic comedy but from the use of marriage as part of a grand scheme or act of deceit. Worth noticing is how spectacularly unromantic his wedding scenes are, and if there is love in the relationship at all, it is generally not the reason for the wedding taking place.

Sturges' cynical view of marriage is introduced with upfront frankness in *The Great McGinty*. When the Boss first suggests that Daniel McGinty get married in order to draw in the women's vote, he attempts to make his scheme more convincing by asking, in his underhandedly charming way, "Don't you know that marriage has always been the most beautiful ... setup between the sexes? Don't you know that a man without a wife is like a coat without the pants? Like a pig without a poke?" McGinty flatly refuses, quipping back, "Poke that in your pig!" This general disdain for marriage is continued in the next scene, as Catherine believes she and McGinty would make an ideal couple because neither of them wants to be married. Her vision of the future is one of convenience rather than marital bliss, with her keeping up the home and appearing in publicity photos, being his "lawful wedded wife and everything except when we were alone."

In unromantic fashion, the wedding takes place off camera, with only the quick departure of the newlyweds along with the Boss and two other cohorts shown as the wedding march is heard playing in the church. One cohort violently pelts them with rice as they climb into what seems to be a getaway car, emphasizing the illegality of their scheme. When Catherine is dropped off at her apartment, she invites McGinty up to have a drink, an action more suitable for a couple's first date than their wedding day. The revelation that she has children and her reluctance to tell him before indicate that the marriage is a convenient opportunity not just for McGinty, but for Catherine as well. No longer a single mother, she now has a financial supporter whose guaranteed political success will benefit her and her children. Although the pieces are all in place with a mother, father, and two children, love and the sanctity of the home are the last things on

McGinty and Catherine's minds. Their union is one of mutual self-interest and deception (McGinty's deception of the public and Catherine's initial deception of McGinty).

In spite of the marriage, McGinty and Catherine carry on their professional relationship, sleeping in separate bedrooms and essentially leading separate lives. It goes without question that their marriage is not consummated. They move into a larger apartment, ironically located across the street from a church. She continues to address him formally as Mr. McGinty and later as "Your Honor" after he is elected mayor. There is a particularly sly comment on their living situation when McGinty comes home on the night of his victory party, clearly drunk and unfamiliar with the layout of the new apartment. He stumbles over a ladder and noisily knocks over a table covered with fine china. Awakened by the commotion, Catherine apologizes for leaving the ladder in the middle of the room without a nightlight. Holding a piece of broken china, McGinty adds, "Or a red lantern." On the surface, the reference to red lanterns seems like a clever joke relating to the china and the red lanterns used in Chinese festivals, but it could also be a subtle reference to the red lanterns associated with the brothels in ancient China. While McGinty and Catherine may not be engaged in a sexual relationship, their defilement of marriage for their own gain was as much a blow to the restrictions of the Production Code as outright prostitution.

Sturges treads dangerous waters with the introduction of Catherine's lover George. According to the Production Code, "Out of regard for the sanctity of marriage and the home, the triangle, that is, the love of a third party for one already married, needs careful handling. The treatment should not throw sympathy against marriage as an institution" (as cited in Leff & Simmons, 2001, p. 298). The romantic relationship between

Catherine and George is certainly not kept hidden from McGinty, nor does either feel guilty about it. This is a daring situation for a movie in 1940. Two people are in an unconsummated marriage of convenience while one engages in an extramarital affair right under the other's nose. This not only throws sympathy against the institution of marriage; it absolutely skewers all sense of propriety and morality. The only conceivable way in which Sturges managed to avoid the wrath of the Production Code is by having the heretofore chaste husband and wife fall in love. Their recognition of their love for each other, brought on by McGinty's jealousy, culminates in a passionate kiss that leads to Catherine's first utterance of McGinty's first name. At last, their marriage is made honest, and her affair officially ends.

*The Lady Eve* opens with a joke of its own, as an animated snake slithers its way down an orchard in the amusing opening credits sequence. The cartoon is a burlesque of the Garden of Eden, evoking the theme of a treacherous Eve and a gullible Adam. The snake, wearing a top hat like a groom, is clearly male. Once he reaches the end of the credits, where Preston Sturges' billing appears, he slithers through the O in Sturges' first name and promptly gets stuck in it. This could be seen as either a Freudian joke or, in keeping with the groom motif, the male becoming trapped by the wedding ring. Either way, it introduces the film's view on marriage as an act of malice by the woman on the man. This is solidified further when an apple bearing the name Eve drops onto the snake's head.

Although the snake in the opening sequence is identified as male, both sexes are equated to snakes throughout the film. As Charles arrives on the ocean liner, Jean is positioned far above him, holding an apple. She impishly drops the apple on his head,

repeating the action from the opening cartoon, only now *she* is the snake, waiting to draw the gullible man into her sinful designs. While dining that evening, Charles reads a book entitled *Are Snakes Necessary?* as female gold-diggers send him adoring looks. The connection between the unnecessary snakes he is reading about and the greedy snakes who are leering at him establishes Charles' equation of women to snakes, which is reinforced later when Jean and the audience are introduced to his pet female snake. On the other hand, Jean remarks that Charles "should be kept in a cage" after he confesses that he is "cockeyed" over her perfume, establishing her view that men, like snakes, should be kept in captivity rather than allowed to roam freely.

The eventual marriage between Charles and "Eve" is, like that between McGinty and Catherine, founded on deception and self-gain, although in this film it is only one-sided. Charles believes they are in love, but Jean uses marriage as vengeance against him. She marries him because she hates him, and she takes sadistic pleasure in seeing him hurt both physically (in a number of pratfalls) and emotionally (when she fabricates stories of past promiscuity). The emotional distance between them is emphasized by the fact that Charles, in spite of his love for her and the fact that she has not altered her physical appearance, cannot recognize that "Eve" is the same woman he loved before. The wedding scene itself is stripped of any sense of romance, shown only briefly at the tail end of a fast-paced and humorous montage.

Charles eagerly forgives Jean in the film's closing scene, as her earlier deception pales in comparison to "Eve's" sordid past. He confesses that he is now married, and she makes the same confession with a playful knowingness. The complication of their situation—they are married to each other while not married to each other—will be

expanded and developed further in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. In this film, no third party is involved, although Jean is in fact the other woman in her own marriage. This setup allows Sturges' protagonist to be married to one woman and in love with another while avoiding the discouraged triangle, thus adhering to the guidelines of the Production Code while still ridiculing the institution of marriage.

If there was ever a memorably unromantic wedding scene in any Sturges film, the opening sequence of *The Palm Beach Story* would easily hold that title, rivaled only by the same film's closing sequence. A dizzying, frenetic montage, the opening sequence makes little sense even on repeated viewings. What is clear (only on a repeat viewing) is that Tom and Gerry Jeffers and their identical twins are all featured, and the sequence ends with Tom and Gerry at the church altar. Gerry's sister is seen bound and gagged in her undergarments while a maid faints after seeing Gerry in a wedding dress. Tom's twin is shown getting into a cab, although where he is going and where he is coming from are unclear. It may be easily interpreted that Gerry was involved in some sort of manipulation of her sister, who apparently was the sister who was originally going to be married. Which of the Jeffers brothers was the original groom and whether one or both were involved in the manipulation are up for debate. The sequence culminates with the onscreen text, "and they lived happily ever after," followed by the unexpected "or did they?"

After five years, Tom and Gerry's marriage is in poor condition. She is no longer satisfied just being "a part of [him], just something to snuggle up to and keep [him] warm at night like a blanket." She has material desires that he cannot fulfill on his low income, and she sees herself as useless to him because she does not fit the mold of a conventional

housewife. The Wienie King's willingness to hand her \$700 gives her the inspiration to use her body to gain personal favors for Tom with successful businessmen. She devises the scheme of posing as his sister and essentially prostituting herself for Tom's career. At this point, divorce is not mentioned, so it may be concluded that she will perform this service while still married to him. "You know we're not in love anymore," she says, "We're just habits, bad habits." For Gerry, whose sole interest is money, love has lost its meaning. She is still sexually drawn to Tom, as demonstrated by the aroused movement of her feet when he kisses her, but even this is not enough to keep her from leaving him. In her mind, sex and success go hand in hand, and unless one leads to the other, she sees no reason to stay around.

If marriage as an institution is presented as fruitless and impotent in the first half of the film, it is depicted as an avenue to temporary satisfaction in the second half. No character embodies this more fully than the Princess Centimillia, a walking libido who woos and disposes of men on a daily basis. She is currently married to a prince, but she has Toto on the side and expresses interest in looking for a new husband, who she finds in Tom. She makes no apologies for her lifestyle, and marriage consumes her in the way gambling or sports consume other people. Gerry sees Hackensacker as prime husband material, not because he is loving or nurturing, but because he is rich and generous with his money. He is a younger version of the suggestively named Wienie King: lacking Tom's sexual virility, but well endowed with wealth. If her scheme works, Gerry will have everything that she desires: Hackensacker will provide financial support while Tom—married to the princess—will provide sex.



The men present the only traditional view of marriage, although Hackensacker is so lacking in passion that he proposes having a trial marriage with rented children to make sure everything will work out. He believes that marriage should last forever, but he approaches it as he would a business deal, sizing it up to see if it will be satisfactory. His unimaginative metaphor for marriage as “a permanent grafting of two trees into a permanent graft” exemplifies his aloofness. Hackensacker may be viewed as the ultimate parody of the Production Code’s approach to marriage. For him, it is only an institution, something to be respected and upheld, but without true emotion (Sturges’ use of the word “graft” as a double-entendre also indicates that marriage is an institution to be used for financial gain). Tom, then, possesses the only normal views on marriage, but he remains constantly behind Gerry (it is impossible to ignore the connection to their animated namesakes, with hungry cat Tom always in pursuit of the craftier mouse Jerry). Sturges seems to suggest that the traditional views of family and matrimony, as represented by Tom, are behind the times of a fast-moving transition to female independence.

The final wedding sequence, in which Tom and Gerry reunite and the millionaire siblings marry the Jeffers’ twins, is an abrupt twist that arouses almost as much confusion as the opening sequence. Sturges’ repeat of the “and they lived happily ever after ... or did they?” device is almost unnecessary because it is clear that they surely will not. The entire situation is one of convenience for everyone (except the nameless twins, who will be discussed further in a later section). The princess has her new husband—and Toto, too. Hackensacker marries Gerry’s twin, and therefore will continue to help Tom with his airport design. Tom and Gerry are reunited with each other and united through their twins to Hackensacker, ensuring their own financial stability without Gerry having to

prostitute herself. But the princess will surely divorce Tom's twin shortly thereafter, and if Gerry's twin proves unsatisfactory to Hackensacker, then Tom and Gerry's own marriage will be in detriment once again.

*The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* explicitly relates marital problems to the war. In an early scene, Constable Kockenlocker reads a newspaper article with the headline, "Are Military Marriages a Menace?" The article's opening paragraph warns of men and women being lonely and of decisions that once took years of thought now being made in mere moments. This, of course, is exactly what will happen to Trudy after the dance. Kockenlocker does not trust soldiers, as shown in an early scene where he scolds a group of young servicemen who later watch desiringly as Trudy lip-synchs to a man's voice on a record. As the constable reads the paper, Emmy plays "Here Comes the Bride" on the piano. When asked by her father if she generally thinks about getting married, she confirms that she does, adding "What else do you think I think about?" Sturges thus establishes the home-front situation: men are hungry, women are loose, and parents had better be suspicious. The war has corrupted the sanctity of marriage, removed the sense of sacredness and life-long commitment, and turned it into a spur-of-the-moment activity for young people to engage in before it is too late.

Whereas the weddings in the three previous films were depicted onscreen as rushed, passionless acts, the wedding between Trudy and "Ratzkiwatzki" remains entirely unseen. The only evidence of it is the curtain ring around Trudy's finger, which Sturges treats with a parodic dissolve from a master shot of the two sisters catching sight of the ring to close-up of it on Trudy's finger, accompanied by melodramatic music. There is no license, no groom, and no memory of a wedding. It may very well have never

happened at all, but the idea of having sex out of wedlock is so undesirable for the people of Morgan's Creek—as well as for the Production Code Administration—that Trudy remains thoroughly convinced that she is married despite the lack of hard evidence.

One need not be too astute to see that the device of the marriage in this case is little more than a deception in itself for the Production Code. Although separate from the Production Code, the Catholic Legion of Decency held a significant amount of power in the film industry with its rating system that informed Catholic moviegoers of the moral value in Hollywood films. “A” ratings indicated that a film was morally unobjectionable, “B” ratings signified that a film was partially objectionable, and “C”-rated films were condemned (Walsh, 1996). The Legion of Decency saw through Sturges' deception, pointing out that if Trudy did not marry the soldier, then she was obviously guilty of premarital sex, but if she did marry him, then she committed adultery by later marrying Norval. The Legion, however, found the movie “very funny” and let it go with a “B” rating after having previously condemned films that were less risqué (Walsh, p. 183). Joseph Breen, the head of the Production Code Administration, had resigned to a slight sense of defeat as filmmakers continuously pushed for racier material throughout the war years, and rather than demanding that Sturges abandon the film or make drastic changes, he only objected to a few lines of dialogue and approved it (Leff & Simmons, 2001). James Agee later wrote of the leniency shown to *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* that “The Hays office has been either hypnotized into a liberality for which it should be thanked, or has been raped in its sleep” (as cited in Leff & Simmons, p. 130).

Although Trudy's marital situation is rather absurd, the social truthfulness of it cannot be ignored. Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry (2006) call *The Miracle of*

*Morgan's Creek* “probably the most subversive film of the war” due to its “rejection of the fundamental narratives of war propagated by Hollywood during the war years, and [its] subversion of the narrative conventions of the Hollywood World War II film” (p. 261). They write specifically of the film’s criticism of the popular depiction of women’s great patriotic duty to give the servicemen one last night of pleasure before they leave for active duty. It is also possible, though, to relate Trudy’s abandonment by the father of her child to the plights of many American women who were left to raise their families on their own while their husbands were sent overseas. Responsibility for the family is seen as a woman’s duty and is spelled out as such by Mr. Johnson, Trudy’s lawyer (Al Bridge), when he says, “No man is going to jeopardize his present or poison his future with a lot of little brats hollering around the house unless he’s forced to.” He explicitly states that, were it not for women, marriage would have disappeared long before. Rearing a family is painted as a burden rather than a blessing, and it is one that the mother must abide on her own in times of war. At no point in the film is “Ratzkiwatzki,” whoever he may be, held accountable for the incident. The responsibility falls squarely on Trudy, reinforcing the serious repercussions she must face not just for her promiscuity but for her producing a family to begin with. It also exposes a misogynistic worldview that will be discussed in more detail later.

The film’s second marriage, between Trudy and Norval-as-“Ratzkiwatzki,” bears comparison to the wedding between Charles and Jean-as-“Eve” in *The Lady Eve*. In both cases, one partner uses an assumed name, meaning that the couples are married to each other and yet not married to each other at the same time. Trudy, in fact, is now married to two men without being married to either one, because on both occasions she marries

the fictitious “Ratzkiwatzki.” Sturges presents marriage in this film not as a holy or legal union, but as a root of isolation. Both of Trudy’s husbands are separated from her immediately after marriage, with “Ratzkiwatzki” leaving for war and Norval sent to jail. Marriage in this film is perpetually unstable. It has not only been stripped of romance, but it has lost its enduring quality. It cannot survive unless ordained by a higher authority, and that authority rests in Daniel McGinty, whose reappearance reintroduces the notion of marrying for self-gain. Only this time, it is not the bride and groom who are in pursuit of a selfish desire, but the government. In validating their marriage, McGinty ensures that he will be able to exploit the titular “miracle” without fear of political scandal. The couple goes from being the manipulators to the manipulated as the sextuplets make headlines around the world as a biological platoon and nature’s answer to “Total War.” The marriage can survive because it serves a patriotic necessity—breeding more soldiers. If the war was a menace to marriage in the beginning, it has taken complete control over the creation of the family by the end.

#### *Divorce as Domestic Solution*

Like adultery and the triangular relationship, divorce was severely frowned upon by the Production Code as a corruption of the sanctity of marriage. In 1940, more than half of the Catholic Legion of Decency’s “B” classifications were bestowed on films that featured “light treatment of marriage” or divorce (Walsh, 1996, p. 169). Breen, a devout Catholic, was also disturbed by Hollywood’s increasingly prominent depictions of divorce and remarriage as commonplace (Walsh). During World War II, the divorce rate in the United States increased by more than 60%, a fact that drove Breen to make every attempt to keep films from suggesting that divorce was a solution to domestic problems

(Leff & Simmons). That did not stop Preston Sturges from making divorce a frequent narrative element in his films, including four of the films in this study.

In *The Great McGinty*, Catherine is a divorcée. She claims on her wedding day to McGinty that she divorced her husband on grounds of desertion and that she neither knows where he is nor cares. The obvious implication is that she is happier without her first husband, and his desertion has opened up a new opportunity for her to find a man who can truly support her, even if he is not to be intimate with her. At home, her children seem perfectly happy, cared for during the day by a maid (Libby Taylor) while their mother works. In fact, there is no indication at all that the divorce had a negative impact on the family. As the children say their bedtime prayers with Catherine, she tells them to ask God to bless “Papa who ran away.” One interpretation could be that they are blessing Papa *because* he ran away.

At the end of the film, after McGinty has escaped from prison, he calls Catherine to say goodbye. Acknowledging that he must flee the country, he goes so far as to encourage her to divorce him and marry George. He promises to support her and the children financially, but their marriage must come to an end because, in reference to the earlier “pig without a poke” line, “you can’t make a silk purse out of a pig’s ear.” This development is even more alarming than Catherine’s having been a divorcée in the first place. The audience never finds out whether she follows through on McGinty’s suggestion, but given her opportunistic behavior throughout the course of the film, it is not difficult to imagine that she does. In a bizarre way, the divorce would be their final act of love together for their children, sparing them McGinty’s shame while still providing the financial benefits. It would be a distressingly downbeat ending indeed

were it not overshadowed by the banana republic bookend with an amusing final shot of McGinty and the Boss wrestling.

Divorce is treated even more casually in *The Lady Eve*, as Charles easily decides to divorce “Eve” on their wedding night and goes so far as to desert her on the train in his pajamas. Harry is delighted by this turn of events, seizing the opportunity to turn it into a money-making venture. “For once that we have a chance to make some honest money,” he says to Jean of the settlement she will receive. “I don’t think you realize the beauty of your situation. You’re holding a royal flush.” He sees the divorce not only as profitable, but as a legitimate way of obtaining money, in contrast to cheating at cards. It is Jean’s change of heart that redeems the situation, as she realizes that she still loves Charles and cannot take the divorce settlement. The film ends, then, with the promise of marriage, overriding the divorce that, after all, resulted from a dishonest marriage.

The entire premise of *The Palm Beach Story* centers on Gerry’s desire to divorce her husband. This desire drives the majority of the action, beginning with her train ride to Palm Beach. Unlike most of Sturges’ other divorcées, she is not just leaving Tom for her own gain but for his, as well. She believes that, free from the burden of her materialism, he will rise to greater success on his own. She never stops having feelings for Tom. Divorce, then, is more than just a solution for Tom and Gerry’s domestic problems; it is the ultimate expression of love from a wife to her husband. In a subversive twist, her quest for divorce is more romantic than either of the wedding scenes.

For the princess, on the other hand, divorce is no more a show of love than her spur-of-the-moment marriages are. According to her brother, she has been divorced three times and annulled twice, and she is on her way to her fourth divorce. In response to her

brother's criticism, she says that "Nothing is permanent in this world except Roosevelt." This demonstrates a great distinction between the upper and middle classes and their views on the family. The princess uses men as she pleases, feeling no emotional bond with them. As much as Gerry values money, she displays a genuine affection for Tom. She only uses men who are socially above her, and if Hackensacker is an accurate representation, these men have few to no emotions to take advantage of. Hackensacker takes great pleasure in spending money on Gerry, and as established earlier, his interest in her is free of romantic passion. For the upper class, family is just another frivolous luxury, one that can be changed or disposed of as easily as a new car or yacht. For the middle class, upholding the institution of family is important, but economically difficult.

The scheme to divorce "Ratzkiwatzki" in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* is, like Gerry's, borne from love rather than hatred or dissatisfaction. Norval devises the plan as a way of ensuring that he and Trudy can marry legally. Because the real "Ratzkiwatzki" is never in the picture, the second marriage is somewhat easier to swallow. His absence lessens the sense that Trudy is being disloyal. The audience is allowed to focus more intently on the relationship between Trudy and Norval, and so rather than seeming to end one marriage, their scheme leads to the creation of a new—and true—union. After McGinty's official nullification of the first marriage, the film ends with the family complete: man, woman, and six children. Because the union between Trudy and Norval seems so perfect, and because the crazy events at the end of the film are hurled so quickly and confusingly at the audience, the divorce is almost completely forgotten, just as the marriage was forgotten by Trudy.



### *Parents and Children*

Sturges does not by any means limit his subversive views to romantic relationships. The bonds between parents and children are filled with as much deception and manipulation as his marriages, and some are even more destructive. The strain at the heart of these relationships reflects a growing tension between generations—an older one that does not understand the new and a younger one that has little concern for the past.

*The Lady Eve* features one of Sturges' most fascinating parent-child relationships in Harry and Jean. They, in the beginning at least, are closer than the parents and children to be discussed later. Their unity, however, is founded on dishonesty, not with each other, but with wealthy men. Both cardsharps, Harry and Jean share a love of money and a brilliant sleight of hand that makes them a perfect team. Although they seem to get along well, their affection for each other is closer to that of partners or coworkers than that between a father and daughter. There is an ambiguous quality to their relationship, and the fact that she calls him by his first name throughout the film hints at the possibility that they may not be related at all, an idea intensified when she tells him, "I'm not your daughter for free, you know."

Their relationship is strained when Jean falls for Charles and asks Harry not to cheat him at cards as they had originally planned to do. Thus, Sturges presents the subversion of a father and daughter falling out over honesty rather than dishonesty. This leads her to deceive Harry, blocking his attempts to cheat during his card game with Charles. When Harry confronts Jean about thwarting him, she strikes right at his underhanded nature: "You're such an old scoundrel, you'd skin me if you had the chance," she says. His conversation with her about the importance of revealing her

criminal lifestyle to Charles before their wedding at first sounds like parental affection, but it quickly becomes more sinister when he tells her to wait until after they have departed the ship to do so. While he is clearly worried about his own protection, there is a sense of warning in his voice. He kisses her like a loving father, but the expression on her face after he leaves is one of uncertainty rather than comfort.

Father and daughter are reunited after Charles rejects her. The closest Harry comes to emulating the affection of a true father is when he comforts her as she cries on the bed. More importantly, however, is that the two are brought back together in a spirit of dishonesty and corruption. He welcomes her back into the family circle so that they can continue taking advantage of wealthy men. Her desire to take revenge on Charles becomes their new objective.

The sinister undertones of the father-daughter relationship in *The Lady Eve* are taken to the extreme with the Kockenlockers in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. In addition to the dishonesty and deception between the constable and his daughters, there is a frightening amount of violence that threatens to take the film to an uncomfortable level of darkness. The only thing keeping it from going over the edge is the talented cast of performers who suppress the almost sadistic leanings of the characters by emphasizing their eccentricity. The most vicious relationship is that between Constable Kockenlocker and 14-year-old Emmy, which Rozgonyi (1995) characterizes as being based on mutual contempt for each other. On at least three occasions the constable attempts to kick her, only to miss and fall flat on his back. Toward the end, as they are trying to find a way to break Norval out of jail, he responds to her sarcasm by actually threatening her with

murder, warning that one day they will just find her hair ribbon—“the mystery of Morgan’s Creek.”

There is a noticeable misogyny in the constable’s treatment of his daughters. During his conversation with Norval about getting married, he warns him against having daughters, saying that they are a mess until they get married, “and especially after that.” When Norval says that Trudy will not have him, the constable pushes him to be firm with her, saying “Dames like to be bossed.” It is pointed out several times in the first half of the movie that the constable is out of touch with contemporary society in his treatment of the sassy young soldiers and in his views of young people having active social lives. The notion that his daughters—and, more broadly, women in general—not only have minds of their own but act independently of his patriarchal authority drives him to despise them.

Emmy’s constant deception of her father makes her more of a conventional Sturges heroine than Trudy. Closer in spirit to Jean and Gerry, Emmy is a fiercely independent young woman who makes a perpetual fool of the overbearing man in her life. Although Trudy is at the center of the film’s conflict and is the one who is under the closest scrutiny by her father, her defiance is almost always the result of Emmy’s manipulative advice. But Emmy’s motivations are twofold. She genuinely cares for Trudy and wants to help her out of her scandalous predicament, but there is a gleefulness as well in the idea of undermining her father’s authority. He runs his home like a military post and exerts absolute control over his daughters, a way of life that Emmy frankly rejects and bucks at every opportunity.

The authority of the father is called into question throughout the film, not just by his daughters’ deception of him, but by his own ineffectualness, as well. He is oblivious

to his daughters' needs and lacks the self-control to deal with them fully when those needs are revealed. When he does attempt to help them, he inadvertently makes the situation worse. After Norval is arrested for allegedly abducting Trudy, Constable Kockenlocker attempts to sweep the incident under the carpet by having the Justice of the Peace (Porter Hall) destroy the marriage certificate, not realizing that obtaining the certificate was the reason Trudy and Norval got married in the first place.

The most appealing parent in these films is Mrs. Truesmith, the good-hearted mother of *Hail the Conquering Hero*. The film is an almost oedipal celebration of motherhood, from the opening scene of Woodrow Truesmith sitting alone in a bar as the song "Home to the Arms of Mother" is sung in the background by a female singer. She is ridiculously glamorous for the rundown bar in which she is singing, and her blonde hair and white dress seem to glow against the dark walls and plainly dressed diners around her. She takes on a Madonna-like quality, an idealized representation of the woman's traditional gender role—beautiful and feminine, but kind and nonthreatening—that the soldiers long for, complete with a quartet of waiters following tightly behind her as if to protect her sanctity.

The arrival of the Marines at the bar introduces Bugsy, the orphaned Marine who devises the charade to get Woodrow home. He repeatedly tells Woodrow that he should be ashamed of himself for keeping his mother worried for so long, punctuating every command with, "You've gotta think of your mother." This love for and near obsession with the mother drive the entire story, and on a deeper level, she comes to symbolize the simpler, idealized worldview of other popular wartime films, a life to which the military men wish they could return.

The deceptions of the mother, unlike those of the father in *The Lady Eve* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, are done out of concern for her rather than contempt. Woodrow's initial lie about being overseas is done only to save her the shame of her son being a disappointment to the community for not living up to his father's heroism. The differences between the motivations behind the deceptions are indicative of the gender divide during the war years. *The Lady Eve* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* both revolve around female protagonists. For women in the 1940s experiencing an unprecedented amount of power in the workforce due to the absence of men, rigid patriarchal control seemed oppressive and outdated (McLaughlin & Parry, 2006). For the servicemen abroad, represented by the mother-starved Marines in *Hail the Conquering Hero*, home and family were faded memories of a society that would be forever changed after the war. The devotion to the mother figure and to the rustic town from which she comes evokes the idealistic vision that was propagated in films of the era, while other elements in the film (to be discussed later) expose its artificiality.

#### *Absent Parents and Surrogates*

A common familial element in many of Sturges' films is the absent parent. Several of his protagonists are missing one or both parents, and a surrogate is frequently introduced within the course of the narrative. Sometimes the protagonist *is* the surrogate, as in the case of Daniel McGinty. Although he is legally stepfather to Catherine's children, they remain separated from each other for a significant amount of time. Only after he and Catherine acknowledge their love for each other does he embrace the children as his own, which is demonstrated by his reading them a bedtime story and humorously becoming more invested in it than they are. Later, during a parade after

McGinty is elected governor, the maid takes the children up to a balcony to watch. A guard asks her for her pass, and she indignantly responds, “What you mean pass? These are his honest children.” The family is complete now that the stepfather has moved beyond simply playing the part of husband and father to embrace them as his “honest” family.

Jean’s mother in *The Lady Eve* is noticeably missing from the scene, and there is no mention of her at any point in the film. This once again signals the possibility that Harry is not Jean’s true father and that the two may very well be partners in crime posing as a family. Of greater interest, though, is Charles’s surrogate father figure, Muggsy. Charles’ real father Horace Pike (Eugene Pallette) is, of course, not missing, making the presence of a surrogate all the more surprising. Charles and Horace are, however, separated for a considerable time while Charles is up the Amazon, so Muggsy serves as both a companion and protector. His greatest act of protection occurs aboard the ship as he keeps an eye on Jean and Harry to make sure they do not take advantage of Charles. It is he who presents the evidence that they are criminals, effectively breaking up Charles and Jean’s romance. In Connecticut, when Jean passes herself off as “Eve,” Horace falls for her charade as much as Charles does. Even after Charles leaves her, Horace tries to negotiate between the two of them, unknowingly turning his son over to a band of crooks. Prefiguring Constable Kockenlocker, Horace is oblivious to the needs of his son and the potential harm he is bringing to him. Only the astute Muggsy (ironically played by William Demarest, who later played the constable), sees through Jean’s disguise from the beginning and attempts to look out for Charles and steer him clear of manipulation, even if he is unsuccessful in the end.

The absent parents of Sturges' films touched on a timely issue during the war years that was generally ignored by popular wartime films, especially comedies. With fathers in the military and mothers joining the work force, a growing number of children were left unsupervised on a widespread level, leading to an increase in juvenile delinquency (McLaughlin & Parry, 2006). The effects of the war on children and adolescents were of grave concern for child-development experts, such as Anna W. M. Wolf and Irma Simonton Black, who wrote that "continuous separation from their mothers is one of the most destructive experiences a young child can have" (as quoted in McLaughlin & Parry, p. 251). Without proper parental care, children were forced to grow up quickly and were deprived of the guidance needed to make healthy, moral choices. As McLaughlin and Parry note, however, "Hollywood's depiction of young people in its home-front films tends to ignore or treat lightly the effects of the war" (p. 251).

In *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, the three young protagonists are all victims of absent parents. Trudy and Emmy's mother is gone, presumably dead, and Norval is an orphan. Norval is socially inept, insecure, and given to nervous tendencies, characteristics that may be attributed to a lack of parental care. The Kockenlocker sisters exhibit a peculiar contrast in maturity. Trudy, who is roughly 20 years old, is childlike (witness her braided pigtails) and naïve, while 14-year-old Emmy has the rationality and shrewd street smarts of a woman much older. Together, these three are an odd bunch of young people permanently affected by the absence of their parents.

In an interesting twist, Emmy emerges as the surrogate parental figure, becoming Trudy's confidante and comforter. Like a good mother, Emmy accompanies Trudy to the

doctor's office when the news of her pregnancy is discovered, and she does most of the speaking when they visit the lawyer to find out if the first marriage was legal. Emmy provides the only understanding in a home ruled by violence and intolerance of anything out of the ordinary.

Emmy's knowledge and social awareness are disturbing for one so young. She displays a broad wisdom of crime, marriage, bigamy, and sex. The morning after the military dance, Emmy asks the loaded question, "You didn't go to sleep somewhere or something?" Unable to grasp the implications of it, Trudy answers, "You know me, I never get tired." Trudy's naiveté is likely a product of her father's restrictive treatment, as is Emmy's rebellious nature. His unquestionable control and dated values have made Trudy blind to the hardness of the world, and she possesses a romantic idealism. She does not understand, for instance, what the military dance means to the servicemen who are about to leave. For her, the dance represents a patriotic duty to send "our boys" off with a feeling of hope and assurance. She never gives the idea that these "boys" might take advantage of her a passing thought. Emmy dodges such idealism because she sees firsthand her father's oppressive treatment of her sister.

Because they lack proper parenting themselves, it is reasonable to assume that Trudy and Norval will likewise make inadequate parents. Trudy is incapable of making decisions on her own, always relying instead on her sister. When she does concoct a scheme to solve the problem of her pregnancy, the best she can come up with is double suicide. Norval seems unable to produce a family, possessing neither the physical virility nor the psychological stamina that fatherhood demands. It is fitting, then, that in the end his family is not biologically his, but is in fact "thrust upon him." His first instinct when



confronted with the sextuplets is to run away, indicating that the responsibility is far beyond his means. In spite of the happy epilogue that Sturges provides the viewers, informing them that Norval “became increasingly happy,” the final image of the family is one of utter chaos. Norval collapses over Trudy on her hospital bed, prompting Emmy to pour a vase of water over his head as visitors look on in shock. It recalls the earlier scenes of the constable engaged in physical altercations with his daughters, usually with Emmy on top of him preventing him from reaching Trudy. The final shot illustrates that the dysfunction will only continue in this new union.

*Hail the Conquering Hero* contains probably the most complex example of an absent parent and surrogate, as Woodrow comes to stand in for his own deceased father who was killed in battle at Belleau Wood during World War I. That his father died on the same day Woodrow was born reinforces this substitution, especially in relation to his beloved mother; on the day she lost one man, she gained another. The difference between the older and younger Truesmith is that the father was a great war hero who died nobly in defense of his country, the original “conquering hero.” Woodrow never made it to even the threshold of such heroics and therefore feels inadequate. When the Marines coerce him to step into the role of the war hero, he figuratively steps into the role of his father, giving strength to the oedipal obsession with the mother that pervades the film.

The pandemonium generated on the day Woodrow returns home stems from the social need for mother and father to be reunited. Two bands are assembled at the train station, one to play “Home to the Arms of Mother,” the other to play “Hail the Conquering Hero,” paying homage to both idealized parental figures. Just as the saloon singer in the opening scene acted as an icon of the mother, the father is idolized in a

shrine in Mrs. Truesmith's home. A photograph shows that he was a handsome, strapping man, the antithesis of Woodrow's feeble persona. Both of these icons feed into traditional gender roles: the beautiful nurturer and the stoic leader.

With the mayoral election in process, the people of Oak Ridge prove to be in dire need of a father figure of their own. Mayor Noble is corrupt and selfish, a kindred spirit with McGinty and the Boss. His dirty politics send the people after a symbol of hope, and they find it in Woodrow's guise as the "conquering hero." So desperate are they for a real man to lead them that they latch on to the illusion of one, unable to see that beneath the medals and the uniform is a great lie. What they desire is a return to an old-fashioned way of life before the war corrupted the family unit. The people need positive reinforcement of their traditional ideals, regardless of their source.

At this point, one may argue that *Hail the Conquering Hero* crosses over into the realm of metacinema, although it was by no means perceived as such by most viewers or critics of the time. There seems to be a blatant awareness in the film of what was expected of Hollywood movies during the war and how the public responded to uplifting narratives. Sturges' 1941 film *Sullivan's Travels* told the story of a Hollywood comedy director (Joel McCrea) who lives as a homeless man to prepare for a serious drama about human suffering, only to learn that laughter and escapism are what people need in times of national crisis. *Hail the Conquering Hero* makes a similar affirmation, but from the public's point of view. The eagerness with which the citizens of Oak Ridge blindly put their faith in what seems to be wholesome has close ties with the manner in which audiences embraced Sturges' own deceitful films. It bears repeating Higham and

Greenberg's (1968) assertion that Sturges strove for the "happy ending the gullible public would swallow like ice cream" (p. 155).

It is the community of Oak Ridge that is gullible, swallowing like ice cream the happy restoration of the traditional family. When Woodrow finally confesses his elaborate deception, the logical reaction from the townsfolk should be to turn away from him in shame and disgust. But, as Rozgonyi (1995) observes, it is the strong devotion to the mother that saves him. The reason for the fraud was always to ease the suffering of Mrs. Truesmith. The people are willing to forgive being lied to and deceived if it was done in the name of protecting the sanctity of the family.

Gregory R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black (1987) criticize the ending of *Hail the Conquering Hero*, calling it artistically unsatisfying for its seeming shift in tone from biting satire to sentimental reaffirmation of home and family. They charge that the happy conclusion is the result of the constraints placed on Sturges by the Production Code and the political atmosphere of the era, leaving him with little opportunity except to include "a last-reel affirmation of America" (p. 175). For evidence, they cite the praise the film received from the United States Office of War Information, who called it "a good picture of working democracy in America today" (p. 174). A deeper examination of the ending, however, may reveal that it is not the sentimental pap they believe it to be.

In the final scene, the Marines board the train as the Oak Ridge citizens gather to watch. Woodrow says, "I knew the Marines could do almost anything, but I never knew they could do anything like this," to which Bugsy replies, "You got no idea." The train pulls out of the station with the Marines standing on the observation car as the crowd waves American flags. A shot of the Marines looking into the camera and waving

dissolves into a shot of the photograph of Woodrow's father, the true "conquering hero." Woodrow's remark and the visual equation of the World War II servicemen to the World War I hero glorify the Marines, and there is indeed a propagandistic overtone. However, it is absurdly propagandistic, so obviously turning the Marines into the heroes the Office of War Information wanted them to be. The sentimentality is not the result of political or moral constraints, but rather seems more like a deliberate and conscious subversion of them. Sturges gives the Production Code and the audience exactly what they want by idealizing both the family and the military, suggesting that old-fashioned ideals can coexist with the current political situation. The audience's acceptance of this fantasy parallels Oak Ridge's acceptance of Woodrow as their hero and surrogate father. The happy ending is as much a deceit as Woodrow's pretense of being the "conquering hero," but because moviegoers needed the reaffirmation of traditional values, they accepted it anyway.

#### *Siblings and Other Commodities*

If World War II left a negative impact on the American family as a whole, Sturges reflects this impact at its worst in the treatment of siblings and children, respectively, in the climaxes of *The Palm Beach Story* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. In these movies, he takes the dysfunction of family relationships to the absolute nadir, depicting the complete debasement of traditional values by reducing family members to mere commodities for the use of others.

The final scene of *The Palm Beach Story* explicitly drives home this idea. Tom and Gerry Jeffers' identical twins remain nameless, without character, and unseen throughout the majority of the film. They seem to be virtually plucked from oblivion just

for this scene, and indeed they are solely a device for both Sturges and their siblings. The twins serve Tom and Gerry by ensuring a connection to Hackensacker, but they have nothing to gain from the setup, aside from the perk of being married to millionaires. Their desires are not important because they are not perceived as real people; they are merely objects for use. The twins lack any real human traits of their own. As depicted in the impressive split-screen closing shot, they are just physical carbon copies of the central characters to be used in whatever manner seen fit. They both seem baffled in the final scene, as if they have no idea why they are there and have no control over the situation, and it is probably safe to assume that they do not.

More troubling is the final exploitation of the sextuplets in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. Constable Kockenlocker's misogyny toward his own daughters has been discussed already, and it is clear that the prospect of having six granddaughters would be a burden on him. At one point, he actually hypothesizes about the trouble that will come to Norval if he has "half a dozen daughters," a rather ironic prophecy. But Trudy gives birth to six boys, setting off great excitement among the hospital crew. The exhilaration with which a nurse yells out "All boys!" after proclaiming that there are six indicates a general preference for boys by the entire community. Being boys, the sextuplets are of greater social and political use because they are future servicemen. The babies are never shown onscreen, but their widespread fame is depicted in a montage of newspaper headlines hailing them as the answer to "Total War." Humorously, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler are both shown reacting negatively to the news of the sextuplets, a sign that America is producing large armies in bulk.

Given the general misogyny of Morgan's Creek, it may be gathered that, had the babies been girls, their birth would not have stirred up the widespread excitement that the boys generated. It is likely that Norval and Trudy's marriage would not have been validated by McGinty and, thus, the family would not be complete in the end. The baby boys, however, are favored for their value to the government. Having children has been reduced to a patriotic necessity, and everyone stands to gain from the birth of the sextuplets, including Trudy and Norval, whose future together has been ensured by this "miracle." The babies' public exposure has nothing to do with their value as human beings and everything to do with their worth as American resources.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this study was to explore the reflection of America during World War II as a troubled and disordered society through the unconventional depictions of the American family in five comedies written and directed by Preston Sturges. Content analyses of the selected films provided evidence of a cynical and pessimistic viewpoint that went against the moral principles of the Production Code and the typical representations of American society in popular wartime films. Sturges' representation of the family is one of perpetual disunity, manipulation, and deception, in spite of the cheerful surfaces of his narratives. The recurring motifs observed in the selected films illustrated the continuing vision of the American family as an institution corrupted by the chaotic social climate of the war years.

#### *Summaries of Motifs*

##### *Marriage as Deceitful Pretense*

Four of the selected films depict at least one marriage. In every case, some form of deception is entailed, either by one partner toward the other, or by both toward a select group of outsiders. Love and the desire for a family are never the primary motivations behind the marriages. Instead, personal gain and self-interest drive these unions. That is not to say that love is never involved. In *The Great McGinty*, Daniel McGinty and Catherine grow to love each other in time. In *The Lady Eve* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, the protagonists fall in love before their marriages, but unusual

circumstances take precedence over their love lives. It is unclear whether the Jeffers of *The Palm Beach Story* fall in love before or after their first marriage, but they prove their love to each other before their second. While love may exist between the married partners, the overriding characteristic of these marriages is the light treatment of their sanctity. The complicated and sometimes antagonistic relationships between husbands and wives in these films are reflective of the increasing uneasiness between American men and women during World War II. The manipulations involved in these marriages, particularly by the female partners (Jean, Gerry, Trudy), point to the growing independence of women and their attempts to establish a place of their own in what was still considered a man's world.

#### *Divorce as Domestic Solution*

Reflecting the rise in U.S. divorces during the war years, the couples in *The Great McGinty*, *The Lady Eve*, *The Palm Beach Story*, and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* contemplate or seek divorces at some point during the films. The history of divorce in the pasts of some characters, such as Catherine in *The Great McGinty* and the princess in *The Palm Beach Story*, portrays divorce as a common and perfectly acceptable practice. At its most subversive, divorce is presented not as an act of neglect or abandonment, but as an act of love, as in McGinty's wish to spare the children his shame or in Gerry's desire to release Tom from the burden of her materialism. Divorce is rarely depicted as a destructive or emotionally trying event. It is frankly presented as a legitimate and practical solution to the problems facing the characters who seek it.



### *Parents and Children*

The relationships between parents and children in the selected films reveal a distance that leads to resentment, deception, and negligence. The antagonistic relationships between fathers and daughters in *The Lady Eve* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* display a lack of compassion from the parents and a complete lack of respect from the children. When Jean and Harry are on good terms, it is only because they share a mutual love for cheating and dishonesty. The Kockenlockers' violent tendencies even entail threats of murder. The gap between elder and younger generations—between old-fashioned and new—is symptomatic of a society at odds with itself, uneasy about the social changes occurring during the war. The desire to revert to an older way of living is reflected in the mother obsession of *Hail the Conquering Hero*.

### *Absent Parents and Surrogates*

Lack of proper parental care has a devastating effect on the youth in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, leaving them unprepared for adult lives. In the place of the absent or ineffectual parents in *The Great McGinty* and *The Lady Eve* are outsiders who often provide greater love and guidance than the real families are willing to give. In *Hail the Conquering Hero*, the surrogate is not truly worthy of taking on the role of his heroic father, but he is accepted as such anyway. These films redefine who can be considered family and suggest that the natural family unit is not always the strong foundation it is supposed to be.

### *Siblings and Other Commodities*

The objectification and exploitation of family members in *The Palm Beach Story* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* indicates that the family unit has fallen from its long-held position as a foundation of American society to a level where it only serves the personal interests of those who know how to use it. The nameless twins and faceless babies of these two films bring happiness for many at the expense of their own individuality and humanity. They are mere devices for Sturges' narratives and the protagonists' machinations.

### *Defying the Production Code*

The principles of the Production Code were based around an agenda to uphold moral and legal standards, promote uplifting behavior and narratives, and ensure fair and serious treatment of the law (Leff & Simmons, 2001). The protagonists in all of the selected films are dishonest and crooked, and their illegal behavior frequently pays off in the end. Jean's impersonation, Gerry's attempt to divorce her husband, McGinty's illegal validation of Trudy and Norval's marriage, and Woodrow's elaborate lie lead to seemingly happy endings for everyone. The underlying dysfunction beneath the comedic façades, as illustrated by the motifs above, keeps the narratives from being truly uplifting, suggesting instead that unhappiness lies in store for the protagonists even after they achieve their desired goal. Finally, the law is frequently depicted as either incompetent (Constable Kockenlocker) or corrupt (McGinty and the Boss, Mayor Noble). The crimes committed by the protagonists go unpunished, demonstrating that evil can prevail over good.

### *Conclusion*

The comedies of writer-director Preston Sturges remain some of the funniest American movies ever made. Their frenetic pacing, slapstick antics, screwball characters, and twisted stories have entertained audiences for decades. But beneath the comedy lies a troubling reflection of American society, tapping into the social disorder brought about by World War II in the early 1940s. This was a time when the Production Code exercised strict control over the content and messages contained in mainstream American films, and movie studios strove to release films that contributed to the war effort by promoting optimistic, idealized images of the home front. Sturges' films went against the popular formulae and presented narratives that skewered Hollywood's propagated myths by turning the very social issues that other films ignored into comically absurd situations. By accentuating the positive, at least on a surface level, Sturges bypassed the censors and pleased the public who craved escapism from the chaos of the real world. More than 60 years after these movies were released, they retain a freshness not found in other comedies of the same era. Free of the dated views on family, sexuality, and patriotism, these films still have the ability to entertain, amuse, and yes, even shock 21st-century moviegoers. They also remain important cultural texts from a historical period in which movies were discouraged from honestly reflecting the dark side of America.

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