



The Many Faces of Mildred Pierce : A Case Study of Adaptation and the Studio System

When Billy Wilder's motion picture adaptation of James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1944) crept past Joseph Breen and the Production Code office to achieve both popular and critical success for Paramount, other studios looked into filming previously unfilmed Cain properties such as his 1941 novel *Mildred Pierce*. Like *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (adapted in 1946), *Mildred Pierce* contained elements that fit perfectly into the emerging *film noir* mode, films of cynicism, sexuality, and greed; it also, according to Cain, contained elements that should accord it the status of serious fiction. When Warner Brothers adapted Cain's novel, they achieved great success on the screen, but *Mildred Pierce* underwent major changes in its voyage through the many ports of the studio system, ultimately becoming something both more and less than the novel Cain wrote. Tom Chapman, an assistant story editor at Warner Brothers, acknowledged in a memo on *Mildred Pierce* that "It is commonplace in this business that authors who sell us stories often feel that their material has been destroyed by the vultures of Hollywood"; while "destroyed" may be too strong in this case, certainly there is little doubt that the film's producer, the dictates of the Motion Picture Production Code, the screenwriters, star, and director combined to alter *Mildred Pierce* into something James Cain found virtually unrecognizable (Behlmer 260).

Cain's novel, published in 1941, centers on the ambitious title character and her relationship with her daughter Veda, a uniquely gifted singer. After her husband leaves her, Mildred works tirelessly to get ahead so she can give Veda the best of everything, but Veda is never satisfied and ultimately takes up with the manipulator who becomes Mildred's second husband. Mildred's heart is broken, her dreams destroyed, and she is left to wonder what all her hard work has accomplished. Contemporary reviewers regarded *Mildred Pierce* as a successful domestic melodrama, and while Cain's work often drew mixed reactions—sometimes within the same review—Stanley Edgar Hyman, while arguing against the ultimate

believability of the characters, sounded a typical note, calling Cain "a slick and accomplished writer, with a genius for effective, sparse dialogue and tight, neat plots with trick endings" (442).

Warner Brothers producer Jerry Wald had been interested in *Mildred Pierce* since its publication, and since it was Wald who shaped the development of the movie from the time it was purchased for the screen to the time it was released, it is with Wald that any examination of *Mildred Pierce*'s adaptation must begin. According to Warner Brothers files, *Mildred Pierce* was one of a number of stories that caught Wald's interest in the early 1940s, but his attempts to purchase the film were initially rebuffed by the studio, who correctly, as we shall see, anticipated problems in getting the story approved by Joseph Breen, the executive in charge of enforcing the Production Code. If Wald could find a way to organize the story dramatically and dress it up enough to meet Code requirements, Warner Brothers indicated they then would grant approval to purchase the film rights. With this in mind, Wald in 1943 proposed to Cain the idea of opening a movie version of *Mildred Pierce* with a mysterious murder and telling the story in flashback (Behlmer 256). The technique would, of course, be used successfully in *Double Indemnity*, released six months later, and flashback narration would become a virtual hallmark of *film noir*.¹ Wald suggested that Cain himself write a treatment starting with the murder of Monty, Mildred's worthless second husband, but although Cain disagreed with the idea, he was unable to propose a reasonably cinematic alternative. "I wrote *Mildred Pierce* as a novel and it is hard for me to rethink it for a picture," Cain informed Wald (Hoopes 340). The project seemed to be dead in the water, and Jack Warner wrote Wald a memo suggesting he drop it. Instead, Wald got story analyst Thames Williamson to write a treatment which included an opening murder, and Jack Warner passed this treatment on to Joseph Breen's office for his opinion on the chances of getting a Code approval on such a picture. Breen's return letter was discouraging; even with the initial changes Warner Brothers proposed, Breen called the story "sordid and repellent," and suggested that Warner Brothers dismiss it from further consideration (Leff and Simmons 128-29; Behlmer 257).

This incident, showing Breen's ability to dictate to studios the projects they could make, illustrates the power of the Production Code, which was instituted in 1934 to perform the self-policing that industry heads believed would prevent governmental interference and cool the outrage over Hollywood scandals and the sex and violence prominent in the pictures of the twenties and thirties. The Code had a profound effect on the movie business until replaced by the rating system in the 1960s, and by reviewing story ideas, scripts, and finished films, Breen's office held final authority over what films would reach an audience, and in what condition.²

Among other things, the Production Code included the following general stipulations:

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.

In practical application, the code frowned upon the portrayal of murder; sexual relations (adultery was not to be justified or presented as attractive; scenes of passion were not to "stimulate the lower and baser element"); the use of "low, disgusting, unpleasant" subjects; the bedroom as a location; and obscenity or vulgarity (Leff and Simmons 284-85). The result as far as Cain's novel was concerned? In order to qualify for Code approval, it would have to undergo wholesale changes, for as a Warner Brothers memo points out, "As Cain originally wrote the novel, all the characters in it, including Mildred, were unpleasant. . . . At the same time the immoral activities of Mildred actually were unscreenable because of the Production Code" (Behlmer 255). Although Wald was told yet again that he should forget about adapting Cain's novel, he didn't want to; his conception of *Mildred Pierce* conformed nicely to the type of movies then being produced on the Warner lot, for as Thomas Schatz has pointed out, Warner Brothers' "longtime commitment to black and white cinematography and to urban crime films predisposed it to *noir* intrigues" (415). Wald knew if he could simply get *Mildred Pierce* past

the censors, the studio had the resources to make it successfully, and the Production Code snaggle was finally solved when Williamson suggested to Wald that the novel was so "rich, strong and dramatic that it could be played from start to finish on a higher level." With this somewhat vague proposal in hand, Breen approved the project, with the stipulation that he foresaw a number of problems with the handling of certain scenes and situations. This was agreeable to Warner Brothers—they also anticipated considerable changes in story and characters, not all of them as a result of Code restrictions—and they purchased the rights to the novel in late February 1944 (Behlmer 257).

A number of screenwriters worked on the film after Cain himself wrestled with the idea, and he was kept apprised on the progress of the succeeding writers, sometimes to his chagrin. To transfer the movie to the screen, it seemed apparent that in addition to changes for the Code, the novel would have to conform more closely to Hollywood conventions. In general, this meant making a sharper delineation between the protagonist, Mildred, and the antagonists, Veda and Monty. A Warner memo explained the changes envisioned for Mildred herself:

Since it was clear that Mildred must be the heroine of the story it was necessary to clean up her character. For this reason she was made a member of the upper middle class instead of the lower middle class; vulgarisms were dropped from her speech; she was made more the victim of circumstances than a sinner. (Behlmer 255)

Other changes were more controversial. The first scriptwriter on the project (Williamson was not offered a chance to write the script, since Wald felt he was not the proper type of writer for what he envisioned as a "woman's picture") was Catherine Turney, and while she excelled in writing the type of picture Wald wanted, she balked at the murder/flashback approach and at some of the character changes Wald proposed for Veda.³ Wald believed that Veda's musical genius might prompt too much sympathy from the audience, and instead insisted that Veda ultimately "go into a low dive and become a night club singer," a signal for Code-trained forties audiences of Veda's complete moral degeneracy (Behlmer 257; Thomson 219). Turney, on the other hand, recognized Veda's talent as an "integral part" of Cain's novel, and changed it only with the greatest reluctance (Behlmer 258).

Other writers involved in the picture included Albert Maltz, a specialist in action pictures, who wrote a lengthy prose treatment playing up the murder and the sexual elements Turney had toned down; this treatment then served as a model for Turney's later work on the script (Schatz 417). After Wald took Turney off the script, he reportedly contacted Cain again about doing the adaptation; Cain once again declined, suggesting Margaret Gruen for the job, and Gruen, following Cain's novel closely, wrote a script that Wald decided against because it lacked some of the dramatic elements he envisioned (Behlmer 258). Randal MacDougall, who ultimately shared screenwriting credit (and the Academy Award nomination) with Turney, seems to have finally incorporated the changes Wald wanted; he is credited with the police elements in the story, and a Warners production memo notes, "MacDougall's approach to the script includes all the basic changes from the novel which appear in the completed film" (Behlmer 258). In addition to Wald, a screenwriter himself, and director Curtiz, these writers also worked on the project: Margaret Buell Wilder, Louise Randall Pierson, and William Faulkner, and while the writers were revising each other's work, Wald was reportedly synthesizing everything from the array of ideas that resulted (Behlmer 258).

Once work had well and truly begun on the script, the casting decisions began. Although other actresses were considered for the title role—among them Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck, and Ida Lupino—Joan Crawford lobbied for the part and impressed Wald with her tenacity. When the former glamour girl was assigned to play Mildred, an additional creative complication entered the picture. As a certifiable star with an established persona, she necessarily carried a set of associations into her portrayal of the role. Crawford was known for the vitality and almost-masculine drive she displayed on screen, although the roles she had played during the course of her career had moved from flappers and ambitious shop girls to the "glamorous clothes-horse" she typically played toward the end of her MGM period (Walker 292). In many ways, *Mildred Pierce* was a logical continuation; it certainly seemed an ideal role for her. She called it the easiest role she ever played, and Alexander Walker has pointed out

how the energy, brains, ambition, and ruthlessness which the character possessed, even in the watered-down film version, "harnessed Crawford's ambition like an oil strike" (292). Because of Crawford's affinity for the character, she is not recorded as demanding changes in the script, although the Warner decision to portray the film Mildred as a slightly upscale version of the novel's character might have been influenced by the Crawford persona's traditional combination of spunk and glamour.

One creative decision that was a direct result of Crawford's casting concerned cinematography: As the film neared production, both Wald and director Curtiz worried about capturing the distinctive Crawford look, and Wald's memo of 6 November 1944 describes his anxiety at achieving unsatisfactory results after testing various cameramen with Crawford. Wald hoped they could get James Wong Howe, busy at that time with other projects; Curtiz pulled for Arthur Edeson, his—and Ingrid Bergman's—cameraman on *Casablanca*; and ultimately Ernest Haller turned in satisfactory footage on a retest, but the importance of showing their star to best advantage while using the visual stylings of *film noir* had greatly concerned the filmmakers (Behlmer 254; Schatz 419).

The last element of the film under Wald's control, Michael Curtiz, remains a problematic figure in discussing the adaptation process. Curtiz was at the time the top director on the Warner Brothers lot, with recent successes including *Casablanca* (1942), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1936), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1938), and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942). After seventy-odd movies for Warners, Curtiz had established a reputation for competence, consistency, and a fast-paced picture; but, while many Hollywood directors left an indelible stamp on their films in both style and subject matter despite the collaborative nature of picturemaking—it is possible (in fact, usual) to refer to a John Ford film, a Howard Hawks film, or an Alfred Hitchcock film—critics typically have considered Curtiz less an inspired artist than a competent artisan. Andrew Sarris, the foremost proponent of *auteur* criticism in America, is of two minds on Curtiz. In his *The American Cinema*, Sarris described the success of Curtiz's *Casablanca* as "the happiest of happy accidents, and the most decisive exception to the *auteur* theory," while he later modified this statement, saying that Curtiz was a much better director than he had supposed (176; *The Primal Screen* 59). The truth of the matter, at least as it relates to *Mildred Pierce*, lies somewhere in between. Curtiz, while not a true *auteur* exerting his personal vision onto the finished project, did contribute both a distinctive cinematic style as well as suggestions for location shooting and plot changes; a recent article describing him as "an *auteur* of the assembly line" adequately states Curtiz's contributions to this film (Paris 44).

In the decade preceding *Mildred Pierce*, Curtiz seems to have become more and more style conscious; certainly the Warner executives called him down more and more often on directorial decisions and the excessive time he seemed to be taking in setting up shots compared to his earlier work. On *Captain Blood* (1935), for example, producer Hal Wallis chewed out Curtiz for playing a dramatic reaction shot in long shot

so that you can get the composition of a candle-stick and a wine bottle on a table in the foreground, which I don't give a damn about.

Please don't forget that the most important thing you have to do is to get the story on the screen. . . . If you don't have a story, all the composition shots and all the candles in the world aren't going to make you a good picture. (Behlmer 23)

Although Wallis had similar complaints on *Charge of the Light Brigade* and *Robin Hood*, and Jack Warner personally wrote Curtiz during *Casablanca*, that "I am depending on you to be the old Curtiz I know you to be," Curtiz got away with these extravagances because, despite the complaints of studio executives, he did indeed get the story on the screen, and his interest in duplicating the *film noir* style he had used on *Casablanca* and *Passage to Marseilles* (1944) stood him in good stead on *Mildred Pierce* (Behlmer 208).

In addition to the sense of style he contributed, Curtiz worked closely with the writers. Curtiz suggested Mildred's momentary impulse toward suicide, the idea of her operating a drive-in restaurant, and that of shooting the opening murder sequence in Anatole Litvak's

beach house, where Curtiz was staying while Litvak was working with Frank Capra on the *Why We Fight* documentaries (Behlmer 259). Along with Wald, Curtiz helped refine the story and set crew and cast assignments. He even met with Cain to tell him about the final script.

Cain's reactions to the changes in his book were, according to Curtiz, very positive—"I couldn't write it better. You have improved it. Excellent"—while Wald's discussion of the film with Cain left the producer with the same impression (Behlmer 261, 259). If we consult Cain himself, however, we get a different response. Not only did he continue to object to the murder idea, which for Wald and his writers was the dramatic linch-pin holding their movie together, he objected to each script in turn, arguing rightly that Wald's approach was turning *Mildred Pierce* into a copy of *Double Indemnity* or *Postman* when it was actually a very different property (Behlmer 260; Hoopes 349). He had several major problems with *Mildred Pierce* as filmed. As screenwriter Catherine Turney had sensed, Veda's immense talent was the key to Cain's novel; he wrote Wald that without that fable-like element, the story lacked point, and it was impossible to understand why Veda would never accept Mildred and Mildred likewise would never understand her daughter. He resented Veda's transformation into "a cheap little tart." And he always disliked the idea of the murder, as the novel's climax to him seemed perfectly drawn:

The poetic retribution in the story is that Mildred, having used Monty as live bait, discovers that the bait has swallowed her fish. . . . I think any murder simply beclouds the whole issue and leaves the story in an impossible situation. . . . Furthermore, the Veda in your script would never have the guts to kill Monty or the pride to want to kill him.

Cain continued to think of *Mildred Pierce* as a book with serious aspirations, while as far as he could tell, "the only point developed in this footage is: Who done it?" (Hoopes 348-49).

Still, given the essential differences in narrative conventions between the modern novel and the Hollywood film, the restraining factor of the Production Code (David Thomson notes, for example, how instead of showing us Monty and Mildred making love, we instead see them walking in the rain together and then sitting in front of a fire to dry and must infer what has happened in the interim), and the many collaborators on a film made by a major studio, *Mildred Pierce* retained many of the elements of Cain's story, and Cain certainly could not complain about the publicity he reaped from the popular film adaptations of his novels (218). Perhaps Cain would have been better off adopting the philosophical attitude of modern hard-boiled writer Robert B. Parker—"If they make a lousy movie out of my good book, it's still a good book. If they make a good movie out of my lousy book, it's still a lousy book. There's no connection between the two"—and realizing that his *Mildred Pierce* remained on the shelf, ready for reading, no matter what Messrs. Wald and Warner did on their soundstages in Burbank.

Greg Garrett
Baylor University

Notes

¹ Although Warner Brothers files assert that Wald developed the idea on his own, it is also possible that he somehow found out about the structure of the *Double Indemnity* script being prepared by Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder.

² In "The Breening of America," Leonard J. Leff suggests that Breen's role was less repressive and more collaborative than that usually ascribed to him; certainly his approval of those films adapted from Cain's novels indicates a certain flexibility on his part.

³ Warner files indicate Turney thought Wald's flashback scheme too closely paralleled the film version of *Double Indemnity*, but it may also be possible that she recognized that the type of writing such an approach would entail meant a sharp departure from the work she did best.

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