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Popular Culture's Ambivalence Toward Female Autonomy

In the midst of the Great Depression, Works Progress Administration (WPA) writer, Frank Byrd, sought to record and report personal experiences of prostitution in Harlem. The project began with knowledge of the fact that materially stronger groups always exploited women of minority races and economically bankrupt groups. Byrd stated, "Many of them are forced to semi or full time prostitution in order to have a place to sleep." These women utilized their bodies to provide sustenance for themselves. The story of Big Bess, who Byrd interviewed in 1938, epitomized the life of these women. While working in a St. Louis restaurant at the age of eighteen, Bess met a man with a wide smile who left her exceptional tips. She accepted his request to go out with him, but soon realized what his game was. She was willing to do anything he said, complying when he put her in a "two-dollar joint". Upon realizing that she was a sucker for the man who also had four other girls working for him, Bess escaped to Chicago. Bess was through with pimps and wanted "someone of her own in the worst way". She met another man in Chicago who wore flashy clothes and spent a lot of money, but enjoyed her freedom too much to fall for a pimp again. This man realized how lonely she actually was, though. He eventually lured Bess by sending her expensive gifts and diamond rings. Bess longed for a man who would treat her right, but found herself trapped with an endless cycle of pimps. She notes toward the end of the interview that, "I'm getting sick and tired of this life, but what can I do? I don't know any other kind of work and even if I did, where would I find it? Besides, once you get accustomed to seventy-five or a hundred dollars a week, it's pretty hard trying to get by on fifteen or eighteen."[1]

Women of the Great Depression were pushed to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, which left them destitute in a male dominant society. The minimal opportunities for female employment gave women limited choices for steady income. Although the autonomous woman removed herself from the traditional female role as a mother, they often remained dependent on the male's success. These progressive women put themselves in command of their own life, despite their reliance on men for income. According to screenwriter Andrew Bergman, "[t]hat power was sexual, but it also involved replacing passivity with activity as a way of relating to the world."[2] Independent women saw themselves as masters, not the slaves of men. The independent women in the Great Depression's popular culture would attempt to use their sexual power in order to replace the stability in society that patriarchy procured.

Popular culture during the Great Depression portrayed the independent women as persuasive, conniving, and sexually confident through film, music, and radio. These characters were continuously unsatisfied as they used their power over males to climb the social ladder. On the one hand, film, radio, and music signified the acceptance of the new opportunity for female autonomy, but maintained ambivalence in support of this lifestyle. On the other hand, women portrayed in the Great Depression's popular culture ultimately returned to a life completely dependent on men.

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[1] Frank Byrd, *The Private Life of Big Bess,* "American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940", http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?wpa:1:./temp/~ammem_txs4::

[2] Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 60

The producers of popular culture expressed ambivalence toward the lifestyle of independent women before their eventual return to dependence. Removing all sentiment allowed women to feign love, putting them in a position of power over men. Many women used their bodies as a tool to control men in the process of becoming independent. The economic straits became so severe that their highly desirable bodies became their only saleable possessions.[3] In order to adapt to the changing environment, the succubus of the Great Depression's popular culture would use her appearance to attract, manipulate, and recycle men for personal gains.

Pre-code Hollywood films permitted uncensored sex and violence, which provided the most explicit version of the Great Depression's independent woman. These films generally possessed a strong female character that utilizes persuasion and deception to gain prominence. This style of life was not considered ideal, though, as it was merely a representation of the opposition that traditional gender roles faced. The producer's portrayal of independent woman did not intend to be mimicked or rejected by the audience. Instead, it introduced the new opportunities that women were discovering in the harsh economic environment of the Great Depression. Women could break free from the traditional patriarchal role of motherhood, but they risked losing satisfaction and stability with their alternative lifestyle.

Baby Face is the story of Lily Powers, whose father is killed by an explosion in his distillery. With no means of income, Lily considers becoming a showgirl or a prostitute. After seeking advice from her German mentor, the cobbler, she is urged to take control of her own life.

> **Lily**: "What chance has a woman got?"
>
> **Cobbler**: "More chance than a man. A woman young, beautiful like you can get anything she wants in the world. Because you have power over men. But you must use men, and not let them use you. Be a master, not a slave!"[4]

Lily accepts the advice, which becomes evident in her new interactions with men. She begins working at a large bank, starting at the bottom where she can only go up. Her beauty instantly mesmerized the men, making persuasion less difficult for the new employee. As she swindles her way up in the company, loving one boss after another, she finds herself in a scandal with the bank's committee. Despite her persistence to remain independent, Lily finds herself in love with Courtland Trenholm. Lily reconsiders her plan to escape to Europe and returns to a wounded Trenholm. With her arms wrapped around the recovering man, Lily realizes that she wants to stay with Trenholm. Lily was never satisfied until she became completely dependent on a man. Perhaps the filmmaker's thought that Lily was better off with a man than she was on her own.

Another pre-code Hollywood film, *Female*, contained a similar theme. Alison Drake was the epitome of an independent woman during the Great Depression. She was the wealthy owner of an automobile company and free from the reign of men. After eschewing men in her personal life for some time, she finds herself oddly attracted to one of her employees, Jim Thorne. Jim was searching for a steady wife, not an autonomous woman. This became apparent in a conversation with Alison, when he said, "I suppose you think you're far too superior for love and marriage. The things women were born

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[3] Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 50

[4] *Baby Face*, dir. Alfred Green (Warner Bros:1933)

for."[5] After rejecting his proposal, Drake's assistant suggests that men do not desire independent women. Realizing this, she reverses her ideals and succumbs to Jim's demand for marriage. Despite her success as an independent woman, Alison decided that she could not survive without Jim as her loving husband. The film signified the acceptance of the independent woman, but posited that this was not always the best route.

Torch singers of the Great Depression yearned for the love of a man, who was seen as the solution to their insecurity. Torch singers perceived their lives as glum and unstable without a man, which led them to sing for their return. Trapped and alone in the harsh economic environment, the torch songs represented women's dependence on men. While it portrayed the singer's dependence on men, the option for autonomy was still present. These singers rejected the autonomous lifestyle and instead pined for a man they could depend on once again.

Ruth Etting popularized the song, "Ten Cents a Dance", which was about life as a showgirl. She seems to never have known love, as her occupation exploits women for their appearance. Although she is not yearning for love explicitly, she examines the woes of women who were most objectified. The tag of the song went,

"Sometime I think
I've found my hero,
But it's a queer romance.
All that you need is a ticket
Come on, big boy, ten cents a dance"[6]

She was unable to find income any other way than to sell her body, which forced her to accept the objectification she experienced. Despite her sorrow, she is forced to remain dependent on the men that pay her to dance.

The song, "Stormy Weather", was about a recent separation that had only brought the singer depression. The singer's sadness is symbolized by the poor weather, which leaves no sun in the sky and does not stop raining. The singer claims that "Life is bare", and she "Just can't get [her] poor self together" without the man she loves. Satisfaction lies in the return of her lover, where she can "Walk in the sun once more."[7] The dependence of the singer on men is apparent in the mood of the lyrics, which expresses her unhappiness when a man does not foster her.

Contrary to other mediums of popular culture, advertisers of the Great Depression moved to reinforced their belief that women were better off when dependent on men. The advertisements portrayed a satisfied woman, who nurtured their children through the advertised product. The advertisements rejected the idea of autonomous females for a more conservative portrayal of women. These women were gentle, innocent, and the antithesis to the independent female of the films and radio. Advertisements of the Great Depression attempted to guilt women into the traditional patriarchal role as a mother. These advertisements differed from the ambivalent stance contemporary popular culture expressed toward female dependence on men.

A Listerine advertisement from 1931 depicts a woman with her arms wide open. The subtext reads, "YOU 5,000,000 WOMEN WHO WANT TO GET MARRIED-

[5] *Female*, dir. Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros/Vitaphone:1933)
[6] Lorenz Hard and Richard Rodgers, "Ten Cents a Dance" (1930)
[7] Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, "Stormy Weather" (1933)

How's Your Breath Today?"[8] Both the woman portrayed in the advertisement, and the intended audience, were not the independent woman using sex for income. Although the opportunity for autonomy was still present, these females were satisfied with their dependence on men. Instead of becoming the independent women portrayed in films, women in advertisements defaulted to the traditional patriarchal role as the housewife.

Some advertisements were aimed directly at women who had already chosen marriage, which disregarded the independent women's collective audience. These advertisements placed the blame for unhealthy children on the mother, casting guilt onto those who were not nurturing children. An advertisement for Dr. West's Waterproofed Toothbrush claimed that a, "WIFE TAKES FULL BLAME" for her family's soggy toothbrushes.[9] Post 40% Bran Flakes suggested that, "PERHAPS YOUR CHILDREN TOO may benefit from this delicious cereal."[10] Cocomalt's advertisement from 1931 depicts a child who gained nine pounds from eating their product.[11] These advertisements made mothers, and women who chose independence, experience guilt for not fulfilling their traditional duties. The independent woman may have been a consumer for these products, but advertisements during the Great Depression targeted a very different audience.

Popular culture during the Great Depression signified the acceptance of the opportunity for women to become independent, but maintained its' ambivalence in supporting the lifestyle. The representation of women who, like Big Bess, struggled during the Great Depression's harsh economic environment considered alternatives to motherhood as a mere possibility, but the producers of popular culture rarely suggested these optimal lifestyles. Women could use their body as a tool for exploitation, but they ultimately returned to their dependence on men. Torch singers had the opportunity for independence, but found that dependence on men was the best route. Advertisements for women did not signify an acceptance of this role, though, as they only targeted the male dependent wife. Women portrayed in film, radio, and music of the Great Depression may have survived as independent females, but in the end, they discovered that they were better off dependent on men.

[8] "How's Your Breath Today." Listerine, 1931.
[9] "Wife Takes Full Blame." Dr. West's Water-proofed Toothbrush, Oct. 13, 1934.
[10] "The Strange Career of Little Mary Dodd." Post 40% Bran Flakes, 1933.
[11] "How We Added 9 Pounds to Dorthy's Weight." Cocomalt, 1931.

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Female, dir. Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros/Vitaphone:1933)

Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, "Stormy Weather" (1933)

"How We Added 9 Pounds to Dorthy's Weight." Cocomalt, 1931.

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