Re-Envisioning 1930s Working Women: The Case of Kitty Foyle

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To cite this article: KATHERINE ROGERS-CARPENTER (2008) Re-Envisioning 1930s Working Women: The Case of Kitty Foyle, Women's Studies, 37:6, 707-730, DOI: 10.1080/00497870802205209

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870802205209

Published online: 29 Jul 2008.

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RE-ENVISIONING 1930s WORKING WOMEN:
THE CASE OF KITTY FOYLE

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After RKO released its film adaptation of Christopher Morley’s Kitty Foyle in December 1940, New York Times critic Bosley Crowther wondered ironically whether “Dalton Trumbo, who [was] listed as author of the screenplay, [was] responsible for botching the original (which he must certainly have done on order)” (“Credit”). Although critics and fans praised Ginger Rogers’s Academy Award winning performance as Kitty Foyle, reviewers like Crowther balked at Trumbo’s extensive plot changes and revisions which, coupled with the requirements of the Motion Picture Production Code, transformed Morley’s novel from what one critic called “a penetrating study in feminine psychology” (“Books”) into a formulaic romance. This normalized version of Kitty Foyle lingers on the periphery of our cultural memory, surfacing in accounts of Ginger Rogers’s life and histories of American cinema, while Morley’s original novel with its patriotic and pro-interventionist message has effectively disappeared.

The screenplay’s deep revisions can be explained, in part, by the requirements of the film industry. Rogers and Trumbo, both struggling to get into mainstream Hollywood films in the 1930s, readily acceded to the changes demanded by the Hays Office and conservative director Sam Wood.1 Rogers, initially shocked at the novel’s content, recounts producer David Hempstead’s advice in her 1992 memoir, Ginger: My Story.2 When Hempstead reminded

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1Wood later helped found and head the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals—the reactionary group responsible for soliciting House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings in Hollywood (McGilligan and Buhle 314). Rogers would go on to testify willingly before the House Committee.

2Hempstead co-produced Kitty Foyle with Harry E. Edlington.

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her that “RKO bought this book as a starring vehicle, expressly for you. So DON’T TURN IT DOWN until you have read the rewrites” (111), she agreed to read the modified scripts. True to his word, Hempstead precipitated revisions that met the Hollywood censors’ guidelines and, after her successful performance, Rogers was cast in mainstream acting roles. Trumbo, now remembered for critical successes like *Johnny Got His Gun* and *Spartacus*, spent most of the 1930s writing B-grade film scripts. In exchange for adapting *Kitty Foyle*, he negotiated a release from his RKO contract which allowed him to concentrate on his own writing (Cook 141). “By playing it safe [with films like *Kitty Foyle*],” biographer Peter Hanson writes, “Trumbo secured his place at the top of the movie industry—while producing some of the most banal screenwriting of his life” (55). Hanson further argues that Trumbo’s changes “diminished the film’s potential to become an important historical artifact” (55).

Hanson is right. The flaws in RKO’s production are hard to ignore. In its scrupulous avoidance of controversial topics, the screenplay offers only the faintest social critique which reasserts middle-class values rather than challenging them. Furthermore, as Hanson notes, to a modern audience, its portrayal of romance and sexuality seems watered down, quaintly archaic, and irrelevant (57). In *Modern Love* (2003), David Shumway contends that romantic storylines like this one, which revolves around Kitty’s choice of mates, were symptomatic of women’s increasing power within marriage at the turn of the twentieth century. In Shumway’s view, “Romances . . . allow[ed] people—especially women—to reimagine their lives as a narrative in which their choices and desires might be realized” (51). In the 1920s and 30s, romances also reflected a growing expectation that marriage should satisfy couples’ sexual, intellectual, and emotional needs. But Kitty’s choice of spouses, which in 1939 served as an expression of independence, now seems commonplace, even trite.³

For Morley, *Kitty Foyle* was a deliberate experiment with less intellectual subject matter and a sparer style—a strategy encouraged by his friend and business manager Frank Henry (Oakley 274). As

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³The sanitized romances of Depression-era Hollywood would become much more explicit after WWII when sex began to be discussed in more public venues (Benshoff and Griffin 307).
biographer Helen Oakley explains, “at a time when Faulkner and Hemingway were writing savage, virile pieces, and Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O’Neill, and Theodore Dreiser were holding up uncompromising mirrors to the mores of the day—compared with these, Morley’s work was found by some contemporary readers to be pallid, precious, and quite old-fashioned” (146). The book’s overwhelming success would make Morley, already a well-known newspaper columnist and book-of-the-month club editor, a celebrity (Oakley 296).

Although some critics accused Morley of writing *Kitty Foyle* for purely commercial reasons, the story does incorporate a social critique. Through Kitty, Morley connects women’s changing roles to prospective US involvement in World War II. He initially thought of writing about white-collar women in the 1920s; his 1921 essay describes them as “a new generation of their sex, cool, assured, even capable. They are happy, because they do not think too much; they are lovely, because they are so perishable, because (despite their naive assumption of certainty) one knows them so delightfully only as an innocent ornament of this business world of which they are so ignorant” (“Thoughts” 634). Although ill-equipped for the business world, work experiences would prove valuable for young women when they (inevitably) married. The same assumptions structure Kitty’s life and choices in Morley’s novel.

*Kitty Foyle* was also Morley’s attempt to marshal efforts behind the US’s imminent participation in WWII. To this end, reproduction is represented as a strategic source of future leaders who will defend the home front; intermarriage between ethnic whites is advanced as a way to invigorate the gene pool. More specifically, motherhood is ideologically valuable as a means to safeguard and improve the white race. The unconditional whiteness of the film

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4His earlier works, *Parnassus on Wheels* (1917), *The Haunted Bookshop* (1919), *Thunder on the Left* (1925), and *The Trojan Horse* (1937), reflect his passion for books as well as classic literature. *Parnassus on Wheels* and *The Haunted Bookshop* deal with a traveling book salesman and a secondhand bookstore respectively, while *The Trojan Horse* is a contemporary adaptation of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (Wallach 61).

5Morley’s classical training (as valedictorian of his graduating class at Haverford College and then a Rhodes Scholar), and his reputation as a writer leant Harry Scherman’s obviously commercial Book-of-the-Month Club cultural legitimacy (Radway 183). Thus, in addition to being a middlebrow writer, as one of the club’s selection committee members Morley was an arbiter of middlebrow taste.
adaptation, however, implies a nativism which denies the impending conflict. Several factors may have contributed to the filmmakers’ decisions: Jewishness or pronounced ethnicity might be construed as pro-interventionist and/or Leftist—political stances that would alienate conservative audiences (Schatz 13). Marked ethnicity might also generate more controversy in light of increased ethnic tensions created by the Depression (Bayor 5–6). Clearly, the film’s retreat into conservatism was not designed to foster patriotic support for US involvement in the war.

In the 1939 best-seller, the Depression along with impending US intervention in WWII provide the story’s context and motivate many of protagonist Kitty Foyle’s actions. As a third-generation Irish American, Kitty grows up on Frankford Street—a working-class Philadelphia neighborhood. Her father Tom Foyle works as a munitions plant night watchman. Volatile and hard drinking, Foyle is also kind, shrewd, diligent, and ambitious for his children—traits which Morley represents as distinctively Irish and genetically inheritable. Kitty’s mother dies, and, with the help of the family’s African-American maid Myrtle, Foyle brings up his daughter, sending her to live with relatives in Illinois in order to attend high school and college. But Tom Foyle has a stroke, and, soon after, the stock market collapses. To care for her father, Kitty returns home, entering the workforce as an office assistant at socialite Wyn Strafford’s ill-conceived magazine Philly (modeled on The New Yorker). Kitty falls in love with Wyn, but his elite Main Line Philadelphia background makes marriage impossible. When she gets pregnant during this romance, Kitty secretly has an abortion and later becomes a successful cosmetics demonstrator for French businesswoman Delphine Detaille. The novel ends when Kitty decides to marry Mark Eisen: a Jewish pediatrician who works with crippled children.

The screenplay’s plot is much more reductive due to the elimination of the story’s controversial themes. Thus Kitty’s premarital affair becomes a week-long, ill-fated marriage; her abortion becomes a miscarriage; and her role as a white-collar

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6When Kitty Foyle was adapted, Trumbo, a Leftist who would later join the Communist party, was, like Wood, strongly opposed to US intervention in WW II. Between 1939 and 1941, historian Justus Doenecke notes, he spoke out against the war, “even contributing to the conservative Chicago Tribune” (101) and authoring Johnny Got His Gun (1939).
worker is subordinated to romances with Wyn and, subsequently, Mark Eisen. Like the other African-American maids and porters in the original story, Myrtle is expunged from Trumbo’s adaptation. Gone too are any characteristics that identify Mark as Jewish, making him almost interchangeable with the hyperwaspish Wyn. Notably, the only time Mark’s last name, Eisen, is mentioned in the entire screenplay is in a stage direction. Casting choices transform Kitty’s appearance from dark-haired “belle sauvage” (246) in the novel, to the more Nordic Ginger Rogers. These changes alter the story’s content and plot radically; Kitty no longer becomes a better citizen by choosing “interracial” (or interethnic) marriage. Instead, she becomes more virtuous by forgoing passion (living in sin with the caddish Wyn) for respectability (marriage to the virtuous doctor).

**Book vs. Film; Melting Pot Eugenics vs. Absolute Whiteness**

In the novel, Morley co-opts features of the 1920s New Woman to construct an ideal mother-citizen who, above all, seeks to improve the national identity (the future) through careful breeding and mate selection. Reworking earlier Progressive Era notions about motherhood, Morley suggests that, through melting pot eugenics, white ethnic groups can reinvigorate a feminized and flagging upper middle class. His portrayal of Irish ethnicity draws upon earlier notions of nativism, Americanization, and pluralism. In the 1920s, nativists like widely read Madison Grant linked eugenic theories of racial deterioration to paranoid fears that foreigners would erode American white national identity. Such arguments hinged on female sexuality inasmuch as white women’s purity protected the race, while ethnic immigrants’ fecundity threatened it.

Pluralism, more benign but equally racist, presented a “democratic” model of immigration based on essentialist ethnic traits. Katrina Irving argues that even though pluralists extolled ethnic diversity, attributing traditional domestic qualities like maternalism to immigrant women replicated nineteenth-century virtues. Hence pluralists “remapped” separate spheres ideology, making the new virtuous subject the immigrant mother (100). Irving explains Americanization as a holdover from the Progressive Era when
writers and reformers proclaimed the immigrants’ potential for rehabilitation. . . . The momentum of this project, known as the Americanization movement, peaked during and in the years immediately following America’s participation in World War I. Its inception can be . . . located specifically in the work of the social settlements, in the various programs launched by the Daughters of the American Revolution to educate immigrants in American customs, and in the work of individual activists such as Jacob Riis. (70)

In Morley’s novel, Kitty Foyle balances self-reliance with a Progressive Era vision of eugenic maternity. Whiteness is a pluralistic racial category which consists of a caste or continuum of ethnicity. Blackness, on the other hand, is represented by African American characters like Myrtle as an undifferentiated exoticized Other—a foil against which to establish whiteness. 7

Rather than using ethnicity and motherhood to explore national identity, in the film stereotypical Irish and Italian Americans provide comic relief, ethnic diversity is superficial at best, and blackness is almost nonexistent. Kitty’s revised character is fairly conventional, and her fertility is safely contained within the mores of the white middle class. Motherhood thus becomes a trope for a normative white racial category. To facilitate these changes, this married virtuous Kitty has a miscarriage, and choosing an ethnic or “less white” suitor is never an option for her. Whiteness is more homogenous and related directly to membership in the middle class, while racial and ethnic tensions are conspicuously absent—an ironic strategy given the layoffs and cutbacks pervasive during the 1930s. Like other sections of the population, the middle class was in a precarious position; representing this class as established and secure offered movie-going audiences an escape from legitimate anxieties.

Not surprisingly, motherhood is always a better alternative for women than working in the adaptation. This is clearest in the scenes Trumbo added which demonstrate Kitty’s inherent suitability as a mother. In one of the earliest of these sequences, as Kitty and Mark deliver a baby in a poverty-stricken tenement, the stage directions emphasize her maternal instincts. After

7Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses this trend towards a binary, skin-based construction of race in Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (1998).
washing up, Mark comes out of the bedroom and sees Kitty holding the newborn. When she asks “What’s his name?” Mark replies:

They haven’t decided yet—he—you see there isn’t any father (a shake of the head). Might’ve been better if he hadn’t pulled through.

Close shot-Kitty and Mark. She suddenly holds tighter to the baby, as if to protect its life.

Kitty: (intensely) Don’t say that, Mark. It’s always better to pull through. Something about the intensity of her tones attracts Mark’s attention. Suddenly, he drops down on his haunches beside the chair, looking from her to the baby.

Mark: There’s something about the way you said that, that makes me—think—(breaks off suddenly, pulls a tiny engagement ring out of his pocket)

Oh, Kitty, will you take this ring? I mean—will you marry me? (smiles and makes a helpless little gesture) (10–11)

In RKO’s production, romance propels Kitty’s destiny. Predictable dialogue dramatizes Kitty’s sentimental stance as she protects the newborn infant. Genre expectations about melodrama help viewers anticipate her “correct” responses to Mark’s observations (e.g., “It’s always better to pull through”), as well as her reward (an engagement ring). Mark is captivated by Kitty’s role in the mother-child tableau, which is symbolic in a number of ways. Laura Doyle explains that “on the one hand, the racialized mother figure harbors a knowledge and a history rooted in the senses of a racially and sexually specific body. On the other, this figure carries out the dominant culture’s subordination and use of that knowledge and history” (4). Following Doyle, I would argue that, as a white mother, Kitty functions as conduit and barrier determining access to a racialized class identity. This matters to Mark who wants his future wife to behave appropriately.

A series of flashbacks reveals that an earlier miscarriage (of which Mark is unaware) has intensified Kitty’s desire for children, making the tenement scene more poignant. This revision can be traced directly to the Motion Picture Production Code. Under the Legion of Decency’s powerful influence, the Hays Office tried to eliminate all references to abortion in films in addition to “[a]dultery” and “[s]cenes of actual childbirth” (Jeff
and Simmons 289-90). To comply with the code, Trumbo thwarts Kitty’s maternal longings with a miscarriage instead of an abortion diminishing her reproductive agency. In the hospital, at the beginning of the miscarriage sequence, Kitty says: “This [motherhood] is what women want. It isn’t men—not really—it’s something down inside of them that’s the future. They want to bring it out and make something of it” (147). A consuming drive to reproduce and generate a future world is much more important than any sexual or personal desires women might have. The scene dissolves out as Kitty realizes, based on “the tears in Delphine’s averted eyes” (148), that her son has died. Softly she explains (in close up and full makeup) to Delphine “I’m not thinking about me. I’m thinking about my little candidate for the year two thousand. It’s so good to be alive and—he didn’t even get a chance to fight” (150). In conjunction with Kitty’s longing for a conventional life as wife and mother, heightened pathos implies that the 1930s New Woman is only marginally interested in the independence offered by the workplace.

In the novel, however, Kitty approaches Delphine for help with an abortion. Because she recognizes the practical problems the pregnancy poses and empathizes with Kitty, Delphine hesitantly recommends a qualified physician: “Keety. . . . You must be quite sure you do not want these baby? Do not think of the business, you can have your job back after, perhaps we invent a new talcum powder for heem” (268). And later she admonishes Kitty (lightly): “My dear, it is better to do your precaution before and not afterward” (269). Delphine’s ethical quandary and ultimate pragmatism differ significantly from the teary sentiment expressed in the film. Although his publisher J.W. Lipincott and his friends objected to what they saw in the original story as a lapse in taste and judgment, Morley considered the abortion essential to the book’s main argument—that melting pot eugenics

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8This change in the film may reflect the growing trend in the mid to late 1930s towards viewing abortion as a moral, rather than medical issue—a change which Kristin Luker attributes, in part, to post-World War I scientific advances. Medical justification for abortion was traditionally based on preserving the mother’s life. However “the invention of intravenous glucose feeding” and the virtual eradication of some diseases (55) eliminated many conditions that would have indicated abortion earlier in the century. As a result, decisions about when to perform abortions were less clear cut and what had been largely a medical debate became a social, moral, and public one.
can save the nation. Kitty atones for her choice through good works, but sees her action as the only way to protect Wyn. “Wyn,” she explains, “wasn’t big enough to have a bastard; or the folks he had to live with wouldn’t let him be. It would be making him unhappy for the sake of somebody that didn’t exist yet” (268-69). Later she says, “I couldn’t feel any kind of wrongness. I did what I had to do” (270). In Morley’s view, such decisions hurt the dying Main Line stock, because they hinder the nation’s progress.

Kitty distinguishes between positive US eugenics, which combines ethnic diversity with careful breeding, and negative Nazi genocide policies: she rationalizes this good/bad binary by connecting melting pot eugenics to a healthy economy. During a discussion about Hitler and the Nazis, she describes a local news dealer’s child:

He’s got that lovely golden skin and United Cigarstore eyes, the Jewish hasn’t come out on his features yet but you can see it there ready for when it’ll be needed. . . . I always say to myself That kid’s my candidate for the year 2000. If he keeps away from Hitler that is. . . . My baby could have been going strong in 2000; at least he wouldn’t be 70 yet, and with all those wonderful genes –Jesusgod every woman has a right to have some candidates for the future. . . . She gets tired being told Birth Control is the solution for everything. She’s got a right to a baby if she needs one, same as a man’s got a right to pay income tax. (325-26)

Underlying Kitty’s assertion that “[every women has] a right to a baby” is the belief that just as all men are potential taxpayers, all women are potential mothers whose most important role is to create political and economic leaders. Creating “candidates for the future” is a way to fight Hitler and other threats to national security. Because they impede this critical reproductive function, however, elitist ideas about birth control, abortion, and marriage are detrimental to the nation. As Kitty points out, Hitler’s tactics also jeopardize a valued capitalist ideal. Significantly, the child is mentioned in conjunction with his parents’ news stand—a symbol of economic assimilation. In this way, Morley valorizes capitalism as a form of Americanization.

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9As New York Times reviewer Margaret Wallace pointed out, “Christopher Morley first thought of calling this novel ‘Nation Wide,’ which goes to show that he considered its problem national in scope and full of social significance” (BR2).
Over the course of the 1930s, Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies accelerated the shift away from negative eugenics in the sciences towards an emphasis on environmental influences (especially mothering skills) in child development. In place of punitive sterilization, many sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists posited a combination of positive eugenics and a return to traditional values in order to restore what liberals and conservatives saw as the deteriorating middle-class family. Experts attributed this problem to white middle-class women’s failure to have children or to adequately parent them (Kline 124). “Feminists and liberals,” notes historian Wendy Kline, “pointed out that half of all births during the 1930s came from families on relief or making under $1,000 a year” (97). Morley’s promotion of motherhood as a way to revitalize white identity, then, places the novel in a larger dialogue about women’s eugenic responsibilities. Sex, reproduction, economics, and patriotism converge in the mother—in this case, Kitty Foyle.

“I’d be a better American if I married Mark than if I married Wyn,” she decides towards the end of the story, articulating her own eugenic-political role: “The more we get mixed up, I mean race-mixed-up, the better. We got no time for that kind of prejudice” (280). Like Kitty’s “Irish” sagacity and resourcefulness, Mark’s virtue and keen intellect are valuable racial characteristics,10 which earn him membership in the middle class. “Mark,” she explains, “had an inferiority hidden away inside him that must have took a hundred generations to build up, but there wasn’t any inferiority when he picked up a microscope or a sick kid” (322). In conjunction with her position in the caste system, Kitty’s superior assimilative skills, her discerning palate and understanding of social cues (gained, in part, from Wyn) can help offset Mark’s social inadequacies. His class ascendance depends on her cultural knowledge, and he merits Kitty’s help because of what he can contribute to future generations. “That kicks a goal for Mark Eisen,” she concludes. “We’d always have the hospital to think about and the cripple children” (198). Mark’s scientific talents and dedication to children are also an

10In the novel intellect and empathy don’t essentially define Mark the way skin color does, but they do resonate with a Christian ethos of redemption through healing (Gilman 21). These, Morley suggests, are values the Main Line used to have and should aspire to.
indirect reference to Roosevelt’s polio\textsuperscript{11} and his commitment to sponsoring polio research, hospitals, and children’s camps. Kitty carries out FDR’s progressive vision through her volunteer work and her choice of Mark as a spouse.

Morley’s story of mutual admiration between Irish and Jewish Americans glosses over the ethnic tensions which grew as jobs dried up and the Roosevelt administration revamped government agencies. In “Transatlantic Connections and the Sharp Edge of the Great Depression,” historian Matthew O’Brien chronicles a series of setbacks for Irish Americans triggered by this changing political and economic climate: “Not only did cities cull their job roles and industries close their factories,” he writes, “but many of the families who had seemingly reached respectability over the previous twenty years lost their life savings with the widespread bank collapses” (87). Furthermore, the federal government took over the relief effort—traditionally led by political bosses—effectively undermining the Irish-American political machine (89). Increased displacement of Irish by Jews in higher status jobs also exacerbated interethnic tensions. Ronald Bayor explains that “[s]ince the Irish were concerned about occupational status, the increased competition from the Jews in such areas as teaching, civil service, and law contributed to their resentment” (26). At the same time, conservatives linked Eastern European immigrants and especially Jews to communism, the Red Scare, and intervention in WWII. Father Charles E. Coughlin, popular radio host, anti-Communist, and virulent anti-Semite condoned the Christian Front—a violent, militantly Catholic, pro-Nazi group (104). Historian Chris McNickle explains that while not all Irish Catholics resorted to such extremism: “[a]s World War II approached, most Irish supported a policy of neutrality” (355) only supporting the Allies after the United States became actively involved in the war. Jewish organizations such as “the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the American Jewish Congress, [and] Hadassah” supported intervention as a way to combat Hitler’s persecution

\textsuperscript{11}Morley supported FDR’s policies and shared his views about fascism and the necessity for intervention in WWII. In a 1939 essay titled “History of the Future,” for example, he set up a parable about a farmer who is killed in the process of putting out an electrical fire. “Even neutrals,” Morley warned, “are conductors of electricity” (28).
of Jews and the rising tide of anti-Semitism in the United States (often fueled by Hitler’s supporters) (Bayor 121).

Overcoming anti-Semitism is critical to Kitty’s character development. She compares her own attitudes about Jewish ethnicity to her friend’s: “She was glad I picked out an apartment on Riverside. At first she was a bit ruffled by race prejudice, but I get quite a kick out of it. They’re so different from the Main Line. Jesusgod, I might even marry one of them. They think about the future and they’re good on the fiscal end. Sometimes I wish they weren’t quite so hairy” (148). For Kitty, the “positive” stereotype of forward-thinking, pragmatic people offsets their “negative” hairiness. She continues, “Honestly, I’d rather have one window looking across the Hudson towards America than a whole penthouse over on the East River where people have to live to remind themselves how well bred they are” (148). The Jewish Riverside neighborhood embodies a traditional American myth of ascendance through hard work—a positive alternative to the Main Line’s self-serving illusions. By juxtaposing Riverside with the East River, Morley suggests that the upper middle class lost these positive traits after generations of complacency.

If Kitty married Mark, his Jewish traits—incisive intellect and social conscience—would add value to the middle class, just as Wyn’s marriage to Kitty would rejuvenate the decaying Main Line. Wyn’s marriage to non-descript socialite Ronnie Gladwyn is, as Kitty notes, a eugenic mistake: “I wonder if a nice girl like Ronnie hasn’t slowed up the Strafford family for quite a few generations; just because she’s a nice well-bred girl and nothing else…. [I]f I was a family I’d like to knit some good genes into it that wants to get somewhere. Wyn’s genes had a little hankering that way, they could have been taken places” (306). As this passage shows, eugenics and Neo-Lamarckian theory fuel the racially inflected rhetoric of the melting pot—a holdover from the Progressive Era when luminaries such as sociologist E. A. Ross and Theodore Roosevelt argued that the decadent upper classes

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12In 1948, Ross still worried about hereditary fitness. In Howard Odum’s American Sociology: The Story of Sociology in the United States Through 1950 (1951), Ross argued that “in scores of ways the hereditarily inferior, the constitutionally less fit, are being helped to survive and multiply” (101–102).
could be reinvigorated through intermarriage with ethnic groups like the Irish—reiterating a more ethnically diverse notion of whiteness.

In Trumbo’s screenplay, however, a predictable love story supplants eugenics and citizenship as the primary theme. To facilitate this process, Mark’s Jewish background is completely erased. Only his consistent generic virtue and parvenu status distinguish the earnest young doctor from the equally two-dimensional playboy Wyn. Throughout the story, Mark is committed to marrying Kitty and having a family with her. Conversely, Wyn, whose second wife won’t divorce him, asks Kitty to run away with him to Brazil. In a later monologue, a voiceover representing Kitty’s conscience underscores the value of respectability: “A lot of pretty fine things come out of that piece of paper [marriage license], Kitty—a home—children. That’s where Mark comes in again—you’d be a lot happier with Mark and that piece of paper than you could ever be with Wyn and a snug little apartment with a key for him and a key for you” (24). There is no question of assimilation for this new solidly respectable Mark Eisen. If in the novel Kitty helps Mark assimilate, in the screenplay, Mark helps Kitty achieve a normative mainstream role.

Assimilation vs. Ethnicity: The Whitening of Mark Eisen

The whitening of Mark Eisen reflects the film industry’s emphasis on assimilation at the expense of ethnicity: a trend which began in the early 1930s and grew unchecked until US engagement in World War II. Film historians Nicholas Sammand and Chandra Mukerji explain that “[i]n Hollywood, Jewish producers had

13In his first appearance, Mark meets Kitty after work and the stage direction sets the scene: “The cab has scarcely stopped when the rear door opens and Mark Eisen, a tall, good-looking young man, gets out quickly” (7). This is the only time Mark Eisen’s last name is mentioned in the adaptation (in the dialogue or stage directions). On the one occasion when Kitty introduces Mark to her roommate, Pat, his last name is a series of dashes: “Pat this is Dr.———, (to Mark) Miss Day” (88). It is unclear whether Kitty is supposed to say Eisen or not, but dashes indicating elisions are not a strategy Trumbo uses elsewhere in the text.

14According to film historians Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin “Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Havana were often represented in films of this era [the 1930s] as modern urban paradieses laden with sensual pleasures like music, alcohol, and romance” (140). With its connotations of illicit romance, Brazil would be a natural choice for Wyn.
faced years of anti-Semitic attacks from nativist groups, who accused them of subverting American morals: as war approached isolationist anti-Semites added the charge of conspiring to draw the United States into the conflict” (6). In 1939, representing Mark Eisen as an unassimilated or assimilating Jew was risky for filmmakers and investors because it could arouse anti-Semitic sentiment in more conservative viewers. Controversial films could also result in boycotts by organizations like the Legion of Decency or the withholding of a Seal of Approval (indicating compliance with the Code). Excluding films from theaters meant losing a significant profit; since films were contracted to theaters in blocks, excluding one film from a venue meant excluding a whole block of films.

Sammand and Mukerji further contend that “assimilation involved a discernable (. . . almost ritual) movement from the performance of ethnicity into the enactment of Americanism” (4). In Trumbo’s adaptation, comedy displaces any serious concerns with ethnicity. Kitty alludes to her Irish background only rarely and seems completely assimilated. However, pronounced accents and stereotypical behaviors mark other individuals as quaint, humorous, and less assimilated than Kitty. For example, in an added scene at the beginning of the film, as Kitty and several other sales girls go home, the camera focuses on two Irish Catholic cleaning women who comment on the action and provide comic relief:

[Stage direction] “Two charwomen, blowsy old Whoops Sisters, shake their heads as the girls hurry off towards the employee’s washroom.

First Charwoman: I’m past all that, praise Mary! I’m so old I can’t even REMEMBER my first kiss.

Second Charwoman: (gloomily) I can’t even remember my last”15 (6)

Unlike Kitty, these working-class women couldn’t and obviously didn’t marry a man like Wyn or Mark. The cleaning ladies’ brogues, Giono’s dramatic gestures, and Delphine’s exaggerated accent might resonate with a more conservative audience insofar as these characters could never “pass.” Through less assimilated characters, however, Trumbo also parodies the American dream.

15The Whoops sisters were tipsy older women—the invention of New Yorker cartoonist Peter Arno in the mid-1920s.
Italian speakeasy owner Giono, for instance, vigorously embraces capitalism and political conservatism. He staunchly opposes lifting prohibition because, as he tells Wyn and Kitty, “[Roosevelt] He’s a wet! He wants to repeal Prohibition! Prohibition goes—where am I?” (48). After Hoover’s loss to Roosevelt in the 1932 election sets off a huge celebration in the bar, Giono alone collapses under the weight of his disappointment. He doesn’t pretend to care about prohibition (or the election) as a moral choice: he cares about selling alcohol. Similarly, Delphine Detaille skillfully markets her cosmetics and perfumes to an upper-class clientele, carefully teaching Kitty to pronounce her products’ names with a French accent in order to present them as chic and desirable. Delphine succeeds by manipulating aging, insecure clients. Thus, in addition to parodying assimilation, these stories of ascendance satirize capitalist opportunism and hypocrisy.

In novel and film, gestures of inclusion are democratic when directed towards ethnic whites, but they are polarizing when applied to black/white interactions. In the New Deal era, Matthew Frye Jacobson writes, “the problematic Letts, Finns, Hebrews, Slavs, and Greeks of 1924 become ever more ‘white’ as the politics of segregation overwhelmed the national agenda” (246). Kitty’s incorporation into the mainstream middle class (through a less prominent ethnicity) represents a shift in which racially designated European groups (Nordics, Slavs, Finns, Italians) became a more undifferentiated white category. As “the negro question” moved to the forefront of 1930s politics, it was represented by conservatives, progressive liberals, and radicals as a skin-based racial dichotomy between whites and blacks.

In Morley’s novel, the color line clearly separates black and white characters. The Foyle’s maid Myrtle, for example, is consistently associated with bodily functions, and she is always pragmatic about them. She helps Tom Foyle raise Kitty after Mrs. Foyle dies, offering sensible advice about her emotional and sexual development. “Dey bulges here and dey bulges dere,” she explains as Kitty approaches puberty, “all of a sudden dey’s real pleasurable” (17). Later, when 13-year-old Kitty has her first period on a Chicago-bound train, a Pullman porter helps her. “With the intuition of a great gentleman,” she says, “he must have guessed, for soon after a large black hand came through the
curtains and handed me a package” (37). Earlier in the story, Kitty explains that “Colored people don’t have to stop and think in order to be wise; they just know things naturally, it oozes out of them” (18). Blood marks instinctive behavior, and it is the medium through which characters inherit traits. The argument that unlike Myrtle, upper or middle-class whites like Wyn lose touch with what is true or real, does attempt to represent African Americans sympathetically and positively, but it rests on a eugenic and linear notion of evolution—whites are hypercivilized, blacks are intuitive. The danger for whites is that rarified inbreeding leads to over-civilization, a problem African Americans never face in the story. This is naturalism cast as inclusion.

The parallels Tom Foyle, Kitty, and Myrtle draw between Irish and black experiences advance this democratic ethos. “Myrtle,” Kitty explains, “was proud of the fact we were ‘Scotch-Irish.’ She figured that Irish, like colored people, were sort of on their own, secretly at odds with the rest of the world” (17). Pairing black and white cultures in this way suggests an illusory equality even as it highlights critical differences between African Americans and Irish in the story. Here, for example, the first-wave protestant Irish or Scotch-Irish who emigrated to the US in the early 1800s form a distinct subset of an ethnic white caste system (Ignatiev 99–100). “Colored people,” on the other hand, are an undifferentiated group set apart from whites by skin color. Unlike the Irish, African Americans do not ascend to the middle class through hard work or marriage in this story. This may explain why, when Myrtle describes her father as “a pioneer in the wool-straightenin’ business, nobody dat can straighten wool is goin’ starve” (217), her dialect is supposed to be comical, as is the reference to her ‘pioneer’ father. Historically, the beauty industry was one of the few capitalist avenues for African Americans, but here such economic assimilation is part of a racist caricature. Blacks, this passage suggests, will always try to mimic whites and fail.

The bond between Foyle and Myrtle dramatizes and normalizes inequality based on race and gender. Reflecting on this relationship, Kitty explains that “[t]hey both enjoyed kidding, and like sensitive people do, they knew where to stop. Myrtle said once ‘If yo’ Pop called me nigger I’d be like to walk out and quit. But when he say Black Woman I know he mean it fo’ compliment’”
Morley does not advocate interracial marriage. Instead, the mutual affection between the Foyles and Myrtle suggests that this hierarchy is natural, even egalitarian in its pseudo-intimacy. Myrtle’s devotion attests to Tom Foyle’s open-hearted tolerance masking any social inequity or racial conflict. In reality, rampant discrimination and a tightening labor force made secure employment difficult for black women to obtain in the 1930s, and agricultural and domestic workers were not protected by labor legislation (Jones 411). Myrtle would probably lose her job if she directly criticized her employer. Like her speech, Myrtle’s employment options would have been very limited.

As evidenced by the widespread riots following the end of World War I, the Great Migration displaced or at least jostled Irish populations in the larger cities and heightened existing tensions especially in conjunction with fewer job opportunities and resources. However, the only hint of racial tension in Morley’s novel occurs when Kitty expresses a righteous empathy for Marian Anderson. “I want to be a good American,” she says. “I’ll never forget how I heard that colored girl Marian Anderson sing My Country Tis of Thee on the radio. . . . I cried partly because I was proud of her being a woman, and partly because it was Main Line kind of people that had been stupid about her” (283). Ostensibly, Kitty’s charitable attitude towards the African American singer makes her more empathetic, but the real issue is Kitty’s patriotism and the Main Line’s shortcomings. The D.A.R.’s refusal to make their Washington, DC facility, Constitution Hall, available to Anderson in 1939 made the organization a target for progressive liberals and radicals. To widespread popular approval, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the organization in protest. Kitty’s attitude puts her squarely on the side of progressive liberals like Roosevelt, reflecting a true democratic spirit, but she doesn’t go beyond sympathizing with black women: she never tries to help Marian Anderson or Myrtle.

Trumbo’s solution to such a conservative (and reassuring) portrayal of race relations was to eliminate Myrtle altogether—understandable in light of his outspoken stand against racism, his Leftist political affiliation, and especially his participation in the

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16 Critics such as Laura Wexler and Shawn Smith make similar arguments about benevolence masking inequality.
NAACP’s drive to eliminate racist stereotypes in films. In “Blackface, Hollywood Style,” published in Crisis in 1943, he equated racism with Fascism, accusing the film industry of making “tarts of the Negro’s daughters, crap-shooters of his sons, obsequious Uncle Toms of his fathers, superstitious and grotesque crones of his mothers, strutted peacocks of his successful men, psalm-singing mountebanks of his priests, and Barnum and Bailey sideshows of his religion” (366). Trumbo’s objections were certainly valid; paradoxically, getting rid of Myrtle made the story whiter—a change which had serious implications for African American audiences. In his discussion of minstrel performers Michael Rogin notes, “Trumbo’s attacks on [racist] stereotypes . . . ran up against the uncomfortable fact that black entertainers . . . were among the few prominent African Americans whom the civil rights organization could celebrate” (198). Dispensing with the objectionable Myrtle character meant eliminating any African American presence in the story along with any opportunity for a black actor to appear in the film.

The final RKO production fleetingly adds Myrtle back into the story. In the film, Hattie Noel makes a single uncredited appearance in a scene that features Kitty (Ginger Rogers) tending to her sick father before going out for the evening. Noel appears for a blurry 15 seconds on the right side of the frame in the background. The dialogue consists of Kitty asking “Myrtle, is that you?”; Myrtle’s response, “Yes’m Miss Kitty, it’s me. I just got here”; and Kitty’s acknowledgement, “Alright.” Without pausing or turning her head, Kitty continues talking to her father. “I’m going out to dinner tonight, so Myrtle’s going to get you yours” she says, arranging the blanket around him. Clearly, there is no room for character development in Myrtle’s revised role. Instead, as part of the mise-en-scene, she establishes Kitty’s authority in the household as an employer. Myrtle’s liminal status, shown through physical positioning onscreen, is echoed in the social web created by the new story. Thus the addition of an African American maid dramatizes Kitty’s white middle-class identity.

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17Michael Rogin discusses this article with reference to minstrelsy in Blackface, White Noise (198).

18In her biography of Hattie McDaniel, Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood (2005), historian Jill Watts argues that some African American actors, like McDaniel, did try to expand these stereotypical roles.
RKO’s casting choice of Ginger Rogers also reinforced Kitty’s racial and class status. In Morley’s original text, a combination of exotic and mainstream physical characteristics represents Kitty’s outspoken but culturally assimilated personality. Delphine, she recalls, “was always kidding [her] about [her] having blue eyes with black hair, she said it was the belle sauvage touch” (246). This is the closest the story comes to developing an outsider/insider dichotomy. By nativist standards (or Hitler’s standards), Kitty is less Nordic or ideal than Main Liners like Ronnie Gladwyn, but Morley presents Kitty’s physical traits as positive proof that the Irish are white—a racial identity which is accentuated through a comparison with Myrtle. Kitty is lithe, graceful, and well-versed in the use of perfumes and cosmetics. Myrtle, on the other hand, is flat footed and has a distinctive odor (presumably because of her heavy domestic labor—cleaning, doing laundry). As long as Myrtle is present and so plainly, unerotically Other, Kitty’s whiteness is indisputable. RKO’s virtual elimination of Myrtle in the film, however, removes this contrast, leaving Kitty’s racial identity open to question. Instead of using Myrtle as a foil, in the film Kitty’s whiteness is incontrovertible because of Ginger Rogers’s physical characteristics. Thus, RKO’s Kitty Foyle embodies a much blonder, glamorous ideal.

In the original novel, Morley clearly empathized with young working women whom he considered vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the business world. One of the novel’s more well-known passages compares white-collar women to tenant farmers:

Jesusgod, I read about the . . . woman of the dustbowl and the gingham goddess of the covered wagon. What about the woman of the covered typewriter? What has she got, poor kid, when she leaves the office. Molly and I certainly had most of the breaks but I remember when Molly got past her first enthusiasm and said about her and Pat ‘Do you know what we are? We’re sharecroppers. We work like nigger hands in a cotton field and give Palmer’s more brainwork than they’d know what to do with and what do we get for it? (261-62).

Here, images of tenant farmers and sharecroppers, ubiquitous in 1930s reportage, explain how white-collar women are exploited by big business, and, like their dustbowl counterparts, these women are heroic in the face of adversity and victimization. Shortly after this passage, Kitty describes confronting President
Roosevelt in a dream: “I see [white-collar girls] in subways and on busses, putting up a good fight in their pretty clothes and keeping their heeby jeebies to themselves. There’s something so courageous about it, it hurts me inside” (334). This is the novel’s most direct criticism of the economic/political system and its effect on women.

Typically, in Kitty’s fond reminiscences about rooming with Molly and Pat, cutting corners is almost always fun: “When you’re working on 18 a week like those kids you don’t go out unless someone takes you. You sit home . . . iron a slip and buy the evening paper in turns and set the alarm clock so there’ll be time to walk to work in the morning” (200). To survive the Depression, Kitty makes due, works hard, and, in the end, matures to adulthood. In the process, she develops what are presented as morally valid conclusions about race, motherhood, and her own civic responsibilities. Problems like sexual harassment, low pay, not being able to pay bills, and not having family around for support are never seriously considered. During the 1930s, Kessler-Harris writes, many women who had never worked before resorted to low skilled, low paying jobs (the only kind available to them) to support themselves (Out 251). Women entered domestic service in record numbers, and many women also resorted to the sex trade (Baxandall and Gordon 191–220). Kitty’s choices are never this stark. Because of her independence and resourcefulness, which we see through her work, Kitty deserves to survive and reproduce.

Trumbo, however, offers a reactionary solution to the difficulties faced by white-collar women by adding a synopsis of women’s rights to the beginning of the film. “This,” the narrator explains, “is the story of a white-collar girl. Because she is a comparative newcomer to the American scene, it is fitting that we briefly consider her as she was in 1900 and as she is today. Thus we shall be able to measure woman’s ironic progress from corset to white collar in one generation” (1). The word ironic here implies that by working in the public sphere, women have gained nothing; the series of vignettes that follow further excoriate the women’s movement as a threat to patriarchy and implicitly, to capitalism. In the first, labeled 1900, a lone attractive young woman boards a trolley and one male passenger is only too happy to give up his seat. Trumbo’s stage directions are as follows: “With
proper reluctance, and with a timid little smile of gratitude, the young lady takes the nearest one. The man who has lost his seat remains standing as the car lurches ahead, a look of smug righteousness upon his stern, masculine face” (1). The tone in the scene that follows, titled “1916,” is very different. Beginning with “The Battle Cry of Freedom” a group of “old and hatchet-faced” (3) women march down a main street carrying signs that say “Free Us From the Tyranny of Men” and “We Want the Vote!” (3). Suffragist women are unattractive, old and sexually repellent.

At the end of the historical sequence, this subtitle appears on the screen: “Victory, yes, but at what a cost! For then arose a new and even more serious problem…the problem of how to get a man with whom a girl has worked shoulder-to-shoulder from morning till dark to continue the association into the more romantic shades of evening” (4). The narrator never explains the conditions that precipitated the women’s movement in the first place. Instead, suffrage seems superfluous, while working is an obstacle to romance because it makes women undifferentiated from men and therefore less appealing.¹⁹ The next scene progresses logically from the last, tying wrongheaded feminism to Kitty Foyle’s experiences. As the scene opens, the camera moves through Delphine Detaille’s department store, panning over different groups of young women busily at work, and finally resting on an elevator crowded with clerks at the end of their workday. The young women banter about the value of marriage and men until the clerk referred to as “prim girl” in the stage directions asks, “Isn’t independence worth anything to you? After all, what’s the difference between men bachelors and girl bachelors?” (6). As Kitty steps out of the elevator in her first appearance in the film, she replies, “Men bachelors are that way on purpose” (6).

Kitty is consistently poised and glamorous in RKO’s production—even immediately after a miscarriage. In The Wages of Sin, Lea Jacobs argues that 1930s “glamour imagery” suggested a

¹⁹Trumbo’s biographers and critics have noted the discrepancy between his radical politics and the film roles he created for women—especially in this prologue. According to Hanson “the movie falls in line with a provocative, and probably unintentional theme that runs throughout Trumbo’s films: one suggesting that women who defy old-fashioned gender roles are punished for doing so” (48). Paradoxically, Trumbo’s wife and daughter both worked as professional photographers and, in personal correspondence, he supported his daughter’s choice.
morally suspect “narrative of promise and exchange” (69). Gold digger and fallen woman films in the early 1930s almost always included modern, sophisticated and lavish sets and backdrops, and their female stars dressed in stylish clothing, furs, and jewels. Conservative critics and organizations (like the Catholic Legion of Decency) believed that such excesses conveyed the alarming message that immorality pays. Kitty Foyle’s “narrative,” in Jacobs’s view, “works to offset the potentially subversive implications of glamour” (143) because Kitty redeems herself through suffering and marriage. This narrative can also be read, however, as enlisting sex appeal to propel a fairly conservative agenda because glamour denotes middle-class aspirations—part of a parvenu success story. Thanks to Trumbo’s script, Kitty’s self-assuredness is tempered with a sentimental yet pragmatic desire for domesticity. Thanks to Ginger Rogers’s stage persona, Kitty’s polished and alluring appearance is offset by wholesomeness. The end result is sex appeal—as opposed to sexuality—signaling conventionality (in this case), heterosexual normalcy, and deserved middle-class prosperity.

In Morley’s original story, feminism, melting-pot eugenics, ethnic assimilation, and class mobility promise to create a stronger citizenry capable of fighting Hitler and attaining economic prosperity. Through Kitty Foyle, he offered a clearly political solution to the growing social and political uncertainty which followed the Depression. Sam Wood’s production depoliticized this narrative by reinventing the main character, and, in the end, Ginger Rogers’s interpretation of Kitty Foyle endured. After Rogers’s death in 1995, a National Review obituary summed up her career in the following way: “If Dietrich was the characteristic European sex symbol, mysterious and slightly threatening, Ginger Rogers was the new American type, sexy yet companionable—and only just out of reach.” In Rogers’s performance, Kitty Foyle embodied this “new American type.”

Sexy enough to be interesting, conservative enough to be reassuring, the new Kitty banished all thoughts of the Depression and the impending war. Although the changes to the story reflect RKO’s desire to create a commercially viable product, the resultant shift away from Progressive Liberalism parallels other more global political trends at the end of the 1930s such as the marginalization of the Left (culminating in the McCarthy hearings), the
backgrounding of feminist issues, and a more rigid notion of the middle-class family. The RKO version of Kitty Foyle works to establish conservatism as a definitive middle-class characteristic. She is a harbinger of things to come.

**Works Cited**


