Dead, Drunk or Just Forgotten:
The Emasculation of Men in Early Screwball Comedies, 1934-1936

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree
Bachelors of Arts with Honors

By
Lesley Coffin

Advisor-Dr. Nina Mjagkij (History)
Secondary Advisor-Dr. Wes Gehring (Telecommunications)

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
December 2005
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Abstract

I chose to do my Honors thesis on this subject because it provided me with the opportunity to combine my knowledge from my two majors, history and film, with my interest in gender studies. I was particularly drawn to this topic because of the lack of scholarship that has been done on the subject of masculinity and this is the only known study done on masculinity in the screwball comedy genre. This study focuses on the earliest years of the genre because it was at this time that men were making the biggest adjustments to their concepts of masculinity. This study will focus specifically on those men who saw themselves as members of the white, middle class because the information cited in this thesis is from studies focusing on these groups and screwball comedies were targeted towards these demographics.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Nina Mjagkij for supporting me in all aspects of this study. This study originated in her American History through Film course at Ball State University. Because of her, I first developed my interest in combining American history, the study of masculinity, and screwball comedy. Besides encouraging me to make this my research topic, she also provided me with a good deal of resources. Also, she helped me to find a focus for this thesis which, even with a narrow subject matter, was in danger of expanding to an unmanageable amount of work.

I would also like to offer thanks to Dr. Wes Gehring for his encouragement to study screwball comedy, a genre of film which has been largely ignored by modern film scholars. Besides being an excellent source of information on the genre, his support of my own studies has been invaluable. Thank you also for giving me research experience for three years as your Honors research fellow. The experience proved to be beneficial when doing research for this study.

Finally, I would like to thank those in the Honors College for approving this study. Also, the staff at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, who provided copies of the photographs included in this thesis. Finally, I would like to thank all those who provided me with moral support while writing this thesis, and throughout my college career, especially my parents Tom and Alice, my sister Natalie, and grandparents John and Cecile.
Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................ page 1

Chapter One:
Kicking and Screaming: Men’s Resistance to Change in It Happened One Night (1934)
and Twentieth Century (1934) ........................................................................ page 10

Chapter Two:
The Men of Leisure: Men’s Surrender to Change in The Thin Man (1934), The Gay
Divorcee (1934), and Top Hat (1935) ................................................................ page 32

Chapter Three
The New Gentleman: Men’s Acceptance of Change in My Man Godfrey (1936) and
Libeled Lady (1936) ......................................................................................... page 51

Conclusion ........................................................................................................ page 71

Filmography ..................................................................................................... page 73

Bibliography ..................................................................................................... page 74
Introduction

The social, economic, and emotional changes that affected Americans during the Great Depression were drastic. Men, specifically white, middle class men, felt shame, guilt, and a sense of failure because they were unable to provide for their families and prove their worth as men. Until the mid 1930s, most of these men defined themselves through their roles as breadwinners for their families. When they lost their jobs during the Great Depression, they felt as if they lost their roles in their families. Historian Elaine Tyler May noted, “although most Americans experienced some form of hardship, it was the nation’s male breadwinners, fathers who were responsible for providing economic support for their families, who were threatened or faced with the severest erosions of their identities.”¹ This study will examine how screwball comedy films commented on the changing roles of men, while providing alternative images of men who were coping with their new place in society.

Screwball comedies, like all films, are more than entertainment. They provide insight about American history, particularly Americans’ emotional and social concerns and the manner in which they coped. Screwball comedies emerged during the Great Depression, the golden age of film, when people were searching for forms of escapism. This study demonstrates that these popular contemporary films portray a sympathetic image of men during the depression, depicting them as victims of circumstance and societal demands. Furthermore, screwball comedies provide examples of how men coped with and adapted to the changes, and why a new image of men, that of the proper

gentleman, developed during the Depression. This study will focus on the leading male characters in these films and their interactions with other characters. It is divided into three sections, showing the gradual changes men experienced during the Depression.

The first chapter titled "Kicking and Screaming" focuses on the 1934 films Twentieth Century and It Happened One Night. Both leading male characters in these films have not yet adjusted to their new place in society and are resisting the changes caused by the Depression. Although each character responds differently to these changes, both of the leading men behave in destructive manners. Their denial that a change in their status has occurred is shown in several ways: their body image and their, attempts to demonstrate financial means, and to remain protectors and authority figures in their relationships with women. Their comedic behaviors mirror the resistant behavior of many men during the Depression to change.

The second section of the study, "Piss Poor but Still a Man," deals with male characters who accepted their new circumstances, such as long term unemployment, dependency on government support, and a need to participate in domestic activities in the family. Profiled in this section are the 1934 films The Thin Man and The Gay Divorcee and the 1935 film Top Hat. All three films feature men who lack the traditional ideals of masculinity; displayed in their appearance, financial means, and their authority over the family. These characters, who lack all signs of ambition to conform to the traditional image of the ideal male appear to be functioning in the world better than those characters in the previous film, who are still in denial. Yet, these men also lack self-respect and dignity which is not a positive alternative.

"The New Gentleman," the final chapter of this study, focuses on two classic
screwball comedies, *My Man Godfrey* and *Libeled Lady*, both made in 1936, the heyday of the classic screwball comedy. Both films presented images of proper gentlemen to Depression audiences. Unlike the men who resisted change or those who gave up their roles as heads of households, these films present men who have adjusted to the changing image of masculinity and have accepted their new roles while maintaining their sense of dignity and masculine identity. These new men defined their manhood by their behavior and manners, the aspects of their personality that they could maintain no matter what their financial situations.

To understand how men changed and why it was a challenge, people must understand the masculine ideals presented to white, middle class men at this time period. Although the ideas of masculinity are constantly changing, the crisis in masculinity during the 1930s was a response to three developments. The first was the rise of the middle class during the Industrial Revolution in the later part of the 19th Century. A growing number of men, between 18 and 27% of the rural population from 1920 to 1929 were leaving the farms, where they had held jobs that involved physical labor.2 At this same time, factories were increasing their output through the use of machinery, which also decreased their needs for large staffs and skilled labor.3 This led to men who otherwise would have performed physical labor being promoted to managerial and administrative desk jobs, so called white collar jobs. These jobs decreased men’s sense of masculinity because they could no longer demonstrate their strength and agility. Yet, these white collar jobs were highly valued because they were better paid and considered by mainstream society to be more respectable. Although the amount of white collar,

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3 Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson, *Timelines of the Great Depression*, [www.hupp.com/Timeline.htm](http://www.hupp.com/Timeline.htm), Nov 1, 2005
middle class workers was relatively small, 15 to 20% of all Americans belonged to the middle class. The middle class was presented to the public as the norm, since "the nation's policies and institutions were closely enmeshed with the prosperous middle class." Some men who felt their masculinity threatened turned to soldiering as a way of recovering it.

World War I provided men with an opportunity to re-establish their masculinity. Traditionally, men viewed war as the best manner to show their masculinity because it gave them the opportunity to show their physical abilities, participate in activities which were designed purely to involve men, and show their abilities to protect. Popular stories which portrayed wars in the western part of America were particularly successful because of the way they presented real, heroic men as soldiers. Men who served during World War I, however, returned suffering the effects of the first modern war such as the use of modern weaponry like machine guns and mustard gas. Although the study of psychology arose during the war because men were suffering from shell shock, many veterans felt that seeking such help would have been emasculating.

The work and volunteerism women did during World War I was closely associated with the suffrage movement, the third factor that contributed to the crisis in masculinity. Not only did women gain the right to vote in 1920, but they also began to embrace what many contemporaries considered to be masculine habits, such as smoking. They dressed in less feminine fashion, participated in sports, rode bicycles, drove cars, pursued higher education, and took part in social and political discussions. This was particularly true of young women who moved to urban areas. Many men felt threatened by these women's independence.

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Enjoying their financial independence and personal freedom, many women delayed marriage. The personal fulfillment and independence they experienced made entering into marriages a less than ideal prospect. After World War I, the marriage age was rising by one to two years for women and two to three years for men, while the rate of marriage declined approximately 5% between 1910 and 1930. Still, believing that a wife and family was an essential part of proving their manhood, many men felt pressure to make the prospect of marriage more attractive to women. They believed that their attractiveness to the opposite sex was based on how well they conformed to society's concepts of proper male behavior.

Desperate to prove their masculinity, some men found becoming physically fit was a way to show their virility and attractiveness to women. Men began to exercise and pay attention to fashion in order to present themselves as the forceful, space occupying, and even dominating images of masculinity which was being presented in magazines and advertisement at the time as the ideal. As women gained more independence in society, some men attempted to exercise more control in their relationships with women. This included the promotion of the middle class idea of “a woman on a pedestal” in which a man was expected to provide everything to his wife, including protection, economic security, and social guidance. Such attempts may have instilled in men the feeling that they were still masculine, but according to psychologist Shawn Megan Burns, such behavior led to problems for men, because of their singular role as the bread winners,

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which lead to them to distance themselves from their families. According to American historian Joe L. Dubbert, “men seemed to lack the capacity to love, be affectionate, and relate to children.” Rather than address the possible negative aspects of this masculine behavior, the public accepted it as the norm and men felt compelled to conform to such ideas.

One of the challenges such expectations caused for men before the depression was pressure to provide for their families. Men’s need to have the financial means to keep their families in the middle class lifestyle led them to define themselves solely through their professions. Psychologist Deborah Anderson wrote in her study on the history of middle class men in the work place that:

After the Industrial Revolution, work dominated the lives of men, pulling them away from home and family. The world of acquiring, spending, and power occupied definition. The financial bottom line, the Dow Jones, a secure paycheck and the threat of a pink slip became the facts that controlled a man’s sense of himself. The traditional aspect of the work life, as imposed by society, can be restrictive, confining, and controlling, all of which can reduce a man’s self image, shrink his self-esteem, and limit development and personal growth.

The pressure men felt to be successful in their careers, scholar Michael S. Kimmel defined as marketplace masculinity, ‘in which a man feels that his material possessions, career (or job), and money is the way in which to represent himself and prove himself to others, including other men and women.’ Not only were men expected to be able to provide for their families but their social status also depended on their professions. In order to participate in America’s growing consumer society, some men took great risks in

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the stock market.\textsuperscript{12} The restrictive concepts of masculinity which defined “real men” by their economic and professional status led to the crisis in masculinity during the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{17}

When the Great Depression started in 1929, many men suddenly faced unemployment. Numerous men blamed themselves for their sudden economic decline, as did some of their wives and other family members. Moreover, after decades of defining themselves as the breadwinners, unemployment and the sudden lack of money left them feeling as though they had lost their identities. According to Burns, men’s insecurity led them to “many men taking on the façade of coolness, or communicate pride, strength, and control by appearing emotionless, fearless, and aloof as a coping mechanism.”\textsuperscript{14}

Between 1929 and 1932, 13 million men lost their jobs. In 1930, unemployment climbed from 3.2% to 8.7%. By 1931 the unemployment rate rose to 15.9% and in the following year it rose again to 23%.\textsuperscript{15} Depression era sociologist Wynona Morgan’s study of the unemployed that men believed that “the worst effect of the Depression was their personal sense of failure as a provider.”\textsuperscript{16} Many unemployed men during the Great Depression made similar statements. As historian Joe L. Dubbert observed “American males saw their personalities reflected in their bank balance, and when the balance dwindled, they were often overcome by remorse and self doubt.”\textsuperscript{17} Fellow historian Kimmel concluded that once white, middle class, men’s economic power was eliminated “their status as head of the household is eroded, and with it their sense of manhood.”\textsuperscript{18} Embarrassed by what

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Timelines of the Great Depression, www.hupp.com/Timeline.htm, Nov 1, 2005
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Wecter, \textit{Age of the Great Depression}, 3-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Burns, \textit{The Social Psychology of Gender}, 92.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Timelines of the Great Depression, www.hupp.com/Timeline.htm, Nov 1, 2005
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Joe L Dubbert \textit{A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition} (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979) 213.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 210.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Dubbert, \textit{A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition}, 201.
\end{itemize}
some men saw as their loss of status, power, and respectability in society as well as within their families, many men had difficulty coping with these changes, particularly because the media reinforced the traditional images of men in gangster films and detective novels. As these images became increasingly more dangerous and violent, one of the causes of the 1934 production code, Americans began to define an alternative to the strict masculine image that had been dominating the media.

The first screwball comedy was released in 1934 one year after President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office. The societal restrictions placed on people about what was appropriate behavior no longer worked and had to change. Most screwball comedies depict the battle of the sexes, but unlike traditional romantic comedies, it is usually the male characters who give up the power in their relationship in order to find happiness. These men are often in a state of constant confusion about events and as a result humiliate themselves. Screwball comedies reflected the new attitudes of gender in society, as film scholar Ed Sikov wrote:

In turning the world upside down, in releasing their behavioral inhibitions, in scraping against each other, in discovering their affinities for another person through this mutual mayhem, the men and women of these often anarchic and exhilarating movies were in effect finding themselves.\(^{19}\)

Perhaps it is understandable that Depression era audiences, who faced turmoil in their own lives, would be attracted to such films.

As the economic conditions for men in America improved and they began to accept that their condition was not their fault but a national issue, the way they saw their masculinity changed as well. This gradual change in gender roles and masculine behavior is represented particularly well in screwball comedies. The genre, however,

was slow to evolve, first showing the ridiculousness of the restrictive male images, the complete abandonment of the male image, and finally a redefinition of what it meant to be a man. These gradual changes in the gender ideal were reflected in screwball comedies.
Kicking and Screaming:
Men’s Resistance to Change in
It Happened One Night (1934) and Twentieth Century (1934)
Kicking and Screaming:

Men's Resistance to Change in

*It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Twentieth Century* (1934)

When the depression began in 1929, Americans were uncertain how to cope with it. Depressions were not new to the American economy, and there was no reason to believe that this specific depression would be any worse or longer than the previous ones. People were uncertain what had caused the sudden collapse in the market economy. The press addressed the depression, not as a national crisis, but as a crisis which affected those who lacked financial knowledge. Some articles in newspapers and magazines even mocked those people who were affected by the depression. The articles also presented the ability to consume as a way to demonstrate that individuals had not been affected. 20

Such personalization over the Depression caused most people who were unemployed or had lost their financial security in the stock market to blame themselves, particularly men.

It was not simply that men internalized the effects of the depression, but others also blamed them for their unfortunate situation. Not only did the press make claims that the depression was caused by individuals who could not succeed but so did other groups. The protestant church's official stance was that the depression was a form of punishment for sins, the church to which the majority of white, middle class Americans belonged. 21

Wives also blamed their husbands for their families' economic crisis. In a study of

21 Ibid., 212.
middle class Chicago families, one woman blamed her husband for his unemployment because he had been drinking, she told the interviewer “I want you to put it down in black and white, the depression in my case is due to drink."22 Another woman in the same study told the interviewer that her husband:

He neglected his opportunities when he was young. If he had had a proper education and had a better personality, he would not be in his present state. Besides, he has changed for the worse. He has become irritable and very hard to get along with.23

Such personal attacks were similar to those many men suffered from their wives and families. They were particularly painful because they attacked the fundamental element which defined men.

The social pressure men experienced from being expected to be providers, was compounded by the additional blame of their families. This caused many men to feel isolated, even if married. Men lost sleep and did not eat and suffered from depression and anxiety.24 A Depression era social worker called male unemployment the wasting disease. He described the condition as “affecting some men as if they were in the grip of panic, driving them to frenzied search for work by day, sleepless worry at night...universal was a mood of lost self esteem, perplexity, or bitterness toward old employers and life in general.”25 The symptoms included “insomnia, nervous breakdowns, estrangement from children, excessive drinking, and in extreme cases even suicidal tendencies.”26 Not all men displayed physical signs or obvious symptoms of the effects the Great Depression was having on them.

23 Komarovsky, The American Man, 343.
24 Ibid, 342.
25 Weeter, The Age of the Great Depression, 32.
26 Dubbert, A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition, 212.
Some men withdrew from contact with other men, because of the emotional pain they felt. Other men attempted to conceal their unemployment, at times they did not even tell their families about their joblessness and tried to maintain their lifestyles. Yet, others withdrew from their friends and peers, either because they were embarrassed about their situation or felt guilt for spending any of their time on leisurely pursuits instead of looking for work. Most men believed that if they did not bring home any money they were not entitled to spend any.

Even those men who continued to have money because members of their families had jobs, did not feel comfortable asking for and accepting it. As one wife observed, her husband “would rather walk miles than ask for car fare money. His daughter would want him to have it, but he cannot bring himself to ask for it.” For many middle class men, even asking for the smallest amount, such as money to purchase tobacco, was the greatest humiliation of being unemployed. For many of the family men affected by the depression, their loss in status and feelings of inferiority caused them to experience great shame and guilt.

It was almost universal for married couples to experience stress, even if wives did not openly blame their husbands for their unfortunate position. Several women acknowledged that their husbands were much more sensitive to what they said and took offence at even the most minor critical statement about them. If a wife refused to submit to sexual relations, a number of men interpreted it as a statement about their wives dissatisfaction with them, rather than their wives’ practical concern about the risk of

28 Ibid, 343.
29 Ibid, 342.
31 Komarovsky, The American Man, 360.
pregnancy. Many men even admitted to having paranoid thoughts that their wives' felt contempt towards them. With such a strain between men and their families, it is understandable that their presence in the home would be a stressful one.

Although most middle class men saw themselves as the head of the household, their sudden abundance of time made them aware that their families had their own systems and routines that did not involve them. Feeling that their presence in the house was unwelcomed, many men pulled away from their families. Lack of money prevented men from attending recreational and sporting events, or social organizations or fraternities. When at home, many men found it difficult to be around their families and would either completely ignore their presence, leave the room, or even leave the house. One of the places some of these men escaped to was the library, able to spend nearly the entire day reading alone. This need to escape and feelings of uselessness was likely one of the reasons some men deserted their homes or committed suicide.

The suicide rate increased by 20% in the first four years of the depression and almost all of the victims were. A sociologist commenting on the frame of mind of a Depression era man, noted that:

He often wonders what would happen if he put himself out of the picture, or just got out of the way of his wife. Perhaps she and the girl would get along better without him. He blames himself for being unemployed. While he tries all day long to find work and would take anything, he feels that he would be successful if he had taken advantage of his opportunities in youth and had secured an education.

It was not only suicide that led to men's absence from their homes. Some men

36 Wecter, The Age of The Great Depression, 47.
37 Komarovsky, The American Man, 343.
abandoned their families because they were ashamed that they were unable to provide for them. Others left to find jobs elsewhere. A number of men made agreements with their wives to cease living with their families so that they could collect a greater amount of welfare.\footnote{May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, 49.}

It was not until the mid 1930s that many Americans began to accept that their economic situation was not the product of personal failure, but a national problem. President Herbert Hoover had a similar view of the economic situation. This is one of the reasons he was seen by the majority of Americans as doing nothing to help the public. Hoover’s inability to act many Americans believed was the reason that the depression did not end. In 1932, President Roosevelt was elected, promising that he would do everything in his power to assist the people. As men became more comfortable accepting their bleak financial situation, they also began to understand why the restrictive stereotypes of masculinity that had dominated society were harmful to them.

In 1934, the first year that the national unemployment rate was in decline, screwball comedies emerged. Two early films, It Happened One Night and Twentieth Century, present male characters who are attempting to maintain their traditional, gender roles. They denied that the changing male role in society caused them to suffer and behave foolishly. The male characters in both films believed that the traditional, macho appearance, having financial means, and the ability to maintain power in a relationship are the keys to being real men. It Happened One Night tells the story of a couple who are forced to spend the night together, and eventually hitchhike across the country together. Twentieth Century is the story of a former couple who rekindle their romance when they have a chance encounter on a train.
In the early 1930s, the traditional physical appearances of men were still being stressed as an important way to prove their manhood. Men were expected to keep their bodies in good shape, dress well, and be able to accomplish physical tasks. Clark Gable’s character Peter in *It Happened One Night* and John Barrymore’s character Oscar in *Twentieth Century* are idealized images of the traditional male ideal. Clark Gable’s trim, muscular shape represented the masculine image that had become the ideal at this time. John Barrymore’s face, particularly his profile which had been written about as the
greatest in the American theater, was also an idealized image of masculinity although he was more refined and burly than Gable. There is no question that these men lived up to the contemporary standards of masculinity which they each seem extremely proud of and interested in displaying. Peter, for example instructs his travel companion Ellie how to undress, removing his shirt to intimidate her. Oscar watches himself giving imaginary stage directions in his three panel mirror while admiring his masculine beauty. Like these male characters, many men used their physique as ways to re-affirm their masculinity.

Twentieth Century (1934)
Oscar (John Barrymore) admires his handsome, burly, refined, and definitely masculine body in the mirror in order to build up his self-esteem.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
However, neither of the leading female characters seems to be particularly impressed by their physical appearances or abilities. Indeed, Ellie (Claudette Colbert), who has never been alone with a man, is threatened by Peter when he takes off the shirt, because she sees it as a sexually aggressive act. Peter is behaving like a sexual predator, calls himself “The Big Bad Wolf,” threatening to return the runaway heiress to her father. The idea that men should have control of all sexual interaction is a concept that emerged in the 19th century, but such a view no longer seemed reasonable because of the fear of pregnancy. Depression era women usually made the decision about when sexual
intercourse occurred. This was a change most men appeared to resent. Peter’s reference to the Big Bad Wolf was an attempt to re-establish proper gender roles and oppose the control women were attempting to except in relationships.

*It Happened One Night* (1934)
Ellie (Claudette Colbert) is nervous about spending the night with Peter (Clark Gable), especially when he refers to himself as the “big bad wolf.”
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

In *Twentieth Century*, Lily is less passive and much more sexually aggressive than Ellie. Although the film never admits it, Oscar and Lily appear to live together though they are not married. When Lily welcomes Oscar into her bedroom, she implies that he has complete sexual freedom in the relationship. A few years later, however, because Lily is professionally more successful than Oscar, the relationship is in trouble.

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When Oscar enters Lily’s bedroom, she is angry and refuses his advances. Oscar complains that she constantly goes out without him and does not care about his needs. Although his complaint is an attempt to endear himself to her, by claiming that she neglects him, Lily remains unmoved. Unlike Peter, who resisted and fought change, Oscar was a character in a position similar to most men who were angry about their new situation. These reactions are examples of how most men were in fact “kicking and screaming,” in attempts to resist change. Both men have not yet accepted that their physical appearances will no longer win the heart of either woman.

*Twentieth Century* (1934)
Oscar (John Barrymore) has suffered such indignity that he cannot even defend himself against Lily’s (Carole Lombard) fiancé, who seems to be frightening him.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre
When the display of their physique failed to produce the intended results, both men resort to their traditional role as breadwinners. For men who came of age in the 1920s, the most important way to prove their manhood was through, which allowed for the consumption of commercial goods. One advice book for young men in the 1920s, "A Guide Book for Young Men About Town," stated that in order to achieve popularity and find a girl a man had to "have money in the bank."  

Men had great difficulty accepting that they could not provide for their families and many went to extremes to maintain a middle class lifestyle, even though they could no longer afford to do so. Some men worked long hours, stole, or made installment plan purchases. Other men sacrificed their own physical and material comforts so that they could provide for their families. One woman recalled that her father sold his books and golf clubs so that he could buy her a wedding dress. Most men complained that being unable to provide for their loved ones was the most painful effect of the depression, because husbands and fathers lost their status in the family they feared that their families no long valued them. Some men refused government assistance or discouraged their wives from seeking jobs because, as one man said, "the strain of poverty would be preferable to the ill effects of the wife earning an income." The male loss of status did not only affect families but also marriages and other romantic relationships.  

It Happened One Night and Twentieth Century portray men’s efforts to prove their financial abilities in order to win the affection of women. In It Happened One Night, Peter’s pride and his need to demonstrate that he is the provider is the cause of

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42 Dubbert, A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition, 342.  
43 May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, 55.
most of his problems in his relationship with Ellie. For example, when Ellie attempts to be charitable to a little boy whose mother is sick, Peter has too much pride to ask her not to give away all their money. He also leaves Ellie in a hotel room alone, without telling her where he is going, so that he can get an advance pay from his editor, in order to propose marriage to her. Peter’s fear of proposing marriage to her without any money almost leads to her marrying another man. Had Peter been humble enough to admit to Ellie his lack of money, their journey would have been much smoother. Only after, he finally admits to Ellie that he is unemployed does she agree to marry him. For Peter to find happiness, he first had to give up his traditional notions of proper masculinity.
It Happened One Night (1934)
Peter (Clark Gable) refused to beg for food for Ellie (Claudette Colbert) but does steal carrots from a farm to feed her, because it is more masculine to steal than ask for help. He is obviously a real man because Ellie is able to "lean" on him.

Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Oscar, a stage director also attempts to keep his pride, although he is at a great disadvantage. After his successful collaboration with Lily, his career falls apart and he becomes economically dependant on her. Oscar, however, still wants to be the boss in the relationship and control Lily’s activities. Lily, however, believes that she should be in control of the relationships because she is earning the income for both. Twentieth Century presented Lily as a woman with bad manners because she attempted to take the role in the relationship traditionally reserved for men. She taunts Oscar who is distressed about their relationship and threatens to kill himself, urging him to “be a man, jump.”

Twentieth Century (1934)
Lily (Carole Lombard) meets former boyfriend Oscar (John Barrymore) on a train but is engaged to another man who is willing to be subservient to the overpowering woman.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Many Depression era families experienced similar conflicts. Some men claimed that they lost their position as the head of the household when they stopped earning an income. Others felt that household authority was determined by who earned the money and therefore female wage earners should force husbands to relinquish power to them.\footnote{Komarovsky, \textit{The American Man}, 346-348.}

\textit{It Happened One Night} (1934)
Peter (Clark Gable) shows off his masculinity for Ellie (Claudette Colbert) by "protecting" her from the advances of a salesman. The amount of intimidation and threat Peter uses against the much smaller and weaker man is one of the ways in which Peter proves his masculinity to Ellie. Peter’s behavior is also an excuse to humiliate a much less masculine man in order to make himself feel better.

Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

To maintain control in their relationships the male characters must use physical force to demand authority. In \textit{It Happened One Night}, the only reason that Peter is able to control Ellie is that he uses his physical prowess to assure his protector role during their journey. Although Ellie is wealthy, she lacks street smarts and is unable to take care of herself. Although she initially refuses Peter’s assistance, he remains undeterred. First
Peter chases after a man who steals Ellie’s purse. Then he takes it upon himself to wait for her at a bus stop so she does not need to travel alone. Later he “saves” her from the advances of a man who is flirting with her. Finally, Peter decides to take control of her finances. When Ellie rejects his offers, he uses physical force, picking her up and carrying her across a river, while slapping her on her rear. When she challenges him, he is about to accept a breakfast from another man, he violently grabs her by the arm. Not only does Peter force his authority on Ellie, but he refuses to allow her to be helped by anyone else.

*It Happened One Night* (1934)

Peter (Clark Gable) enjoys being able to protect Ellie (Claudette Colbert) from the inquiries of her father’s investigators, who want to bring her back to her father.

Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Twentieth Century (1934)
Initially, Oscar and Lily (John Barrymore and Carole Lombard) have a traditional relationship in which he is the protector of the childlike Lily.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research.

Oscar, has lost his position as the authority figure in his relationship with Lily, because she regards him as weak. Oscar has also lost his authority as a theater director when he demands respect from his cast and crew they is treat him like a fool. He is initially attracted to Lily because of her willingness to submit to his authority. Indeed some Depression era men admitted to being attracted to women who were less intelligent than them because they believed that these women were easier to get along with. Lily and Oscar's relationship does not end until she begins to demand more control in their relationship. Lily and Oscar eventually reunite after they reach a compromise. He agrees

45 Bailey, From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America, 112.
to behave modestly and be less demanding of Lily, if she agrees to stop being the man in their relationship. In both these films, the men had to compromise and abandon some of their pride in order to find happiness with their female companions. Yet, it is clear that the compromise entails that the authority will rest with the men.

Twentieth Century (1934)
Oscar (John Barrymore) finally gets Lily (Carole Lombard) back when both reach a compromise in their relationship.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

Although in the end the men in both films emerge as authority figures in the relationships they no longer have the power they once had. When male characters were unable to use their masculine traits, they did not adjust their behavior to fit the circumstances, instead they acted negative by. Both films also addressed an alarming
trend or the Great Depression, the increase in domestic abuse. The male character are literally “kicking and screaming. Peter performs physical acts of violence and Oscar participates in verbal abuse. Peter, who is quick to fight with anyone, constantly threatens to hit Ellie, and hurts her twice. Oscar abuses Lily emotionally and verbally, accusing her of promiscuous behavior and mocking her working class background. Lily announces that she is tired of his abuses, suggesting that there had been physical displays of violence in the past. The film depicts one physical altercation between Lily and Oscar, when Lily challenges Oscar’s abuse and mocks his threat to commit suicide, suggesting he is not man enough to do it.

It Happened One Night (1934)
Peter (Claudette Colbert) attempts to maintain his cool disposition when he returns to Ellie (Claudette Colbert) after leaving her in hotel to ask for money from his editor. Left behind, Ellie feels abandoned. Eventually, he’ll confess his love for Ellie and his financial problems, which will lead to Ellie leaving her wedding to another man (not pictured) and marrying Peter.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Another form of resisting changing gender role was excessive drinking. For some men, drinking was one of the coping mechanisms they used during the depression. Not only were drinking establishments predominately male locations, but with the end of prohibition, alcohol became affordable. Drinking therefore provided some frustrated men with an opportunity to socialize with other men and deal with their emotional pain. The first time Oscar appears is on screen it is obvious that he is drunk, because he has lost control of his theatrical staff. Drinking seems to provide him with liquid courage to confront challenging situations, with his staff or Lily. Peter also drinks excessively and like Oscar, is first seen in the movie, completely drunk. Likewise, his drinking provides him with the courage to speak up for himself. For example, while drunk Peter confronts his boss on the phone for firing him. Both men also have drinking companions, none of whom are men who are particularly honorable or virtuous characters. Likewise, the audience knows that one of the reasons both Peter and Oscar are in poor financial standing is because of their drinking.

Both *It Happened One Night* and *Twentieth Century* presented images of men who were resisting their changing roles in society. These traditional ideas of masculinity led them to prove that they still possessed the physiques, financial means, and ability to protect the female characters, which they believed made them ideal mates. When such attempts failed, resentment and shame emerged, which led to them "kicking and screaming" as they resisted any changes to their masculine ideal. Although comedic images, their reaction mirrored the tragic responses of many men who felt that they had lost their identities as men. Finding ways to cope with and adjust to the destruction of traditional gender roles was the next challenge American men would have to face.
The Men of Leisure:
Men's Surrender to Change in
*The Thin Man* (1934), *The Gay Divorcee* (1934),
and *Top Hat* (1935)
The Men of Leisure:

Men’s Surrender to Change in

The Thin Man (1934), The Gay Divorcee (1934),

and Top Hat (1935)

As American men began to adjust to the changing gender roles, some choose to ignore traditional male ideals. Rather than trying to meet the traditional standards of physical appearances, having financial means, and serving protectors, these men rejected traditional conventions. As these changes occurred, some men began to take on feminine characteristics. Not only did their physiques and appearances change, but men also had to find different ways of appealing to women because they no longer could serve as providers or protectors. Screwball comedies as The Thin Man, The Gay Divorcee, and Top Hat, mirrored these changes. These films which presented men who represented the opposite of what was considered traditionally masculine. This change occurred as the Great Depression continued and people stopped blaming themselves.

One of the primary reasons for this change was the way men were behaving socially. Families and friends began to form support groups and men were more willing to accept that the depression was not their fault.\(^{46}\) The concerns and discussions of many of these men also changed dramatically. Rather than spending their time reading and writing about politics and economics, which they had done prior to the Depression; they now took an interest in other subjects. Some men even became amateur scholars and experts on subjects that they had never taken any interest, because they did not offer any

\(^{46}\) Komarovsky, The American Man, 339.
financial rewards. With the emergence of government programs, some men also took classes.⁴⁷ These men were becoming more well-rounded men and were using their free time in beneficial ways.

Some men were able to accomplish this because their wives and daughters had been able to find work. By 1933, 1 in 5 wives held jobs outside the home.⁴⁸ Most women had “pink collar” or lower paying jobs. Women were able to get jobs early in the Depression because companies were able to pay them less. The press praised women for taking this step and encouraged men and women to accept these changes to traditional gender roles as a way to cope with the Depression. Some women used this to their advantage and worked to create greater gender equality.⁴⁹ As women took jobs, both men and women were forced to change their roles in the family.

Some husbands, assumed some of the domestic responsibilities when their wives found jobs outside the homes. Contemporary studies found that men did this because it maintained some elements of the traditional family order and gave men the structure and responsibility that they felt was missing in their lives. Their new role in the household, allowed men to maintain some semblance of the traditional family ideal, because one person served as the breadwinner and another as the homemaker.⁵⁰ If both adults had jobs outside the home, it made sense that both partners share the domestic responsibilities.⁵¹ This change in the traditional male role allowed men to regain their position in the family, even if it was not as the provider but as the care giver. This also allowed men to reconnect with their families, from which many men had withdrawn

⁴⁸ Ibid, 25.
⁴⁹ May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, 40-41.
⁵⁰ Ibid, 42-43.
while working in the corporate world.\textsuperscript{52} The majority of couples who practiced this type of equality tended to have marriages which were less strained and in some cases they established a tighter family bond then they had had prior to the Depression.

In addition to these changes in gender relationships, a new generation who had grown into adulthood during the Depression began to enter the work force. While numerous young women were able to find jobs in the 1930s and experienced the pleasures of financial autonomy, many young men realized that they would likely be unemployed or would have to delay their careers. Young women had been experiencing an increasing amount of financial autonomy and personal freedom since the industrial revolution and the Great Depression furthers this. Their independence was something many women not willing to give up in exchange for marriage. One working woman recalled that “it’s not that I didn’t want to get married, but when you are working and have your own money...I did not feel compelled to get married.”\textsuperscript{53} Many other young males and females made similar decisions. One woman who worked during the Depression explained:

> During all the years I worked, I had a boyfriend, but we both had responsibilities at home...Now they say ‘career woman’ but at the time you wouldn’t call yourself that. It’s just because you felt you had a responsibility at home too.\textsuperscript{54}

Not surprisingly, many Americans believed that women were better able to cope with the hard times of the Depression.

Unlike many women, who seized various opportunities men appeared to become less ambitious. Some men saw women who were able to cope with the Depression and

\textsuperscript{52} Dubbert, A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition, 312.
\textsuperscript{53} May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, 40
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 40-41.
admitted wanting to emulate them, even if it meant acquiring some feminine characteristics. Eventually, rather than attempting to maintain their traditional masculine behavior, some men gave up all traits of masculinity.

Three classic screwball comedies, *The Thin Man* (1934), *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), and *Top Hat* (1935), present this change in male behavior. Unlike early Depression era films, such as *Twentieth Century* and *It Happened One Night* which presented men attempting to maintain traditional characteristics of masculinity, the male characters in *The Thin Man*, *The Gay Divorcee*, and *Top Hat*, happily sacrificed those components in order to live comfortable lives. *The Thin Man* was based on the classic Dashiell Hammon detective novel, which became a comedy when the focus of the story became the relationship between married couple Nick (William Powell) and Nora (Myrna Loy). Previously a successful detective, Nick Charles now married to heiress Nora, has retired and now lives off her money. When they return to New York for the Christmas holidays, Nick takes a case for an old friend at Nora’s urgings. The murder story, however, is simply an excuse to watch the witty banter between the happily married couple. *The Gay Divorcee* is the story of Guy’s (Fred Astaire) attempts to win the love of Mimi (Ginger Rogers), even though she is married to another man. In *Top Hat*, Dale (Ginger Rogers) believes that the man she has fallen in love with, Jerry (Fred Astaire) is actually the husband of her best friend.

The most noticeable difference in these leading men was their physical appearances. Unlike Clark Gable and John Barrymore, who were prime examples of the tough masculine ideal, Fred Astaire and William Powell were non-traditional looking

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leading men. The notes attached to Astaire’s screen test read, “Can’t act, can’t sing, receding hairline, can dance a little.” Compared to the clean scrubbed face of his co-star Ginger Rogers in The Gay Divorcee and Top Hat, Astaire’s face was extremely feminine due to the eye make-up he wore. Powell had been cast in earlier films only in supporting roles by studio bosses because of his distinctly unromantic look. Powell’s pencil thin mustache and angular features were a far cry from the rugged and muscular actors who had populated the movie screen prior to 1934.

The casting of these actors as the leading male characters, reflected the physical changes men were experiencing as a result of the depression. Middle class men who had once belonged to sports and recreational organizations found that they lacked the money to pay membership fees. By 1933, more than half of all recreational, social, and fraternal organizations in urban areas had closed. For most men, inexpensive recreational activities such as playing cards, reading books and newspapers, and putting together puzzles, now dominated their free time. Even the popularity of professional sports changed during the depression to reflect men’s new lifestyles. Throughout the 1920s, the most popular spectator sport was football, a game that is characterized by large muscular players who are not afraid to inflict pain on their opponents. By 1933, however, baseball, a game relying on strategy and skills rather than muscle power, had become the most popular sport in America. Physically, men also changed. In 1933, a study of professional engineers who had returned to their jobs after several months of unemployment found that they had “flabby muscles, faulty coordination, and lack of

58 Ibid, 274.
59 Ibid, 220-221.
stamina when work was resumed.” Dietary habits also changed as a result of unemployment. Men no longer consumed large amounts of protein rich meat, instead their diets during the depression consisted of larger amounts of carbohydrates. The lack of protein was another reason why so many men were unable to have the muscular physique that was once expected of men.

If men no longer had the rugged male physique, they needed to develop new male identities. Thus, the Hollywood studios promoted William Powell and Fred Astaire’s other assets: Astaire’s ability to a dance, a talent which endeared him would make him to female screen characters as well as movie audiences and Powell’s wit and elegant speaking voice led the studios to promote him as one of the “wittiest and smartest men in Hollywood.” Neither of these characteristics, however, were specifically “male.”

Not only were many men no longer concerned with traditional male body ideals, they also lost interest in aspiring to be the family’s sole provider. Those who had adjusted to lower standards of living no longer wanted to maintain the pressures of keeping up appearances. One man recalled that he no longer believed in the traditional work ethic because “it didn’t pay to work too hard, because employers will only take advantage of you.” Older workers, who had worked their entire lives to gain some financial security, no longer found it reasonable to prepare for the future or save their money. Many men claimed that their belief in “the American Dream,” which promised rewards to those who worked hard had been shattered. Success, they believed, was

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60 Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression, 33.
determined not by effort but by luck.\textsuperscript{63}

Those men who had the least faith in the American economy were young adults. A 1935, study found that while 4,200,000 young adult men were looking for work, many were “just hanging around” and used their free time to pursue other interests.\textsuperscript{64} No longer did many young men believe that success in their social and romantic lives depended on their ability to work, which had once stimulated many ambitious men to work hard.\textsuperscript{65} The study concluded that young men seemed content with their unemployment.

The male characters in \textit{Top Hat}, \textit{The Gay Divorcee}, and \textit{The Thin Man}, were content, living a life of leisure, and did not pursue professional careers. William Powell’s Nick Charles, although he had been a successful detective previously was happy to live a life of leisure with his wife Nora. Nick in fact lives off his heiress wife’s fortune, which he jokingly claims is the reason he married her. Nick only agrees to solve a mystery after Nora pressures him to demonstrate his skills as a detective. Yet he spends most of his time accompanying Nora to social outings, playing with the couple’s dog, and consuming cocktails. Unlike the characters of Peter and Oscar, however, Nick does not drink to suppress his pain or bolster his courage, but to pass time, and he never becomes abusive.

\textsuperscript{63} Wecter, \textit{The Age of the Great Depression}, 33.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 183.
Fred Astaire's appearance is decidedly unmasculine, with his tiny frame, long limbs, and even his use of facial make-up. Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research.

Fred Astaire's characters in *The Gay Divorcee* and *Top Hat*, are both dancers, a profession that many Americans did not consider to be a "real job" because it required men to be slender rather than muscular. Likewise, neither character ever appears to be concerned with earning an income. In both films, the characters feel no sense of shame or embarrassment about living off wealthy friends. Like so many young men in America, these characters are content to live off of others, rather than attempting to support themselves. By 1935, many young men forced by economic uncertainty, were willing to
go on a date with a woman who paid her expenses as well as those of her date. Since the Depression deprived young men of financial means to pay for dates, they now had to provide something else to attract the attention and affection of women.

Top Hat (1935)
In this photography one notices how tiny Fred Astaire appears, especially when compared to Ginger Rogers. Although all the characters are well dressed and have money, all the men depend on women for their money.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

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The Thin Man (1936)
Nora (Myrna Loy) convinces the reluctant Nick (William Powell) to solve a murder case so that she can see his detective abilities for herself. Although both on the floor, Nick is on his hands and knees as if he is Nora's pet.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

Rather than stressing their ability to provide for and protect women, most men emphasized their companionship as the primary reward. Since men could no longer offer women protection, because their physical capacities had diminished during the Depression, and since they could no longer offer financial security because they were unemployed. They used their wit, charm and talents to attract the opposite sex.
Nick Charles (William Powell) is perfectly content in his marriage to the over active heiress Nora (Myrna Loy), even allowing her to hit him with a pillow when she gets excited.

Photos from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

This is reflected in the male characters in the *The Thin Man*, *The Gay Divorcee*, and *Top Hat*. In *The Thin Man*, it is Nick's personality and his wit which attracts Nora. For example, he protects her from an intruder, without using his muscular power. Yet, he has very few responsibilities in the relationship. One of his unofficial duties is to aid Nora when she has a hang over. Nora can also depend on Nick to perform traditional domestic chores such as cook her scrambled eggs in the middle of the night or bring her a glass of water. Nick and Nora's marriage appears to be one of complete equality. For example, when they host a Christmas party, they each serve drinks and food. Although
Nick has domestic responsibilities, his primary role in the marriage is to be Nora’s entertaining partner; telling her jokes, and playing games with her and their dog.

**The Thin Man (1936)**
Even after Nick (William Powell) is shot in the arm, he shows loving concern for his wife, Nora (Myrna Loy), who he knocked out of the way of a gun man. As soon as she regains consciousness, she will take control of the situation while Nick gets himself a drink to numb the pain in his arm.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

**The Thin Man (1936)**
Nick’s (William Powell) sole purpose in life is to be the life of the party.
Photos from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
The Thin Man (1936)
Nick (William Powell) agrees to fix Nora (Myrna Loy) a midnight snack, one of the many domestic chores he performs in their marriage.
Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
In *The Gay Divorcee*, Fred Astaire's character Guy attracts Ginger Rogers' character Mimi by entertaining her, to bring her pleasure, he stages a car chase, makes shadow puppets on the wall. In *Top Hat*, the Astaire character Jerry also attracts the attention of Roger's character Dale by entertaining her. For example, he dances in the room above her bedroom to help her sleep and he drives her in a horse drawn carriage. Even though she is married to another, rather traditional man, who provides the money for her lavish lifestyles, she is attracted because of his romantic gestures and she decides to be with him. Both Guy and Jerry, entertain women relying on their creativity, rather than their ability to spend money.
Top Hat (1935)
Dale (Ginger Rogers) enjoys her time with Jerry (Fred Astaire) so much that she forgets that she is married to another man. Throughout the film, Jerry’s sole purpose is to bring pleasure to her life.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Despite the male character’s appeal to women many people did find fault with their behavior. Some people felt that the nation would never emerge from the depression as long as men were willing to accept financial aid from the government or, as the male characters in The Thin Man, The Gay Divorcee, and Top Hat do, from wealthy wives or other companions. Other Americans were concerned that men were losing part of the fundamental elements that made them men and were becoming too effeminate. Many people claimed that submissiveness to their wives had become the new ideal for American husbands. Although some Americans, applauded these men for their ability to adjust to difficult times. The “decline in the husband’s status” was according to one study, satisfactory to none. Masculinity would have to be redefined to meet the needs of the nation.

The Thin Man (1936)
While Nora (Myrna Loy) actively negotiates Nick’s work as a detective in a murder case, Nick (William Powell) takes a drink and does nothing.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

67 Dubbert, A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition, 213.
While male ideals changed drastically during the Depression, the films *The Thin Man, The Gay Divorcee,* and *Top Hat* did not present their male characters as masculine. They lacked the physical appearances, financial means, and ability to protect women. Likewise, their less muscular appearances, their willingness to submit to women, and their roles as caregivers and entertainer of women were characteristic of a new masculinity.
The Thin Man (1936)
This publicity photo of Nick and Nora (William Powell and Myrna Loy) has the detective being led by his wife and dog.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
The New Gentleman:
Men’s Acceptance of Change in
My Man Godfrey (1936) and Libeled Lady (1936)
The New Gentleman:

Men's Acceptance of Change in

My Man Godfrey (1936) and Libeled Lady (1936)

As masculinity changed to meet the needs of Depression era Americans, films discouraged men from trying to conform to traditional masculine ideals and encouraged them to embrace a new image of masculinity. This new man no longer defined his manhood by his physique, financial means, and ability to protect women, but by his manners, work ethic, and sense of dignity. In screwball comedies such as My Man Godfrey and Libeled Lady, the male characters are presented as real men because of their abilities to meet this new definition of masculinity. Not only were they rejecting the confining ideas of traditional masculinity, but they were also lacking in feminine characteristics.

Contemporary studies, including public health research, showed that men who adjusted their image of masculinity quickly were less likely to suffer from mental illness than those who attempted to maintain the traditional masculine image of invulnerability. Yet, as author Sherwood Anderson, quoted in A Man's Place by Joe L. Dubbert, observed in 1933:

the breaking down of the moral fiber of the American man through being out of a job, losing that sense of being some part of the moving world of activity, so essential to an American man’s sense of his manhood, the loss of this essential something in the joblessness can never be measured in dollars.

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70 Dubbert, A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition, 212, Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression, 274
Anderson, like other Americans believed that the growing influence women had gained in intimate relationships was having a negative affect on the psyche of men and causing the family, the cornerstone of society, to break down.

Others concerned about with women who demanded control in their relationships with men feared that the ideal man had become submissive. Contemporary journalist Corine Lowe, also quoted by Dubbert, claimed that "females were using their new power in an oppressive way." A study of middle class families concluded that:

The always helpful husband is now completely at her service during the day. He hopes that his helpfulness will earn for him some gratitude from his wife. When his wife accuses him for his failure as a provider, he defends himself by reminding her of his complete devotion and helpfulness in the home.

Another Depression era writer observed that, "the ideal of the internally famous good American husbands is an ideal of male submission."

A fear shared by many Americans was that women's domination of their husbands, was teaching the younger generation to mirror this behavior. Journalist Corine Lowe noticed that as mothers demanded authority in the family, they were "over-mothering their sons." Some people noticed that this increase in female power resulted in "a major source of negative sentiment (towards women) in the adult years." A study of male college students found that some of them "dreaded going home for vacations to face their mothers." Likewise, many men felt shame because they did not provide their sons with positive male role models as husbands and fathers and did not encourage a

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72 Dubbert, A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition, 215.
73 Komarovsky, The American Man, 361.
74 Ibid, page 191.
75 Dubbert, A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition, 215.
76 Komarovsky, The American Man, 361.
77 Dubbert, A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition, 217.
proper work ethic.

The work ethic of young men continued to be a source of distress because they "suffered more unemployment than any other element of the labor force." Many of the young men who had not found work agreed "that it did not pay to work too hard, because employers will only take advantage of you" and that "those who still clung to jobs or oscillated between spells of work and idleness were haunted by the bogey of insecurity." Some of these youngsters disapproved of their father's old work ethic, considering the uncertainty of employment and callous nature of American capitalism. It was becoming obvious to many men that a new approach to work was necessary.

Some Americans also believed that "the government, through social security, was undermining the older, more masculine world by legally declaring its concern for the welfare of American citizens." As one economist noted:

The New Deal, in effect, surrendered to women and had adopted feminine techniques of administering social justice. The best example of this was the process of taking wealth from one group and distributing it to the needy, a manifestation of rampant feminine sentimentalism.

The association of women with the government aid was largely due to the fact that women were the ones who applied for government support and controlled the funds they received. The New Deal welfare programs favored households headed by single mothers. Deeming men unimportant members of the household increased men's feelings that they had lost their dignity and status in society.

78 Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression, 183.
79 Ibid, 33.
80 Kimmel, Manhood in America: A Cultural History, 199.
81 Dubbert, A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition, 215.
82 Ibid, 213.
84 May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, 288-289.
Despite changing gender roles and the decline of traditional concepts of masculinity, most men saw government aid as "a public badge of defeat." The government promoted work programs that allowed men to feel like important members of society who worked in exchange for government pay. The New Deal's work programs promoted the American work ethic and the new role of the American man in society.

Americans realized that the proper image of American men at the beginning of the Great Depression was problematic. Complete submissiveness and apathy towards work had problems, the same way that the traditional, tough image of men was harmful an impediment. The editor of Esquire magazine in a memo instructing his writers to present positive images of new men in their articles, reminded his staff, "Horatio Alger doesn't work here any more." In a series of editorials in Esquire, titled "Man to Man," praised President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a modern man because of his "capacity for friendship and human understanding." Those were characteristics, the magazine insisted that made him an effective president." Hollywood also presented the image of the new American man who emerged on the screen as the American gentleman. Two, films in particular, My Man Godfrey and Libeled Lady, presented "the new gentleman" ideal.

In 1936, William Powell starred in both Libeled Lady and My Man Godfrey, playing characters who personified the new image of the gentleman. In My Man Godfrey, Powell played Godfrey, a homeless man who lives in a dump where the sweet but childish Irene Bullocks (Carole Lombard) discovered him. Irene invites Godfrey to

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85 May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, 288-289.
86 Robert S. Elvaine, Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man, 100-132.
be her family’s butler. Irene, and all the women in the house, are attracted to Godfrey because of his refined manners, but he refuses to get involved with any of them while working for the family, insisting that he wants to be a professional. As it turns out, Godfrey is not a poor man living on the streets but was a former playboy who uses his pay as a butler to start a night club which provides employment for homeless men. In Libeled Lady, Powell plays Bill, an attorney called back to his job at a newspaper when it prints a libelous story about the heiress, Connie (Myrna Loy). Hoping to trick Connie into dropping her lawsuit, Bill marries editor Warren’s (Spencer Tracey) fiancée Gladys (Jean Harlow).

My Man Godfrey (1936)
Godfrey (William Powell) still has an air of elegance and dignity, even though he is living in the garbage dump without a cent.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Although, William Powell lacked the traditional masculine looks “he made up in some respect for his irregularity of features, he chose to use his brains, since his profile was out of the question.”\textsuperscript{88} In both films, Powell played the gentleman who attracts the attention of women. His attractiveness was based on his demeanor and department as an elegant male. For example, he showed a keen understanding of fashion, which was an important attributes of the new gentleman.\textsuperscript{89} Even the best selling book, “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” an advice book for Depression era men, had sections on “diet, grooming, and exercise and offered counsel on sex manners.”\textsuperscript{90} The male characters in My Man Godfrey and Libeled Lady did not wear the rugged fashion men wore in It Happened One Night and Twentieth Century, which conformed with the traditional image of masculinity, or the flashy clothing men wore in The Gay Divorcee, Top Hat, and The Thin Man, which added to their portrayal as effeminate “dandies.”

\textsuperscript{88} Elinor Hughes, Famous Stars of Filmdom (Men), (NY: LC Page & Company, 1932), 285.
\textsuperscript{89} Tom Pendergast, Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950, 155.
\textsuperscript{90} Dubbert, A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition, 223.
*My Man Godfrey* (1936)

Although Irene (Carole Lombard) is desperately in love with Godfrey (William Powell), Godfrey refuses her advances because he believes it is inappropriate while he is employed by her family.

Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Powell’s characters in My Man Godfrey and Libeled Lady were unquestionably male, only more refined. More important than a fashionable appearance, however, were the characters demeanor towards women. Both films portrayed manners as one of the most important assets of men, perhaps because they were not dependent on one’s financial station in life. A magazine survey of women, for example, concluded that “the young man who did not assist his date from the car was not being discourteous in ignoring her need for assistance: he was unmanly because he was not demonstrating his control and protection.”91 Men could prove their manhood by being attentive to women.

My Man Godfrey (1936)
Godfrey (William Powell) prepares to start his first day of work as a butler with enthusiasm and confidence in his abilities. Although a position which could be considered below him, he looks extremely polished, in his freshly ironed suit, newly shaven face, and excellent posture.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

91 Bailey, From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America, 110.
Men's attitude towards work was also changing considerably. Rather than attempting to conform to the old fashioned masculine ideals of work that dictated self-control, discipline, and hard work, as presented in *It Happened One Night* and *Twentieth Century*, "magazines promoted an outer-directed, flexible notion of manhood." 92 Although work was still important and the media promoted the benefits of work, men were advised not to work in order to get financial and material rewards but to achieve personal satisfaction. Magazines urged men to take pride in their work, through slogans such as "greatness is always masculine" and "you have a product and that product is yourself." 93 The film *My Man Godfrey* offers one of the best representations of this concept of taking pride and finding fulfillment in work. When Godfrey tells the head of the household, Mr. Bullocks, "I'm proud of being a good butler," his feeling of self-fulfillment is obvious. Thus the film, presented Godfrey's attitude as a positive way of approaching work, even those jobs that men may have felt were beneath them. Although Godfrey had been a successful business man before the Depression, he takes pride in doing work that some would have characterized as "women's work," such as washing dishes, serving food, and cleaning the house. Godfrey is proud of his ability to retain his dignity while working for the Bullocks family, when no other butler had been able to bear their crazy antics. Godfrey's ability to retain his honor and dignity is particularly noticeable in comparison to Mr. Bullocks, who is more concerned about the money he earns than the work he does, or Carlo, Mrs. Bullocks' "protégé," who is happy to live off the Bullock's money and has lost all sense of dignity.

My Man Godfrey (1936)

Carlo (Mischa Auer) finally contributes to the family who has been supporting him when he cheers up Irene (Carole Lombard) by pretending to be an ape.

Photo from Wisconsin Center For Film and Theatre Research
My Man Godfrey (1936)
Godfrey (William Powell) takes great pride in doing his job as a butler, showing refined elegance, even when setting the table.
Photos from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

It was not only important for men to perform jobs well and take pride in their work, but also to be flexible about how they regarded work and avoid personalizing their profession. During the middle of the Depression, the media encouraged men to take a less serious approach to their profession. Former business reporter Bruce Barton's syndicated column profiled "success stories of one man who goes door to door offering to wash people's dogs, another who raises chickens out in his backyard, and still another who rents rowboats to vacationing rich folks." Popular boxer Jack Dempsey in a 1934 article titled "He-Man Wears Aprons" provided his favorite cooking stories and recipes

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94 Pendergast, Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950, 156.
alongside pictures of himself in an apron."95 The character of Bill in *Libeled Lady* proves to be able to adapt to difficult situations, especially when compared to Warren (Spencer Tracey), the traditional man who reacts to any business problems with panic and frustration. Unlike Warren, Bill does not feel that his personality is defined by his career and is able to use the loss of his job as an opportunity to take time off for leisure activities. By 1935 many of the New Deal work programs were fully functioning 1935 and the government urged men to perform for which they had no training but which would allow them to support themselves.96

*My Man Godfrey (1936)*
Irene (Carole Lombard) and Godfrey (William Powell) finally reach a compromise in their relationship when she pitches in to help wash the dishes with Godfrey. Although participating in domestic work, he never appears feminine, even in his apron.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

Male/female relationships also changed. Although men ceded a good deal of power to women, neither sex saw this as a positive effect of the Depression. When women took on responsibilities with men, they often felt less attracted to those men who they considered to be submissive. Yet many Americans, male and females, expressed a longing for relationships to be equal. According to Elaine Tyler May, in 1935, Ladies Home Journal published a survey that claimed 60% of all women:

objected to the word obey in the marriage vows, 75% believed in joint decision making, and 80% believed an unemployed husband should keep house for a working wife. Yet 60% said they would lose respect for a husband who earned less than his wife, and 90% believed a wife should give up employment if her husband wanted her to do so.  

Men also admitted that they wanted to see more equality in the relationship between the genders. Young men, for example, found themselves attracted to women who worked. One man explained he chose his future wife because of her independence and understanding about his unfortunate financial circumstances. Many men came to realize that women were stronger and more durable than they had assumed previously. Likewise, many women realized that men could perform household chores. Nonetheless, in marriage, men continued to play the role of protectors and asserted their male authority, while women remained the primary caregivers and nurturers. Both men and women, however, wanted to avoid returning to the oppressive gender roles of the past.

97 May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, 55-56.  
98 Ibid, 47.  
My Man Godfrey (1936)

Godfrey (William Powell) looks down on Mr. Bullocks because of his lack of involvement in his family. Mr. Bullocks will soon take the entire tray of drinks and retreat to his office. Although Mr. Bullocks is the man of the house, Godfrey is the male role model because of how he behaves.

Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
The changing gender relations were reflected in *My Man Godfrey* and *Libeled Lady*. In *My Man Godfrey*, Godfrey attracts the attention and affection of women because he shows respect for them and avoids dominating them. Mr. Bullocks, on the other hand, shows no regard for his wife and daughters and does not teach them a sense of decorum or propriety. Instead he withdraws from his family. On the other end of the spectrum, Carlo has no say in the family and his only role is to entertain and bring pleasure to Mrs. Bullocks. In *Libeled Lady*, Bill also displays the new, masculine ideal in his relationships with Connie (Myrna Loy) and Gladys (Jean Harlow). Bill allows heiress Connie to show her tomboyish nature while displaying his own elegant and sympathetic demeanor, unafraid of being seen as unmasculine. Gladys is also attracted to Bill because he chooses to spend time with her unlike her fiancé Warren who puts his business ahead of her. Warren is so absorbed by his career, that he even misses his own wedding. It is not until Bill tutors him in the art of interacting with women and convinces him to pay more attention to Gladys, that Warren wins her back.
My Man Godfrey (1936)
Carlo (Mischa Auer) entertains his "mentor," Mrs. Bullocks by pretending to be an ape.
Photo for Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Both of these films reflect Depression era efforts to redefine manhood. The traditional male ideal had succumbed to unemployment and men's ability to provide for their families ceased to be the crucial male characteristic. The new gentleman who maintained his work ethic, dignity, and manners in the face of great adversity, replaced the traditional male ideal. The leading male characters in *My Man Godfrey* and *Labeled Lady* displayed such attributes and were rewarded for them in the end.
Libeled Lady (1936)
Warren (Spencer Tracey), finally a modern man, has learned that in order to keep his fiancée Gladys (Jean Harlow) he must show her affection and respect and not simply make a decent living.
Photo from Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
Conclusion

The Great Depression changed American attitudes about the economy, the role of the government and proper gender roles. Women proved that they had the ability to cope with and adjust to hard times. For many men, however, these changes led to feelings of inadequacy and emasculation. Although many men attempted to maintain their place in society, ultimately they failed. Once they realized that their role had changed, relinquished all power to women, and became submissive to them, resulting in a loss of their sense of male identity. It took years before many men realized that to survive the crisis, they had to change their views of manhood and acknowledge their new place in society.

Screwball comedies, perhaps more than other film genres, reflected the changes in gender relations occurring at the time. Depression era films, particularly screwball comedies, reflected these changes and offered alternative ideals of manhood. Gradually, the image of the Depression era male changed from the overly macho tough guy, which was projected in the popular gangster films, to the less traditional masculine men in screwball comedies. Eventually, however, this image of men became the masculine ideal in popular culture. The men portrayed in these films were the ones who were surviving and coping with their poor economic situation.

Although the screwball comedy genre emerged in 1934 with films such as It Happened One Night, Twentieth Century, The Thin Man and The Gay Divorcee, it was not fully established until 1936. Until the start of World War II, screwball comedy remained one of the most popular film genres, including box office hits such as Bringing
Up Baby, His Girl Friday, Theodora Goes Wild, The Awful Truth, The Lady Eve, My Favorite Wife, I Love You Again and The Palm Beach Story. The genre changed slightly over the years, particularly at the end of the Depression when studios began to focus on “the comedy of remarriage.” Yet, the image of the gentleman, which had been introduced in 1936 remained the most common stereotypical representation of men in screwball comedies, because it was the most practical male ideal to present during the Depression. One can see that screwball comedies, perhaps more than other film genres, reflected the changes in gender relations occurring at the time.

As soon as World War Two began, the genre’s dominance ended and has never regained its popularity. The reason for this sudden decrease in popularity is unclear, but one of the likely reasons is that the role these films had in American society was no longer needed by the American people. Although screwball comedies did not retain their popularity, the importance of the genre should not be overlooked.
Filmography

The following is a list of the films that were used in this thesis:


Bibliography


Gollancz, 1934.


