

Christmas Holiday

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Introduction

The specific objection to this material is that it is a story of gross sexual irregularities which not only contains 'no compensating moral values' of any kind, but on the contrary, is a story which condones and justifies, and makes it appear 'right and acceptable' this improper sex. (Greco 28)

The above is an August 14, 1939, response from Hays Commission head Joe Breen to Hollywood producer Walter Wagner. Wagner had written to Breen to inquire as to whether Somerset Maugham's recent novel *Christmas Holiday* might be an acceptable source for a screen adaptation. This quotation clearly indicates that Breen thought it was not an acceptable. Five years later, however, a film based on Maugham's novel did make it to the screen. It is the purpose of this paper to consider some issues raised by this quotation. What were the guidelines Breen was using for his assessment? What specific aspects of the novel was Breen referring to? How was the film changed to make it acceptable for the screen?

To find out the answer to these questions I will first provide a historical overview of film censorship in Hollywood. I will consider its origins, purpose, mechanism, and evolution over time. Next, I will give an introduction to the story that takes place in Somerset Maugham's novel. I'll follow that with a brief overview of the story as told in the film. After that, by referring back to the section on film censorship in Hollywood, I'll suggest the specific aspects of the novel that the Hays office might have objected to. Finally, I'll detail the changes made in the film and consider how these changes produced a film that would be acceptable to the

Hays office. I'll discuss how the film managed to live up to the underlying principle used by the Hays office to determine the acceptability of a film.

Film Censorship in Hollywood¹⁾

Introduction

The Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code) was a set of guidelines governing the production of motion pictures. Adopted by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1930 and enforced from 1934 until its demise in 1967, the Production Code spelled out what was and was not considered morally acceptable in the production of motion pictures in the United States.

The Production Code was not government censorship. In fact, the Hollywood studios adopted the code in large part in the hopes of avoiding government censorship. They preferred self-regulation to government regulation.

Before the Production Code

Before the adoption of the Production Code, many perceived motion pictures as being immoral and thought they promoted vice and glorified violence. Numerous local censorship boards had been established, and approximately 100 cities across the country had local censorship laws. Motion picture producers feared that the federal government might step in.

In the early 1920s, three major scandals had rocked Hollywood: the manslaughter trial of comedy star Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, the murder of director William Desmond Taylor, and the drug-related death of popular actor Wallace Reid. These stories, which happened almost simultaneously, were sensationalized in the press and grabbed headlines across the country. They seemed to confirm a perception that many had of Hollywood—that it was "Sin City".

Public outcry over perceived immorality, both in Hollywood and in the movies, led to the creation, in 1922, of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (later the Motion Picture Association of America). Intended to project a positive image of the movie industry, the association was headed by Will H. Hays, a former campaign manager for President Warren G. Harding. Hays pledged to impose a set of moral standards on the movies.

Hays spent eight years attempting to enforce a moral authority over Hollywood films, with little effect. In 1927, the Hays office issued "Don'ts and Be Carefuls", a list of thirty-six subjects to be avoided or handled with care. Some of the subjects that the list warned about were profanity, nudity, drug trafficking and use, white slavery, arson, venereal disease, negative portrayal of established religion, rape, brutality, third-degree methods, sympathy for criminals, cruelty to children or animals, etc. Since there was no provision for enforcement of this list, however, filmmakers continued to do pretty much what they wanted.

1930 to 1934

With the advent of talking pictures, it was felt that a more formal written code was needed. The Production Code was written and finally adopted on March 31, 1930. This and future codes were often called the Hays Code after William Hays.

The early Production Code was a token gesture that was often ignored. However, in 1934, the Code was strengthened, largely in response to three things. First of all, the Catholic League of Decency was created to offer its own, independent ratings of films. Films that received bad ratings from the League were often boycotted by Catholics and other religious conservatives. Second, there was a wave of state and city censorship laws enacted. Third, Congress threatened to enact federal censorship statutes. As a result, on June 13, 1934, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was established. All films were required to obtain a certificate of approval from the PCA before being released. Joseph I. Breen was appointed head of the new Production Code Administration. Under Breen's leadership, enforcement of the Production Code became rigid and notorious.

Provisions of the Code

Unlike the general tone of the earlier list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," the Production Code spelled out specific restrictions on movie language and behavior, particularly sex and crime. It prohibited nudity, suggestive dances, and the ridicule of religion. It forbade the depiction of illegal drug use, premarital sex, prostitution, venereal disease, childbirth, and profanity. Films could not endorse hatred of a racial or ethnic group, but the code also prohibited interracial relationships or marriages. The language section banned dozens of "offensive" words and phrases. Criminal activity could not be depicted on film in a way that led viewers to sympathize with criminals. Murder scenes had to be filmed in a way that would discourage imitations in real life, and brutal killings could not be shown in detail. The sanctity of marriage and the home had to be upheld. Adultery and illicit sex, although

recognized as sometimes necessary to the plot, could not be explicit or justified and were not supposed to be presented as an attractive option. Films could still be violent and feature heterosexual romance, however. Smoking cigarettes was still allowed and even encouraged.

While the above list seems pretty clear, in practice it was often difficult to determine whether a film should receive PCA approval or not. With an eye toward box-office appeal, moviemakers were often tempted to incorporate some of the forbidden subjects within their films. What was needed was one basic criterion to help decide the overall 'worth' of a film. Joseph Breen's concept of "compensating moral value" did just that. It became the fundamental yardstick used to determine whether a film that incorporated some of the questionable subjects was worthy of the seal:

Every film, according to Breen, must contain "sufficient good" to compensate for any evil that might be depicted. Films that had crime or sin as a major part of the plot must contain "compensating moral value" to justify the subject matter. To Breen this meant these films must have a virtuous character who spoke as a "voice of moral behavior," a character who clearly told the criminal/sinner that he or she was wrong. . . . There should be no gray areas in moral decisions in the movies. Each film must contain a stern, crystal-clear moral lesson that featured suffering, punishment, and regeneration. (Black 1994, 173-4)

Enforcement

The Code was enforceable largely because of the vertical structure of the American movie industry at that time. The same studios that were producing the movies also owned the distribution networks, including the movie theaters. Since the studios had voluntarily agreed to abide by PCA decisions and not distribute movies without a seal of approval and since the studios also controlled virtually all of the movie theaters in the country, no movies without PCA approval could make it to theaters. In other words, the movie studios themselves enforced the Code. But why?

The Role of Censorship in Hollywood

While the power of Breen to change scripts and scenes angered many writers, directors, and Hollywood moguls, his role in Hollywood had another aspect. Making movies was, after all, a business, and moviemakers were, above all else, businessmen out to make a profit. They had to strike a compromise in the movies they made. They wanted the movies to attract as

large an audience as possible while at the same time not alienating groups that might force a strict outside censorship system on Hollywood. Then, just as today, sex, violence, and other 'forbidden' topics attracted an audience, and, just as today, these same topics proved to be morally offensive to others. The basic role of Hollywood's self-imposed censorship was to create a system that would allow Hollywood to make movies that would attract the largest possible audience without pushing any of the major morality watchdog groups too far.

Breen's second job, then, was to sell movies to these watchdog groups. After Breen's PCA issued a seal of approval to a film, Breen then became the film's champion. As such he went before the Catholic Legion of Decency to argue for a favorable rating from the Legion. He also lobbied local censorship boards on behalf of the film. In doing so, he performed a valuable service for the movie industry. He helped Hollywood strike a balance that would maximize its profits. And, in fact, Breen performed his role so well that, with time, the enforcement of the Production Code led to the dissolution of many local censorship boards.

The 1950s and early 1960s

Hollywood worked within the confines of the Production Code until the late 1950s, by which time the "Golden Age Of Hollywood" had ended, and the movies were faced with very serious competitive threats. The first threat came from a new technology, television, which did not require Americans to leave their house to watch a film. Hollywood needed to offer the public something it could not get on television (which was convenient but also under a similar censorship code). Next, vertical integration in the movie industry had been found to violate anti-trust laws, and studios had been forced to give up ownership of theaters. The studios had no way to keep foreign films out, and foreign films weren't bound by the Production Code. Finally, a boycott from the Catholic Legion of Decency no longer guaranteed a commercial failure, and thus the code prohibitions began to vanish as Hollywood directors found they could ignore the Code and still earn profits.

The end of the Code

By 1968, enforcement had become impossible, and the Production Code was abandoned entirely. The MPAA began working on a rating system, under which there would be virtually no restriction on what could be in a film. The MPAA film rating system went into effect in 1968 with four ratings: G, M, R, and X. The M rating was changed to GP in 1970 and to the current PG in 1972. In 1984 the PG-13 rating was created to place such films as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* in a middle tier between PG and R. In 1990 the X

rating was changed to NC-17, in part because the X rating was not trademarked and pornographic bookstores and theatres had used the X and XXX rating.

The Novel

Christmas *Holiday* is a 1939 novel by Somerset Maugham. While the backdrop includes Communists, Russian émigrés, and the stodgy, complacent British middle class of pre-war Europe, it is essentially a coming-of-age story.

The Story

It was wonderful to be twenty-three and in Paris on one's own. (18)

After graduating from Cambridge and successfully completing a year working in his father's business, twenty-three-year-old Charley Mason is given a trip to Paris over the Christmas holidays by his father. Both father and son see this as a well-earned chance for him to "sow some wild oats". Arriving in Paris, Charley meets his old friend Simon Fenimore, who is working there as a foreign correspondent. Simon has strong leftist sentiments and plans to return to England to stand for Parliament after gaining some life experience in Europe. He seems to regard Charley's middle class values with disdain and tries to downplay the fact that he and Charley were formerly best friends. As it turns out, Simon's major role in the story is that he takes Charley to a brothel.

On Christmas Eve, after a night on the town, Simon takes Charley to Seráil, a brothel with a Turkish décor. Even the 'merchandise' is in Turkish style:

Two benches facing one another jutted out on to the dance floor and on these sat ten or twelve young women. They wore Turkish slippers, but with high heels, baggy trousers of some shimmering material that reached to their ankles, and small turbans on their heads. The upper part of their bodies was naked. (45)

The gem of the establishment is Princess Olga, the daughter of Russian émigrés. According to Mademoiselle Ernestine, the proprietress, most Russians are "barbarians", but:

. . . Princess Olga is different. She has principles. You can see she's been well

brought up. She has something, there's no denying it. (48)

Charley dances with Princess Olga, but before any other further 'business' can take place between them, Charley says he must leave because he has tickets to see the Midnight Mass at St. Eustache. Surprisingly, Princess Olga asks him to let her come along. He accedes to her wish, and after she changes into more suitable clothes, they make their way to St. Eustache.

During the mass, Princess Olga breaks down and cries inconsolably. Charley is at a loss what to do, and, as time passes, the crying only seems to get worse:

She was now crying so violently that the bystanders could not but notice it. She was making an exhibition of herself and he (Charley) went hot with shame. (55)

By the time the mass ends, she has composed herself. She suggests they get something to eat, and, while eating and drinking, she opens up and tells him her story in way of explanation for her crying.

She begins by saying that she had cried because:

I am a stranger. I have no country. I have no home. I have no language. I am an outcast. (59)

She goes on to say, "I am the wife of Robert Berger." When Charley shows no sign of recognition, she launches into her story, which she tells in a series of flashbacks over the next few days while living platonically with Charley in his hotel room in Paris.

Princess Olga's real name is Lydia Berger. Three years before, her ne'er-do-well husband, Robert Berger, murdered Teddy Jordan, an English bookmaker living in Paris. At the same time, he stole several thousand francs from him. Eventually Robert was arrested and sentenced to 15 years penal servitude in French Guiana. It is Lydia's fate that, even though she knows Robert to be a scoundrel and a murderer, she is still hopelessly in love with him and refuses to divorce him as would be the norm. She somehow considers the life she's leading as a prostitute to be some kind of penance for both Robert's crimes and her failure to help him lead an honest life.

She tells Charley of her life before meeting Robert, the circumstances of their meeting and courting, their six-months of marriage living together with Robert's mother, and finally about the crime and its repercussions. Throughout her telling of the story, it's clear that Lydia recognized Robert's flaws early on but continued to love him desperately. In fact, she still loves him desperately.

As Charley listens to her story unfold, he is at once repulsed and intrigued. At one point as she is telling her story, she turns and looks into Charley's eyes: "He, whose life had been set in pleasant places, had never before seen on a face a look of such hideous despair." His heretofore sheltered life begins to seem somehow unreal. The result is that when he finally returns to his middle class home in England, he thinks back on his trip:

Patsy (his sister) had asked him if he had had any adventures in Paris and he had truthfully answered no. It was a fact that he had done nothing; his father thought he had had a devil of a time and was afraid he had contracted a venereal disease, and he hadn't even had a woman; only one thing had happened to him, it was rather curious when you come to think of it, and he didn't just then know what to do about it: the bottom had fallen out of his world. (251)

The Film

Directed by German émigré director Robert Siodmak, Universal Pictures *Christmas Holiday* is a 1944 American film noir. It features former Universal teenage star Deanna Durbin and song and dance man Gene Kelly, both of whom are cast against type. It was a box office success and went on to gross more than \$2,000,000. Critical reception was mixed with Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* opining, ". . . it is really grotesque and outlandish what they've done to Miss Durbin in this film." (Crowther)

The Story

It's Christmas Eve at Camp Davis in North Carolina. The film begins with the graduation ceremony for US Army officers:

You are about to become officers in the army of the United States. Some of you will serve in one way; some in another—some by living, some by dying. But you're all at the beginning of the greatest moment of your lives. Congratulations and good luck to

you.

Lieutenant Charles Mason plans to celebrate his graduation by going to San Francisco to marry his fiancé Mona. His plans are short circuited when he receives a “Dear John” telegram telling him that Mona has married another man. He decides to go to San Francisco to confront the newlyweds. Because of bad weather, however, his plane is rerouted and forced to land in New Orleans. The passengers are all bussed into New Orleans where the airline puts them up at a hotel. In the hotel lobby, Charles is accosted by Simon Fenimore, a reporter who is disappointed by the news that there were no injuries or mishaps during the forced landing.

When Charles goes to the bar to try to get a sandwich, the same reporter, clearly the worse for drink, approaches him again and insists upon forcing him into a conversation even though it quickly becomes clear that he would prefer to be left alone. Simon picks up on the fact that Charles is in a brown study and offers a quick cure to what ails him: a trip to La Maison Lafitte to meet Valerie De Merode, who, he insists, will find a way to cheer him up, suggesting she might be able to help him get to San Francisco sooner. He describes La Maison Lafitte as “a kind of joint, a way out of town”. Upon arriving, Charles is ushered into an almost empty club filled mostly with women. A beautiful, but straight-faced singer, Jackie Lamont, intones, “Spring will be a little late this year.” When she finishes her song, she’s called over by a man who appears to be a cashier. He gives her some kind of ticket, which she in turn gives to another girl. The other girl approaches a man sitting at a table, who seems disappointed that the girl is not Jackie.

Simon introduces Charles to Valerie De Merode, the manager/owner of the La Maison Lafitte, but when it becomes clear that Valerie can’t help Charles get to San Francisco any more quickly, Simon suggests that they soften the blow by providing Charles with someone to “talk to”. He suggests Jackie, “the star of our little entertainment”. Jackie seems quite subdued, but she and Charles dance. When Simon gives Charles two tickets to the midnight mass at the Saint Louis Cathedral, Jackie asks him to take her with him to the mass. “It would be a great favor—it really would. I want to go terribly.” Jackie quickly changes into street clothes, and they leave for the cathedral. During the mass Jackie suddenly breaks down crying. Charles seems quite embarrassed and at a loss.

After the mass, they go to the Morning Call Coffee Stand where Jackie explains the

reason for her tears. She confesses that her name isn't really Jackie Lamont but rather Abigail Manette (née Martin), the wife of the murderer Robert Manette, who was convicted three years previously for the murder of a bookie named Teddy Jordan. Robert is currently serving a life term in prison. A flashback begins in which she describes in voiceover her history with Robert. Her narration begins:

I don't think it's possible for anyone to have a happier six months than we had—maybe I mean, 'than I had'. They wanted me to divorce Robert after he was convicted. They said I had stood by him long enough. They told me I was crazy when I said that whatever he did I'd keep on loving him. They said it was shameful that I should love him. As if you could stop loving because it's shameful to love. I didn't know it at the time, but Robert had murdered Teddy Jordan that night, less than an hour before he came home to our room . . .

The storm that forced Charles' plane to land in New Orleans is still raging and Charles invites Abigail to stay the night in his hotel room, where she sleeps on the sofa. Over the next day, while Charles' flight is still grounded, Abigail goes on, in a series of flashbacks, to describe her marriage to Robert, how they met, their courting, and their married life with Robert's mother. She describes Robert as a charming, but inveterate gadabout and gambler who can't hold down a job and continually makes promises he can't keep: "You'll see everything will be different from now on." Of course, nothing ever changes.

She portrays the events surrounding Teddy Jordan's murder, her initial ignorance and then the slow realization of the part that Robert played in the murder. She depicts how the police investigation, which initially viewed Robert as simply an uninvolved acquaintance of Teddy Jordan, inexorably begins to close in on Robert as the prime suspect. She outlines the attempts by Robert, his mother, and eventually Abigail herself to destroy the evidence that would implicate Robert in the murder. Robert is eventually arrested, tried, and convicted of murder. He is sentenced to death, but that is commuted to life imprisonment. Robert's mother somehow blames Abigail for everything. When the trial is over her last action is to slap Abigail and say, "You killed him!"

When the story returns to the present, it turns out that Robert has escaped from prison and is in a jealous rage over both Charles and the fact that Abigail is working at La Maison Lafitte as Jackie Lamont. Abigail tries to explain, "I had to live like you; suffer like you. . .

This is my prison." Robert is killed by a policeman after confronting Abigail and refusing to believe that she still loves him. His dying words to her are, "You can let go now, Abigail." She looks up with tears of release rolling down her cheeks, goes to window, and looks out as the nighttime clouds part to reveal a sky filled with twinkling stars.

Breen's Objections

What, in particular, could have been Joe Breen's objection to the story and characters as presented in the novel? What was changed in the film that would answer these objections? The objections fall into two broad categories.

Sexual Deviation: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, Homosexuality, and Incest

Novel. All four of these taboo elements are present in the novel. Although there are no sexually explicit scenes in the novel, it's clearly stated that Princess Olga is a prostitute (53, 58). The term 'venereal disease' is used openly. (251) Maugham alludes to Teddy Jordan's homosexual lifestyle: "They had a pretty shrewd suspicion that he was queer . . ." (139) This, of course, serves to cast the suspicion of homosexuality on Robert, his murderer: "The police would hunt in the night-clubs and cafés, in Montmartre and the Rue de Lappe, which the homosexuals frequented." (110) Finally, there are passages to suggest an unnaturalness bordering on incest in the relationship between Lydia and Robert: "intoxicated by the thought of his soft lips on hers and by the feel of his slim body, still a boy, in her arms". (110) This is accompanied by hints at a power struggle between Lydia and Robert's mother for his affections. This suggests that Robert's mother may harbor feelings that are other than maternal.

Film. Perhaps the biggest change in the film is turning the brothel into a nightclub/dancehall and turning the prostitute into a singer/dance companion. The exotic Russian émigré, Princess Olga/Lydia, becomes the country girl from Vermont, Jackie/Abigail. Homosexuality is never mentioned, although those familiar with 1940s Hollywood would pick up on the fact that Robert is a "Mama's boy". That was often a veiled reference to homosexuality in Production Code era Hollywood. In the film, there is no hint of anything sexually unusual in the relationship between Robert and Abigail, and the implied incest between Robert and his mother that is hinted at in the novel morphs clearly into psychoanalysis in the film. At one point, Abigail's voiceover narration comments:

When it was all over, a psychoanalyst said that Robert's relations with his mother were pathological. All I know is that Robert was the only thing in the world that she cared about. He wasn't just her son; he was her everything.

Lack of Punishment and Compensating Moral Value

Novel. The Production Code demanded that wrongdoers be sufficiently punished and all negative elements in a film be offset with positive elements. It demanded that films end on high moral ground.

One might think that being sent away to a penal colony would be sufficient punishment for Robert Berger, but, in the novel, two former convicts indicate that he's doing pretty well:

He's no fool. He won't make many mistakes. He's a chap who'll make the best of a bad job. You'll see, he'll be happy enough." (219)

It might be argued that Lydia might deserve to suffer because of her fatal attraction to Robert, but it somehow seems that her suffering is greater than his. In addition, what positive note can be taken from Charley's experiences, from the fact that "the bottom had fallen out of his world". He is left with no moral compass and no positive moral value to convey. Where is the "compensating moral value"? The ending of the novel is just too problematic from a Production Code standpoint.

Film. As mentioned above, at the end of the novel:

- Robert has not been fully or sufficiently punished for his deeds,
- Lydia is still tormented by her love for Robert, and
- Charley has lost faith in his previous beliefs about the world and his place in it.

Within the last five minutes of the film, however, all of these concerns are neatly dealt with. First of all, Robert suffers the ultimate punishment: he is killed. When Abigail hears Robert's dying words—"You can let go now, Abigail."—and walks over to window to see the clouds parting in a starlit sky, we know that she is finally free from the love that has plagued her. This clearly illustrates that she has gone through, "suffering, punishment, and regeneration." Finally, just before the final scene, Charles says that he won't go to San Francisco to confront his ex-fiancé. He seems to have gained some clarity in his life through

knowing Abigail. He serves as Breen's "voice of moral behavior" when he says:

I've learned a hundred years worth of life in the last twenty-four hours. I found out that you just don't do things because other people have done the same things, the same way. The important thing is being honest with yourself—whatever you feel, whatever you are.

Conclusion

For good or for bad, for over thirty years the Motion Picture Production Code influenced the making of films in Hollywood. It tried, with varying success, to impose a set of guidelines on Hollywood filmmakers. Often the effect of these guidelines can most clearly be seen when we examine films that are adapted from novels. Based on Somerset Maugham's 1939 coming-of-age novel *Christmas Holiday*, the 1944 film of the same name offers us a clear example of the Production Code at work.

[Notes]

Much of the information in this summary appeared in my earlier paper "Censorship and *Film Noir*."

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