

The Postman Always Rings Twice

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Introduction

The long hesitation of the “Hays office” to permit a motion picture to be made from James M. Cain’s plain-spoken novel, “The Postman Always Rings Twice,” is proved an unnecessary caution by the film which came to the Capitol yesterday. For “The Postman,” as evidenced in this treatment, makes a sternly “moral” picture on the screen, without in the least evading the main line or the spirit of the book. (Crowther 1946)

The above quotation appeared in the May 3, 1946 issue of *The New York Times*. It is the purpose of this paper to consider some issues raised by this quotation. What caused the “the long hesitation of ‘Hays office’”? What might the Hays office have found to be inappropriate in James M. Cain’s “plain-spoken novel”? How was it changed to make it fit for the screen? What does a “sternly ‘moral’ picture” entail?

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 James M. Cain’s novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. I’ll consider its major themes and its place in the *roman noir* tradition, briefly comparing it to the novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Next, by referring back to the section on film censorship in Hollywood, I’ll suggest the aspects of the novel that the Hays office might have objected to. Finally, I’ll detail the changes made in the film⁽¹⁾ 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 Hollywood⁽²⁾

Introduction

The 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 trials 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: 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 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, movie makers 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 movies 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 movie makers 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 the 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

Cain's first novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, was published in 1934. It seems

to have been loosely based on the most sensational news story of 1927 and 1928, the trial and execution of “Tyger Woman” Ruth Snyder and her lover Judd Gray for the murder of her husband Albert. The story in the novel is told in retrospect as the protagonist Frank Chambers sits on death row.

The Story

Frank Chambers, a twenty-four-year-old drifter, shows up penniless at the Twin Oaks Tavern, “a roadside sandwich joint, like a million others in California,” and is met by the Greek owner, Nick Papadakis. Frank tries to con the Greek out of a meal, and it’s clear the Greek is willing to be conned. He wants Frank to stay and work at the gas station attached to the tavern. Frank isn’t interested until he gets a look at the Greek’s wife Cora. Cora is a former beauty queen from Iowa, who, like so many other young girls, had come to California to become a star. She had ended up as a waitress in a hash house, and, when Nick came along and offered to marry her, she had seen him as her way out even though he was much older and she wasn’t attracted to him physically.

Frank begins to work at the gas station and, within a few days, when Nick has gone to the city to get a new sign made, Frank and Cora begin having an affair. Their love-making is quite violent, and soon they are confessing their love to each other. Frank the drifter wants them to run away, but Cora has another idea: get rid of the Greek and live happily ever after together at the Twin Oaks Tavern. Frank’s first reaction is a shocked, “The hang you for that,” but he soon warms to the idea.

They plan to murder Nick while he’s taking his weekly Saturday-night bath. Cora will hit him in the head with a homemade blackjack while he’s in the bath, and it will seem like he’s slipped, fallen, and struck his head on the side of the tub. Leaving the bathroom door locked from the inside, Cora will crawl out the bathroom window and go down a ladder to the ground. They will get rid of the ladder and then break down the locked bathroom door from the outside to ‘discover’ Nick’s body. While Cora is upstairs killing Nick, Frank is to be on the lookout beside the truck in front of the house. If there is a problem, he is to honk the horn of the truck.

Their plan doesn’t quite come off as planned. While Frank is on watch outside, he sees a cat snooping around the ladder. He goes to shoo it away and when he returns, there is a state cop coming around the bend. Seeing Frank, the cop stops and asks a couple of questions.

Satisfied with the answers, he moves on. The cop has noticed the cat playing around the stepladder, though, so Frank rushes to honk the horn to signal Cora to stop, but it is too late. There is a flash of fire from the porch and all the lights go out. Frank hurries upstairs and finds that Nick isn't dead but just knocked out. They rush him to the hospital, coming across the same state cop on the way. Luckily for them, Nick doesn't remember what happened and will recover after a week's stay in the hospital.

Suspicious, the cop insists on returning to the house with Cora and Frank. The cop discovers that the cat had climbed the ladder and stepped onto the fuse box, electrocuting herself and shorting out all the house lights. It all seems to make sense. Nick slipped in the dark and hit his head. Frank and Cora were not involved.

Shocked by their near miss, Frank and Cora break down. When the shock wears off, and while Nick is still in the hospital, they decide to hit the road together. They set out walking down the road, and after less than a quarter of a mile, Cora realizes that life on the road is not for her. Both crying, she returns to the house, and he continues down the road.

Frank drifts around a while gambling. He plays pool and manages to both con and be conned, ending up with no money. He hangs around the market where Nick and Cora shop, hoping to get a glimpse of her. One day Nick spots Frank and insists he return to the Twin Oaks for a visit. He also invites Frank to come along with Cora and him on a trip the next day to a fiesta in Santa Barbara. When Frank gets to the tavern and talks to Cora, he discovers that Nick is pressuring Cora to have his child. She's not pregnant yet, but the trip is to be something of a celebration of her decision to have his child. Frank convinces her to resist Nick's advances just one more night.

This time Frank and Cora hope to get it right. This time it would be different. Rather than a meticulously planned murder, "this was going to be such a lousy murder it wouldn't even be a murder. It was going to be just a regular road accident, with guys drunk, and booze in the car, and all the rest." (Cain 1934, 40) When they leave on their trip to Santa Barbara, both Frank and Nick are drunk so Cora has to do the driving. Before they leave they make sure there is a witness to Frank and Nick's drunkenness. Nora takes a scenic mountainous route, the perfect place to stage an accident. It's a fumbling, messy affair. After Frank kills Nick by hitting him over the head with a wrench, they struggle to get the car over the cliff. Eventually it falls a few feet down. Frank hits Cora to make it appear she's been injured as she

was thrown free from the car during the accident. A car is coming along the mountain road, and Nick hurries down the embankment to get into the car. As he gets to the car, he trips and falls. Both he and the car fall farther down the cliff.

Cora, Frank, and Nick's body are found by the police. The investigation, headed by District Attorney Kyle Sacket, seems to be doomed from the start. At every turn, there seems to be a witness to corroborate Frank and Cora's story of an unfortunate accident. Sacket, however, unearths an insurance policy taken out on Nick just a few days before the accident. Frank knows nothing about the policy and panics when Sacket convinces him that Cora is playing him for a sucker. He signs a complaint against Cora. A clever lawyer named Katz manages to get both Frank and Cora off by playing insurance companies off against one another so that Sacket's case falls apart, but not before Cora, angry over the complaint that Frank has filed against her, swears out a confession to a 'police official' detailing how Frank and Cora planned the murder. It turns out that the police official is actually an employee of Sacket's so that the confession never gets to the police and Frank and Cora get off, even collecting some of the insurance money.

Though they have been exonerated of Nick's murder, Frank and Cora find that their relationship has been poisoned by their mutual betrayals. For six months they live together, drinking, fighting, and then making up. Cora gets a letter saying that her mother is sick and goes to her mother's for a week. Frank closes down the tavern, picks up a girl, and goes off to Mexico for a fling. Soon Cora returns wearing black. Sacket's employee who had taken Cora's confession arrives to try to shake them down. He has copies of the confession and threatens to give it to the police. Frank and Cora, in turn, manage to strong arm the would-be extortionist and get all copies of the incriminating papers.

When Cora announces she is pregnant, they vow to make a new start. They get married at city hall and go to the beach to celebrate. They swim out too far and Cora strains herself. Fearing for her and the baby, Frank puts her in the car and rushes off toward the hospital. In trying to pass a truck, Frank drives the car into a culvert wall killing Nora. Even though it was an accident, he is convicted of murder. The story ends with Frank sitting on death row putting the finishing touches on his memoir as he waits to be lead away.

The Themes

James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is often lumped together into the

tradition of tough guy *roman noir* represented by works such as the *Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett and *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler. On the surface all three authors do share similarities. All write in a direct, no-frills prose, all write about crime, and all had their novels adapted for the screen to become iconic *film noir*. The author of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, however, was different in that, unlike Hammett and Chandler, he didn't have a long-suffering detective hero:

James M. Cain (1892-1977) did not write about detectives or publish in the pulps. He was an Easterner, a newspaperman and a protégé of H. L. Mencken who went West during the Depression to write for Hollywood. There he wrote movie scripts and crime novels. His gift for dialogue and the first-person, confessional form of his narratives gave them the suspense other writers achieved with a detective on a case. (Marling 2007)

The closest thing Cain's novel offers to a detective is District Attorney Kyle Sacket, but Sacket is little more than a peripheral character representing the inevitability of justice. Because of this, unlike Hammett and Chandler, who center their stories around their respective detective heroes, Cain puts the villain, the criminal, at the center. This produces a much darker story, but a story that does share similar themes and motifs with the works of the other two authors. All three authors write about crime, deception, greed, love, and the *femme fatale*.

In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, however, there are two central themes that move the story. The first is "the wish that comes true." Frank and Cora want to kill Nick so that they can live together in happiness. The plot of the novel is driven by this desire. Even though their first attempt fails, they do succeed the second time around and get what they wished for. However, the reality of their wish-come-true is quite different from their original idea. They mistrust each other, fight, and bicker. All of this stems from the second key theme, the "love rack."

The rack was an ancient torture device on which a victim was tied by his/her hands and feet and then pulled simultaneously in two directions. The "love rack" is a similar; however, the physical ropes of the original torture device are replaced by the emotional bonds of love. The victim is pulled simultaneously in two directions, wishing at once to cling to and to escape from the object of his⁽³⁾ desire. The "love rack" becomes the source of both pleasure and pain:

the pleasure of being with the one you love but also the pain the relationship brings. In Frank's case, he is held fast to Cora by his physical lust, but, at the same time, he longs to be free of her.

Problems with the Code

After the novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was published in 1934, MGM purchased the movie rights for \$25,000, and it was immediately "banned" by Breen. A letter written by MPPDA President Will Hays concluded that it was "impossible to make a picture of the book at all."⁽⁴⁾ The fact that it did become a movie over ten years later suggests something changed over that time. In fact, due in part to changing moral values during World War II, the PCA did begin to 'soften' its stance somewhat. But more than that, MGM made changes in adapting the novel to the screen. First, by referring to the earlier section of this paper on the Code, we need to consider several aspects of the novel that would have seemed objectionable. Then we can see how MGM dealt with them.

- **Racism.** The novel is filled with racial slurs. Nick is often referred to as a "greasy Greek." His being Greek seems to be one of the main reasons Cora finds him repugnant. Mexicans are also mentioned in a less than complimentary light.
- **Violence.** Both the violence of Frank and Cora's sexual relationship and the violence of the attempted and successful murders would have been too graphic for the PCA to accept in a film.
- **Sensuality.** Cora is portrayed as the ultimate sensual creature. Her character as she appears in the novel is clearly too hot for the screen.
- **Morals.** There would have been moral objections to some aspects of the novel. For example, there is blatant adultery. Toward the end of the novel, the unmarried Frank and Cora are clearly 'living in sin.' There is an unwed pregnancy.
- **Justice.** Related to the idea of morals mentioned above is the concept of justice. For the PCA, it was important that crime not be rewarded. The wheels of justice must turn. In the novel, we might say that, since Cora does die in the car accident and Frank is to be executed (for a murder he doesn't commit), justice has been served. Perhaps that gives us metaphysical justice, but it says little for the worldly justice of our court system.

The Film

The Story

The story in the film is surprisingly close to that of the novel. While there are many minor

details that differ, the main outline is the same. Frank the drifter takes up work at the Twin Oaks Tavern because he's attracted to the owner's wife. They have an affair and then make an unsuccessful attempt to kill the husband in the bathtub. Subsequently, they succeed in killing him by staging a fake automobile accident and are exonerated in court. Frank and Cora bicker, but they marry. Cora gets pregnant, but is killed in a car accident when Frank is driving. Frank is wrongly convicted of her murder and sits on death row retelling his story.

With the story virtually the same, what was done then to answer the objections mentioned above?

- **Racism.** All traces of racism are removed from the film. South African actor Cecil Kellaway plays the part of Cora's husband Nick with a vaguely British accent. Their surname is changed from the Greek "Papadakis" to the mainstream American "Smith". Nowhere is there any mention of Mexicans or any other ethnic group in the film.
- **Violence.** The ravishing, lip-biting kisses of the novel become almost chaste in the film. Often their kisses are accompanied by softening, romantic music. The violent parts of the murder are moved conveniently off-screen.
- **Sensuality.** The sensual, black-haired Cora of the novel is replaced by the blond-haired Lana Turner, who walks around for most of the film dressed in virginal white. Any sensuality is expressed through innuendo or metaphor. For example, in the opening scene when Frank pulls up to the Twin Oaks for the first time, he sees the double entendre "Man Wanted" sign in front. When he sees Cora the first time, a burning hamburger on the grill represents his burning lust.
- **Morals.** In the film there is adultery, but it is far from blatant. In down-playing the violence and sensuality, the adultery fades more into the background. Yes, it is still present as a motive for murder, but the actual physical act of adultery is only hinted at. In the film, Frank and Cora get married "because of talk." This places the announcement of the pregnancy after the marriage in the film, while in the novel it was before the marriage.
- **Justice.** In the closing scene on death row, Frank protests his innocence, saying he shouldn't die for a murder he hasn't committed. Sacket replies that new evidence has been found that proves that he took part in Nick's murder. Therefore, even if he weren't executed for Cora's death, he would be executed for Nick's. The wheels of justice may turn slowly, but they do turn.

Conclusion

The changes made in terms of racism, violence, and sensuality toned down the impact of the film enough so that it was not perceived as too shocking to be viewed by a wide audience. More important, though, the changes in terms of morals and justice were enough to produce the “sternly ‘moral’ picture” mentioned in the opening quotation. To repeat part of an earlier quotation,

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. (Black 1994, 173-4)

In other words, in spite of the scandalous subject matter in this film, in the end the ‘sins’ of adultery and murder are duly punished, and the mores and laws of society are upheld.

[Notes]

- (1) There have been numerous other adaptations of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, including the 1939 French film *Le Dernier Tourant*, the 1942 Italian film *Ossessione*, and the 1981 American film *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. There have also been two plays and one opera. This paper considers just the 1946 MGM production.
- (2) Much of the information in this summary is derived from “Production Code”, a Wikipedia article found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Production_Code and appeared in my earlier article “Censorship and *Film Noir*.”
- (3) In keeping with the basic masculine viewpoint of *roman and film noir*, the victim of the love rack is inevitably male.
- (4) See Biesen for details.

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