

Manhattan Melodrama W.S. Van Dyke, 1934

Manhattan Melodrama has not received the recognition it deserves. It is famous, but for an unfortunate reason: it was the movie John Dillinger watched on 22nd July 1934 in Chicago's Biograph – before he walked out to be shot by the G-men of the Bureau of Investigation (the future FBI). Critically, however, the film has received only intermittent attention. The most substantial piece I have found is by Jonathan Munby in *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, where the film is discussed as a gangster movie with specific contemporary resonances (1999: 66-82). Munby makes a good case for the film, but *Manhattan Melodrama* is much more than a gangster movie. Unfortunately, one attempt to label it differently – in *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz refers to it, along with *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), as a 'Cain-and-Abel' movie (1981: 99) – is highly misleading; yet the label has stuck, and has been repeated by several critics.

I would like to look at the film primarily from two points of view: as a male melodrama which becomes a tragedy, and in terms of its stars – Clark Gable, William Powell and Myrna Loy. The former is unusual – there are not many Hollywood movies with a genuinely tragic hero – and the latter is striking because it is a definitive film for all three stars. For example, it was the remarkable chemistry between

Powell and Loy in *Manhattan Melodrama* – apparent from their first scene together – that resulted in their being cast as husband and wife in the long-running *Thin Man* series.

Manhattan Melodrama was released in May 1934, towards the end of the so-called 'pre-Code' period. In fact, the term 'pre-Code' is a slight misnomer. Under the supervision of Will Hays, the Motion Picture Production Code was written in 1930, but at first it lacked an effective mechanism for enforcement. Although Hays hired Joseph I Breen as public relations man for the Code as early as October 1930 (Leff & Simmons 1990: 14), for some time Breen was unable to prevent Hollywood producers defying the Code. Between 1930 and 1934, Hollywood studios, seeking to counteract the slump in admissions brought about by the Depression, readily produced films whose content went beyond what Hays and Breen considered suitable for American audiences – primarily in terms of sex and violence. These are the films retrospectively referred to as 'pre-Code'. It was the Legion of Decency, a Catholic body, that brought an end to this period of relative licence. In April 1934, it mobilised such an outcry against the 'excesses' of Hollywood films that Hays was obliged to step in, committing the industry to proper enforcement of the Code. In July 1934, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was set up, with Breen at its head, and with effective sanctions. Hollywood producers could be fined if they did not follow its rules – scripts to be submitted to the PCA for vetting before production; completed films likewise submitted afterwards. If a film was passed by the PCA, it was awarded a Seal of Approval. The Seal was the crucial sanction – without it, a film would not be distributed by any of the major distribution networks.

The *AFI Catalog 1931-1940* records that there were discussions between the Studio Relations Office (the future PCA) and MGM about certain 'censorable' elements in *Manhattan Melodrama*, and some of these elements were in fact deleted (Hanson 1993: 1317). But others were not – e.g. the dimming of the prison lights when Blackie (Gable) is executed – which suggests that, because of its date, the film was not subjected to as stringent a policing of its elements as future Hollywood productions. In fact, the film does not significantly violate the Code, but it nevertheless deals with moral issues with



General Slocum: Blackie takes Jim away from his reading.

a maturity that became rare as the PCA shifted films into more simplified good versus evil conflicts. *San Francisco* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1936) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* both have the same basic premise as *Manhattan Melodrama*: two boys who are childhood friends grow up to embrace very different destinies, one becoming a criminal, the other supporting law and order. But in these later films the moral conflict is simplified: the law-abiding figure is a priest. In *Manhattan Melodrama*, Blackie, who becomes a gangster, is similar to his successors in the other two movies. But Jim (Powell), who becomes first the district attorney, then the governor, is a much more novelistic and divided figure than the priests – and the corresponding conflict between the two men is much more complex.

Traumatic events

The movie begins as a melodrama, with two traumatic events in rapid succession. The first was a real-life disaster: during an excursion of the steamship General Slocum on 15 June, 1904 on New York's East River, a fire resulted in the loss of over a thousand lives. In the movie, Blackie Gallagher (Mickey Rooney) and Jim Wade (Jimmy Butler) are on the ship with others from their East Side community, and the



TOP Blackie and Jim beat up the bully.



BOTTOM Father Joe saves the boys.

disaster functions as a traumatic event in that it orphans them both. The boys themselves jump into the river, but although Jim can swim, Blackie can't, and they require Father Joe (Leo Carrillo) to save them both from drowning. Since, however, Father Joe's cloth prevents him from being other than a spiritual father, they are adopted by Poppa Rosen (George Sidney), whose son Morris was also lost in the disaster. (Just before the fire, Blackie and Jim rescue Morris from a bullying. Indeed, the fire interrupts their beating up

of the bully.) The new family is formed across ethno-religious boundaries (Poppa Rosen is Jewish) but, more strikingly, it is all male. Since we don't see either of the boys' mothers alive, the absence of a maternal influence on their growing years is effectively complete: inevitably, this has consequences for the future.



TOP Leonid Kinskey slaps Poppa Rosen.

BOTTOM The police charge at the melee.

However, only a few years later, Poppa Rosen is then himself killed – the second traumatic event. As a communist speaker – Leon Trotsky (Leo Lange), no less – addresses a

New York crowd, disparaging American politicians and looking forward to the anticipated Russian Revolution, Poppa Rosen protests: he, too, is from Russia and in America there's 'plenty for everyone'. He is promptly set upon by Leonid Kinskey ('You dirty capitalistic stool pigeon'), and a fracas ensues. The police charge in on their horses and Poppa Rosen is trampled underfoot.

The two traumatic events are explicitly paralleled. On the General Slocum, there is a fight, followed by the fire, which sets off a general panic. During the panic, a woman faints and there are several shots of her lying unheeded on the



deck as people stampede around her. In the street, there is a fight, followed by the police charge. Again, the boys manage to escape the crowd turmoil, which is very similar to that on the boat, and here it is Poppa Rosen who falls and is trampled underfoot. The abandoned woman on the General Slocum can now be seen to stand in for the boys' mothers. For the boys, the two disasters are unusually personal: they are orphaned twice.

To begin a film with two such traumatic events is exceptional – indeed, the only other example I can recall is that of *Orphans of the Storm* (D.W. Griffith, 1921). There the father of Louise (Dorothy Gish) is murdered and she is torn from her mother and abandoned as a baby (the first traumatic event). She is taken into a family, where she becomes the adopted sister of Henriette (Lillian Gish), but then both sisters are

orphaned by the plague (the second traumatic event). As the link suggests, this is a melodramatic structure: binding the two protagonists as siblings before taking them into adulthood. Although, as adults, Blackie and Jim do not refer to themselves as brothers – whereas Louise and Henriette do indeed refer to themselves as sisters – their relationship as friends is also, at heart, fraternal.

I have used the narrative parallels between *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) to argue that these films possess a specifically melodramatic type of narrative, one in which an initial traumatic event – here, the sundering apart of a family – echoes compulsively through the story until the rupture can be healed by the formation of a new family (Walker 1993). *Manhattan Melodrama* offers a variation on this structure; it may be seen, in part, as like a male version of the *Orphans of the Storm* story. Thus, whereas Henriette and Louise grow up to become *victims* of ‘the storm’ (the events prior to and during the French Revolution), in *Manhattan Melodrama* the boys grow up to become *a part of* ‘the storm’. The storm here is the gangster era of prohibition, and both men define themselves in relation to it: Blackie joins it; Jim actively fights against it. Nevertheless, melodramatically, ‘the storm’ functions in a similar way in both movies. Just as events leading up to and during the French Revolution repeatedly keep tearing the sisters apart, so the clashes between the different worlds inhabited by Blackie and Jim repeatedly threaten their relationship. But, whereas *Orphans of the Storm* moves towards a happy ending for the two adopted sisters, *Manhattan Melodrama* has a tragic ending for the two adopted brothers.

Equally, though more obliquely than in *Orphans of the Storm*, the narrative of *Manhattan Melodrama* includes echoes of the two initial traumatic events. Blackie and Jim first meet as adults outside the Polo Grounds in New York during another real-life event, the Jack Dempsey-Luis Firpo World Heavyweight Boxing Championship fight on 14 September 1923. Both men are on their way to the fight, but neither makes it, because they stop to talk and the fight is over so quickly. However, they can hear the sounds of the audience reacting to the fight, sounds which continue throughout their abbreviated conversation. In this scene, the fight is displaced from

them, but it nevertheless creates a sense of background turmoil, and as the punters pour out of the arena after the fight, the two friends are spun apart, unable to make a firm date to meet up in the future. The scene establishes a precedent: all their meetings until the climactic courtroom scene will be fleeting – or missed. It’s as though the violence of the traumatic events continues to rumble in the background, forever disturbing a harmonious relationship between them.

When Poppa Rosen is killed, Blackie blames it on the police: they simply charged in without looking. And so, although ‘communist agitators’ started the affray, it is the police suppression of it that is indicted. Blackie swears revenge: ‘Someday I’ll get even with dirty rotten cops’ (the last three words now niftily censored – one of a number of minor elements that were allowed before the strict imposition of the Code, but have since been deleted). This initiates a split-screen montage sequence of the boys growing up: Blackie with his dice; Jim at his books.



One would expect the political aspects of this event to be picked up on later. This does not happen, which suggests that perhaps here the gangster era is in some sense the American equivalent of the Russian Revolution: a period of great political turmoil, with the class conflict necessarily recast in terms of law and order versus crime. This enables a fourth film, the Chinese *Two Stage Sisters* (Xie Jin, 1964) to be brought into the discussion. In many respects like a Chinese *Orphans of*

the Storm, *Two Stage Sisters* differs from the Griffith movie primarily in the ideological split which develops between the two adopted sisters in the final years of the civil war. Whereas Chunha commits herself to the ideals of the Communists, Yeohung is seduced by bourgeois-capitalist luxuries (money, furs, jewellery, alcohol and above all, sex: the film is highly puritanical) into decadence and dependency, becoming a pawn of the KMT forces of reaction. In other words, as in *Manhattan Melodrama*, each protagonist is identified with one of the two politically conflicting forces, an identification which, for ideological purposes, is characterised as a moral / immoral opposition. Equally, as in *Manhattan Melodrama*, the morality of the political conflict is finally symbolically dramatised in a highly personalised (and theatrically enacted) courtroom confrontation between the two, in which the immoral character remains literally speechless in the face of the other’s righteousness.

The Oedipal Triangle

As the boys grow up, Blackie remains emotionally a child, gambling (= playing), carefree, irresponsible. This is suggested, too, in his relationship with Spud (Nat Pendleton), whom he has also known since childhood. As a boy, Spud was Blackie’s dupe; now Blackie has taken him on as a sidekick, as though he needs someone around whose foolishness is entertaining. Spud’s amiable naivety is childlike, and he and his girlfriend Annabelle (Isabel Jeans) are primarily used for ‘comic relief’. By contrast, Jim’s identification with the law places him in the role of the father: in Lacanian terms, he takes over the function of the dead father (by extension, the Symbolic Father) by binding himself to the law. For Blackie, this places Jim in an unassailable position: he can only defer. Writing about *Manhattan Melodrama* in *Pictures Will Talk* – Joseph L. Mankiewicz was one of the film’s scriptwriters – Kenneth L. Geist declares himself baffled by this deference (1978: 67), which goes so far as Blackie’s submission to Jim’s prosecution of him for murder. Melodramatically, however, it makes sense. The traumatic events have another remarkable consequence: as though seeking to fill the gap opened up in ‘family relations’, Jim and Blackie grow up to duplicate,

in their own relationship, the father / son relationship of the Oedipal drama.

This is played out on a number of levels. Blackie sees Jim as rising to be the ultimate secular father-figure: one day he will be President. Indeed, as Munby points out, the film supports this through the parallels it suggests between Jim and Franklin D. Roosevelt: Jim, too, marries an Eleanor (Myrna Loy) and becomes Governor of New York (1999: 67). Equally, when Eleanor, who used to be Blackie's girlfriend, leaves him and subsequently marries Jim, Blackie accepts this; as though he recognises that Jim as father-figure should have possession of the woman. Even the way Eleanor meets Jim is suggestive. On the evening when Jim is elected District Attorney – that is, when he takes the first step up the political ladder – Blackie is supposed to meet him, but he has a gambling appointment: he sends Eleanor instead. It's as though, now that Jim is beginning to fulfil the destiny Blackie has envisaged for him, Blackie unconsciously feels that Eleanor belongs to him. However much the film stresses Blackie's chronic inability to keep appointments, it is surely not insignificant that he leaves Eleanor and Jim alone together (in the Cotton Club) all evening. Afterwards, Eleanor speaks of the 'security' that someone like Jim offers, and actually tries to 'reform' Blackie: she wants them to get married. Blackie refuses; Eleanor leaves. Although she cannot leave to go to



Eleanor tries to persuade Blackie to marry her.

Jim – when a heroine is involved in such a switch of affection, a time lapse is necessary to indicate that she is not flighty – the presence of Jim's overcoat ('accidentally' left behind as he said goodnight) tells Blackie clearly enough 'why' she left.

However, if Blackie seems like a dutiful son-figure, accepting that Eleanor will choose Jim, he also resents this. The Oedipal tensions are by no means conjured away. But Blackie cannot direct his anger at Jim, whom he loves as a friend independently of his filial deference, and so he displaces it onto a fast-operating racketeer, Manny Arnold (Noel Madison). Again the timing is significant. Blackie's showdown with Arnold occurs on the same evening – New Year's Eve – as Eleanor's re-meeting with Jim, two months after she left Blackie. The next day, Jim tells Blackie that he and Eleanor are getting married: within the conventions of 1934 it is relatively clear that the two of them have just spent the night together. And so Blackie shoots Arnold at the same time as Eleanor and Jim first sleep together. In addition, New Year's Eve is *the* privileged night for lovers in Hollywood movies; literally dozens of films testify to the 'truth' of Barbara Stanwyck's line in *My Reputation* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1946): 'They say the person you're with as the New Year comes in is the person you'll be with all during the coming year'. Blackie may not know that Eleanor and Jim are together, but he may suspect it. Certainly, in his conversation with Arnold, Blackie reveals that his loss of Eleanor has made him ruthless. On election night we saw him give Arnold time to pay his debts, but now he has run out of patience: 'a lot's happened in the last couple of months'.

At this point, the film introduces an unusual complication. Blackie had told Spud to return Jim's overcoat to him; instead Spud 'borrowed' it, and now he absent-mindedly leaves it behind in the hotel room where Arnold is murdered. Such carelessness is entirely typical of Spud, but Blackie's failure to notice the coat as he leaves the room is more telling: it looks like a classic Freudian slip, repeating Jim's slip in leaving it behind in Eleanor's apartment. However, what this means is ambiguous. We assume that the coat will be traced back to Jim and he'll be on the spot: either he'll be blamed or he'll have to finger Blackie. If the former, Blackie's 'forgetting' the coat looks like revenge (the duplication of

the initial 'forgetting' is especially relevant here); if the latter, guilt. Such a confusion of motivation seems particularly appropriate to an Oedipally based murder. As it happens, Jim alone recognises the coat and he confronts Blackie with this privately. And now Blackie, fully aware of what is at stake, sets out to convince Jim that it isn't his coat. Since Spud had had a new coat made, identical to Jim's, this is possible, provided Jim accepts the new coat as his own.

As a plot device, the business with the two coats is clumsy, but it also introduces an intriguing subtextual intimation.



TOP Taking a phone call from Tootsie, Blackie holds the gavel.

BOTTOM Jim finds the gavel in the pocket of his new coat.

In the pocket of his coat, Jim had left a gavel he had picked up whilst in the Cotton Club with Eleanor on Election Night. Blackie finds the coat and the gavel after Eleanor has walked out; the latter serves as a particularly irritating symbol, with its (only temporarily misleading) sexual overtones. Now he returns the gavel to Jim in the new coat, and it is the sight of this that convinces Jim that the new coat is his. In other words, he is deceived into accepting new for old by the memento of his first date with Eleanor. But it is now, in addition, a symbol of his *success* with Eleanor: he is rewarded with the return of the phallic symbol which he had forgetfully left in Blackie's care. Blackie's returning the gavel is a gesture of appeasement – it deflects the father-figure's wrath – and arguably it works as such because of its sexual overtones: the son signalling his acceptance of the right of the father to the phallus (and, by extension, the woman). Moreover, because the gavel is in the coat, it's as though the coat symbolises Eleanor (and she is in fact wearing it when



Jim sees her back to her apartment). Perhaps this accounts for Jim's refusal to notice the coat's newness: it's as though, in fantasy, this allows him to view Eleanor as re-virginised. And so, he cannot bear his erstwhile assistant Snow (Thomas Jackson), later, referring to Blackie as his wife's ex-lover.

Such a reading of the coat transaction operates in the film's subtext. It doesn't displace the obvious interpretation – that Jim assumes this is his coat because the gavel is in the pocket

– but it does suggest that rather more may be going on than is at first apparent. We know that Blackie cannot get away with murder. But, after the coat transaction, Jim, now the DA, seems incapable of pursuing the investigation as he should. When Jim invites Blackie to be his best man, his secretary (Claudelle Kaye) warns him of the inadvisability of such a move: 'People are saying that you let Blackie Gallagher off the Manny Arnold killing out of friendship'. And, when Jim is nominated for governor, Snow, seeking revenge for having been dropped (for corruption) from the DA's ticket, has a ready source of impeachable material in the case. He says Jim didn't even try to find Arnold's killer: in every speakeasy in town they know it's Blackie Gallagher. And 'friendship' does not seem a satisfactory explanation; as evidenced by Jim's later, quite ruthless, prosecution of Blackie. It is rather that Jim wilfully deceives himself about the coats, which renders him incapable of seeing Blackie as the murderer. And this self-deception would seem to be bound up with the symbolic overtones of the coat transaction.

Jim and Eleanor marry. Blackie does in fact decline Jim's invitation to be best man: he sends a telegram saying 'No-one else would understand' – significantly, Snow reads the telegram before handing it to Jim. We do not see the wedding, but we do see the couple about to depart by ship for their honeymoon, where we learn that Father Joe, now a priest at Sing Sing, returned to New York to marry them. Keeping Father Joe as a background presence throughout the movie – he is also with Jim on Election Night – prepares us for his crucial intervention towards the end.

Blackie had promised to be there himself to see the honeymoon couple off but, even though he arrives in an ambulance, he is again too late. (In *Me and Orson Welles* [Richard Linklater, 2009], set in 1937, Welles himself uses a private ambulance to beat the New York traffic.) In fact, we never see Blackie, Eleanor and Jim together as a group, which is also relevant to the Oedipal triangle. The absence of such a scene clearly undermines Blackie's professed happiness at Jim and Eleanor's marriage.

Only when Blackie commits a second murder is he arrested and prosecuted by Jim. And here, ironically, the murder – of Snow – is as much to protect Jim as Blackie himself. Snow was

threatening to use his inside information on Jim's conduct of the Arnold case to destroy Jim's chances of gubernatorial election. Eleanor, worried about this, informs Blackie, who says he'll 'have a talk' with Snow.

In the light of Blackie's conviction that Jim will one day be President, we can read his killing of Snow as his behind-the-scenes service to ensure that Jim proceeds smoothly to the next stage: election as governor. In killing Snow for Jim, Blackie acts, again, as a dutiful son-figure. This may be related to a key point in Philip Slater's analysis of the motivation behind US political assassinations: 'the assassin does not really kill authority, he kills in the *name* of authority' (1970: 56). Jim's destiny 'authorises' Blackie to kill Snow. However, on this occasion, there is an unfriendly witness: a blind man who isn't blind.

The Tiresias figure – a blind seer – is not uncommon in movies, whether identifying the murderer (*M* [Fritz Lang, 1931]; *The Informer* [John Ford, 1935]; indirectly *Peeping Tom* [Michael Powell, 1960]) identifying innocence in a character presumed guilty (*Saboteur* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1942]; indirectly *The Blue Gardenia* [Fritz Lang, 1953]), or simply being psychic (*Don't Look Now* [Nicolas Roeg, 1973]). In that the blind man here is a fake, one should not perhaps invoke Tiresias, except for the latter's place in myth as the man who identifies Oedipus as the murderer of his father. In the light of the reading of Arnold's killing as 'displaced parricide', this seems too remarkable to be ignored. Now Blackie accepts the punishment for murder he so neatly evaded earlier: his passivity in the face of Jim's ruthless prosecution testifies to his submission, finally, to the father's wrath.

It's as though the original crime of displaced parricide 'returns' through Snow. With Arnold's killing, it was the timing of the murder that was significant; in Snow's case, it is the setting. Blackie kills Snow in a washroom in Madison Square Gardens. An ice hockey match is taking place in the background, so the scene echoes the place where Blackie and Jim first met as adults. And so, although Blackie kills Snow for Jim, there is also a subtextual hint that, once again, the murder is like displaced parricide.

A further complication is that Snow as blackmailer arises in response to Jim's disavowal of Blackie's responsibility for

Arnold's murder, and he is powerful because he speaks the truth that Jim represses. Snow is like Jim's shadow, corrupted and repressed, but knowing his, Jim's, dark secrets. And one secret is bound up with Eleanor's history. The specific accusation that provokes Jim to strike Snow is, 'You wouldn't hold Gallagher because you wouldn't prosecute your wife's ex-lover'.

The ruthlessness of Jim's prosecution of Blackie arises from a number of factors, but one is contained in this accusation: he is mercilessly proving Snow wrong. A second factor relates to his own earlier wish that Snow be silenced. In killing him, Blackie had acted like Jim's Id, and so Jim's prosecution is also a Superego punishment of the Id, a punishment fuelled by his own guilt at the murder: Snow, after all, was speaking the truth. The film is very sharp about Jim's legal practices: he virtually ignores the first murder (of a racketeer) but vigorously pursues the second (of a lawyer). And, however badly Jim may feel about this, it is clear that his successful prosecution of Blackie clinches his election as governor: he has demonstrated his integrity by sending his friend to the electric chair.

We only see the final stage of Jim's prosecution of Blackie. But, from the moment that Jim enters the courtroom (on this occasion, it is he who is late) and begins his summing-up to the jury, the whole scene has an electric intensity. In such a situation, with an audience and with a powerful speech to

deliver, Powell is at his authoritative best, dominating the room as moves around, incisively driving home his points. Within the courtroom are not just Eleanor, but also, sitting together, Annabelle, Spud and Tootsie (Muriel Evans), Blackie's current girlfriend. The scene is built on montage, cutting not just between Jim, relentlessly laying out his case, and Blackie, tensely listening, but also incorporating these other figures. About halfway through the speech, we are shown that Father Joe is also again present, sitting with Eleanor, but he is not integrated into the dynamics of the montage – unlike the others, he is never shown on his own. Because, ideologically, he must seem to be impartial, his is rather an inert presence.

The scene could be analysed in detail for the way specific phrases are accompanied by specific reaction shots of Blackie and the four significant spectators; I will limit myself to the shots that occur at the climax and conclusion of the speech. Jim has been building a case against gangsters like Blackie throughout his speech, and now he stands close to the jury, telling them that a conviction would, 'give a warning to other gangsters and murderers that they are through'. Cut to a close-up of Blackie, sweating with the stress of what he is hearing. Back to Jim, who turns from the jury and walks towards Blackie. The camera moves back with him to bring Blackie in the foreground into shot. Jim, too, is sweating: 'In 1904, when the General Slocum burned, I made a



TOP CU of Blackie sweating.

BOTTOM Jim moves to address Blackie directly.



Blackie's trial. Eleanor is angry at what Jim is saying; Father Joe is neutral.



Jim addresses the jury.

boyish effort ...' Cut to Blackie: 'to save Blackie Gallagher's life'. Blackie shakes his head, as though trying to shake free from the tension. Back to Jim: he, too, is now in close-up, and he is looking down at Blackie: 'Today I demand from you his death.' Cut to Eleanor, who shakes her head in disbelief at what her husband is saying. Then to Annabelle, who fearfully clutches Spud. Then to Spud, staring angrily – and also sweating. Then to Tootsie, biting her lip as she tries to control her tears. Finally, back to Blackie. He leans back, and with an effort recovers his insouciance; he returns to a sketch he

REACTIONS TO JIM DEMANDING BLACKIE'S DEATH.



FIRST COLUMN

TOP Eleanor appalled.

MIDDLE Annabelle frightened.

BOTTOM Spud angry.

SECOND COLUMN

TOP Tootsie biting her lip.

MIDDLE Blackie recovers his insouciance.

BOTTOM Blackie's sketch.

has been drawing and even shows the flicker of a smile. Jim, still sweating, sits down. He ignores the proffered hand of his delighted assistant and writes a note. In the background, we hear the judge's final remarks to the jury – these continue throughout the rest of the scene. Cut to Blackie sketching and then the sketch itself: himself in the electric chair. Jim's note is delivered to Blackie: 'Sorry, Blackie, I had to do it'. Blackie writes a reply: 'Okay, kid. I can take it. PS and can you dish it out.'

Here, we could argue, Jim is actually playing to the electorate, which provides the most sinister reason for his relentless prosecution: political ambition. But in the reaction shots of Blackie and the four key spectators, we see the cost – the ruthlessness of Jim's prosecution, to say nothing of its intended outcome, remains etched on their faces. Even though Blackie is able to recover his familiar devil-may-care attitude, the other four are devastated. After this, the only way in which Jim can keep his integrity with the film's audience is to give up the governorship at the end.

Sacrificial hero; tragic hero

Blackie kills Snow as a result of a confidence from Eleanor. Here, one could argue, he is acting *as* her ex-lover, gallantly protecting her husband – a motivation also found in certain later gangster movies, e.g. *The Roaring Twenties* (Raoul Walsh, 1939). And by forbidding Eleanor to tell Jim why he killed Snow, Blackie offers himself as sacrificial victim. Jim can prosecute him without constraint, untroubled by his



Proto-noir lighting: Blackie is sentenced to death. His lawyer on his right.

own place in Blackie's motive. Indeed, Jim can *use* him as a vital stepping stone to the governorship.

Jim is elected governor, in which capacity he has the power to commute Blackie's death sentence. The latter's lawyer (Frank Conroy) petitions him to do so, on the grounds that (1) no motive has been found for the killing and (2) Jim was elected governor on the strength of the case. Jim refuses: 'There is no case to change the verdict of the court.'

The refusal is, nevertheless, unhappily made. The virulence of Jim's prosecution has exhausted itself; now he evidently feels remorse. At this point, Jim becomes a tragic hero, painfully torn between love and duty. On the evening of the execution, he 'broods' by the fire. Deeply concerned that he should not let Blackie die, Eleanor tells him that Blackie killed Snow for him. Jim, agonisedly, 'You know what that means?' Eleanor: 'It means that, but for Blackie Gallagher, you wouldn't be governor'. Jim: 'It means that the State has finally found a motive for the murder. There isn't a chance now.'

By returning to the grounds of the lawyer's petition, this brilliantly crystallises Jim's dilemma. Resolving the motive multiplies considerably the force of the second point – Jim's election. Inevitably, Jim's experience of tragic dividedness is intensified, but he remains adamant: 'I must do what I think is right.' Appalled that he should let Blackie die when he has



TOP Jim broods by the fire. Eleanor's head is (just) visible as she enters in the background.



BOTTOM Eleanor tells Jim why Blackie killed Snow.

the power to stop this, Eleanor leaves him, telling him precisely what he is sacrificing for his principles: 'Blackie's life, my love, our happiness.'

Finally, just before the execution, Jim goes to Sing Sing to see Blackie. He is deeply affected that Blackie should have killed Snow for him, but says 'There's nothing I can do to repay you'. Unable to help Blackie in the present, he blames himself for the past: 'When old man Rosen died, it was up to



TOP Jim visits Blackie in Sing Sing.



BOTTOM Father Joe joins them.

me to take care of you ... I was too busy'. At this moment, arriving to accompany Blackie to the electric chair, Father Joe enters the cell. This is a crucial symbolic reunion: the characters say it is the first time the three of them have been together since the East Side, but, so far as the film is concerned, it's the first time since Father Joe saved the two boys from drowning. Moreover, because there is no scene with Blackie, Eleanor and Jim together, this reunion also stands



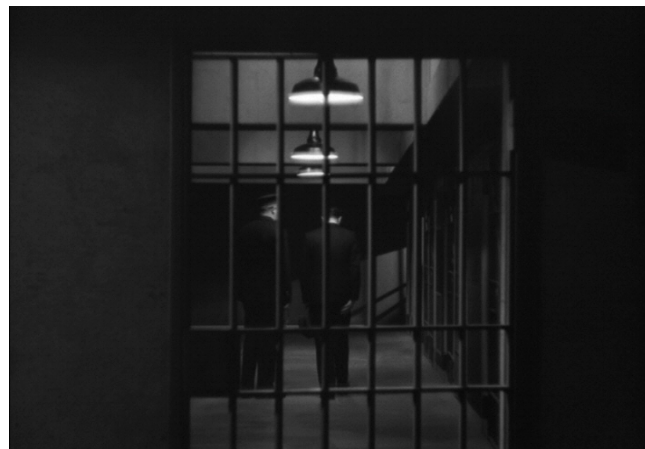
Blackie and Jim's farewell.

in place of that 'missing' scene. (In that he pulled the boys out of the water, Father Joe is symbolically their mother-figure.) And this provides the emotional pressure to break through Jim's commitment to his duty: he says to Blackie 'I can't do it; I've got to commute you.' But Blackie refuses. He realises that, were Jim to do this, it would ruin his career 'And for what? So I can rot in this hole?' And so here he becomes a genuine sacrificial hero; ensuring, by his death, the preservation of Jim's public integrity.

The dimming of the prison lights – signalling the use of the electric chair – occurs as Jim walks slowly away, out of the building. There is a poetic element here: the imagery suggests the tragic hero leaving the stage. But the dimming of the lights also marks the moment of the sacrificial hero's death – a death whose burden Jim will henceforth have to carry.

Even though Jim then goes on to resign the governorship, Blackie's refusal to accept the commutation enables this to be done honourably. Jim is the film's 'representative of the law' and cannot be explicitly corrupted. He has his moment of weakness, when he offers to save Blackie from the chair, but he atones for this by a public confession and his resignation. And this, of course, frees him for an equally honourable reconciliation with Eleanor.

From the moment that Jim knows why Blackie killed Snow (or, at least, the part of the motive relating to himself),



JIM WALKS AWAY AS BLACKIE IS EXECUTED

TOP The lights dim.

BOTTOM The lights return.

the chain of events is arguably inevitable. In order for the film to bring about a resolution acceptable in both emotional and ideological terms (preserving Jim's humanity; protecting his ideological status), Jim has to offer to save Blackie's life, Blackie has to refuse and Jim has to resign. Nevertheless, the film achieves considerable intensity as it negotiates these stages. Tragic heroes are relatively rare in the Hollywood cinema; films with both a tragic and a sacrificial hero even rarer.

The stars

Blackie Gallagher is an archetypal Gable role. Blackie is a natural leader, running a business enterprise – here a gambling joint – with a practised ease, respected and admired by those who work under him. Moreover, except to those who violate the gambler's code – debts must be paid – or who threaten those he cares for, Gable / Blackie is entirely honourable. In *San Francisco*, Gable's character is again called Blackie – emphasising the films' connections – and although Father Tim Mullin (Spencer Tracy) is extremely hostile to Blackie's involvement in what he, as a priest, thinks of as vice, he nevertheless tells Mary (Jeanette MacDonald) that Blackie has a code: 'he never lied, he never cheated and I'm sure he never took an underhanded advantage of anyone.' It is much the same in *Manhattan Melodrama*. As a gambler, Gable / Blackie is also lucky, which is bound up with his insouciance: he wins so often because it wouldn't trouble him if he lost. Incidents such as a police raid simply do not bother him – he takes them in his stride. In matters of the heart, however, Gable stands a little to one side of the Hollywood norm. Although he is invariably attractive to women, and is indeed romantically susceptible, he insists on remaining sexually free – unlike most other stars, he considers marriage as a step towards the trap of domesticity. In this respect, *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), is an atypical Gable role of the era.

I would like to clarify the nature of the Gable persona with reference to Robert B. Ray's notion that classical Hollywood cinema is dominated by two male archetypes, the 'official hero' and the 'outlaw hero' (1985). These figures may be seen as an extension of the categories of 'adventurer hero' and 'settled husband-figure' put forward by Robin Wood (1977). Ray summarises the two types:

Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements. By contrast, the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong. While

the outlaw hero found incarnations in the mythic figures of Davy Crockett, Jesse James, Huck Finn [...] the official hero developed around legends associated with Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lee [...]. (1985: 59)

Ray goes on to argue that Gable was the star who 'most obviously drew on the outlaw hero tradition' (77). He continues:

[Gable's] cheerfully self-reliant image occasioned his frequent appearances in ... [films] ... that dramatized the conflict between romantic independence and societal responsibility. Typically, these movies were reluctant hero stories that required Gable to play a man who had fled from civilization only to find it at his door, bringing in its train problems [...]: wrongs to be righted, villains to be fought, women to be protected. Generally [...] Gable's films turned on a dilemma: his obligations to some particular community (the moral center) threatened his determination to remain free and unentangled (the interest center). (78)

However, if that characterises the Gable roles where he is within the law – Ray's main examples are *Red Dust* (Victor Fleming, 1932) and *China Seas* (Tay Garnett, 1936) – *Manhattan Melodrama* and *San Francisco* are rather different. The crucial conflict for Blackie in *Manhattan Melodrama* is not between moral responsibility and emotional independence, but moral responsibility (protecting those he loves) and avoiding the legal consequences of his actions. In *San Francisco*, where he does nothing more reprehensible than run an illegal gambling joint, it is his resistance to the Christian religion that is presented as the problem, and – showing rather confused thinking – the film uses the 1906 earthquake itself to make him see the light.

Furthermore, *Manhattan Melodrama* is also a film which include both types of hero. Two of Ray's major examples of this opposition within an individual film are *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), but *Manhattan Melodrama* would serve his argument equally well. Here, too, the heroine is pulled between the two men, but ends with the official hero; here, too, the outlaw hero in some sense sacrifices himself so the official hero remains free to pursue his destiny. Just as Rick (Humphrey Bogart) shoots Major Strasse (Conrad Veidt) to

save Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), and Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) shoots Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) to save Ranse Stoddard (James Stewart) for Hallie (Vera Miles), so Blackie shoots Snow to protect Jim – and Eleanor. In *Casablanca*, the killing is absorbed into the film's war-time project: it means that Laszlo is free to continue his work for the resistance, and Rick will join the fight. *Liberty Valance* is bleaker: Ranse is assumed to be Valance's killer, which makes him famous and launches him into a successful political career, whereas Tom declines into obscurity. But *Manhattan Melodrama* is bleaker still: Blackie is executed for the killing; Jim gives up his political career.

Ray also makes the point that, in the strongest examples of this structure, the opposition between the two heroes is heightened by giving the official hero elements associated with the outlaw hero and vice versa (1985: 64). This, too, is found in *Manhattan Melodrama*. Thus Jim moves through some of the same territory as Blackie – a prize fight; night clubs – and comes into contact with the same crooks; indeed, he even asks Blackie about one of them. And Blackie, in turn, encourages Jim in his crime-busting operations: 'You don't play ball with those grafters'.

One of the finest Hollywood actors of his era, William Powell was only rarely given roles which enabled him to show just how good he really was. Jim Wade is one of those roles. As Jim, Powell conveys both authority and lightness of touch; intelligence and empathy. In addition, in the later scenes of *Manhattan Melodrama*, he is utterly compelling as a man agonising over a moral predicament: he absorbs the tensions into himself. It is possible that one reason why there is no scene in which Jim, Eleanor and Blackie meet as a threesome is because it would have been difficult to script whilst preserving a balance between the two men. Without Eleanor, Jim and Blackie can spar back and forth with ease, affectionate and joking, accepting one another's foibles. With Eleanor present, tensions would inevitably arise.

When Jim makes his belated entrance into the courtroom and elegantly excuses his lateness, Blackie, with evident admiration, comments to his attorney, 'Class. It's written all over him: class'. Blackie admires this in Jim because he himself lacks it: there is almost always a sense of a working-class

rough diamond in the background of Gable's roles. But Powell's persona includes a patrician's sense of ease in social situations. This contrast, too, is typical feature of films with an outlaw hero / official hero opposition: the former is more rooted in his environment, more down-to-earth, whilst the latter, pursuing noble ideals, usually moves in a more elevated social world.

In 1938, a poll conducted by Ed Sullivan in the 55 papers which syndicated his column voted Clark Gable and Myrna Loy 'the King and Queen of Hollywood' (Williams [1968] 1975: 63). This is a sign of just how popular Loy was during this period but, although she made seven films with Gable, it was above all her performances with Powell – especially in the *Thin Man* series of films – which guaranteed this popularity. And it was *Manhattan Melodrama* that first brought them together. Indeed, Loy herself has commented: 'From the very first scene we did together in *Manhattan Melodrama*, we felt that particular magic there was between us' (Kay 1977: 76). The scene is set in the back of a chauffeur-driven car: in place of himself, Blackie has sent Eleanor to 'entertain' Jim. But Jim has not yet met her, and he is a little startled to find this woman crashing into his car and then making a joke to the effect that she is enacting a sexual scandal scam. As soon as Eleanor has explained, however ('Blackie sent me'), and she and Jim settle down to talk, the scene sparkles with their rapport. David Thomson has suggested, accurately I think, that '[Loy] was only really stirred if she liked the idea of a screen partnership' (2002: 534), that is, she needed a male co-star to bring out her intelligence, warmth and vivacity. Even so, what we are seeing in this short scene in *Manhattan Melodrama* is the beginning of something exceptional in Hollywood movies: the birth of a male-female partnership that is both scintillating and full of genuine affection.

It is possible that Myrna Loy was so popular because she embodied the notion of the 'ideal wife'. Feminists may feel uneasy with such a designation, with its overtones of a self-effacing wife who is 'understanding' towards her husband. But, although Loy was understanding, she was not self-effacing: in her most characteristic roles, she would show both a resilience and a critical intelligence which she was not afraid to express. Overall, one senses in Loy a sense of irony towards

male behaviour, but this was tempered by an engaging sense of humour – she was almost always extremely likeable. Even when, as in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), her role is largely restricted to handling a husband who was having difficulty adjusting to the post-war USA, one can see her deftness and quiet competence: she always knows what to do.

In popular memory, Loy is of course indelibly associated with the *Thin Man* films, and again she has spoken about what was special about working with Powell: ‘There was this feeling of rhythm, of complete understanding, and an instinct how each of us could bring out the best in the other’ (Kay 1977: 77). But, however popular they were at the time, these films only play out the Powell-Loy marital relationship in a light-hearted comedy mode: Powell in particular seems constrained by the distinctly limited requirements of the role of Nick Charles. But in *Manhattan Melodrama* we see both the light-hearted banter and the tense drama. This is really the definitive Powell-Loy movie.

Generic influence

Made only two years after *Manhattan Melodrama*, with the same director and star, *San Francisco* – at least in its central relationships – is like a Christianised reworking of the earlier movie. But, as also in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, the shift in the law-abiding figure from the law to the priesthood is a highly regrettable step. Everything is now simplified: as a priest, the law-abiding figure becomes infallibly right, rigidly censorious and punishingly anti-sex. All the marvellous ambiguity and complexity of Powell’s Jim Wade is lost in a procession of noble fathers initiated by Tracy’s Tim Mullin, stalking through the narratives as the ideal representatives of the repressive PCA. It is a relief to note the ‘post-Code’ variation of *True Confessions* (Ulu Grosbard, 1981). This returns to the melodramatic origins by making the two figures actual brothers, but signals its modernity by shifting to a priesthood / law polarity in which the priest is the legally corrupt figure.

MICHAEL WALKER

Michael Walker has been on the editorial board of *Movie* and its on-line successor since 1969. His most recent publications are ‘Steven Spielberg and the Rhetoric of an Ending’ in *A Companion to Steven Spielberg*, ed. Nigel Morris (Wiley Blackwell, 2017) and *Modern Ghost Melodramas: What Lies Beneath* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

© Michael Walker, 2019

Works Cited

- Geist, Kenneth L. (1978) *Pictures will Talk: The Life and Films of Joseph L. Mankiewicz*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Hanson, Patricia King (1993) *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States: Feature Films 1931–1940*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California
- Kay, Karyn (1977) *Myrna Loy*. New York: Pyramid.
- Leff, Leonard J. & Jerold L. Simmons (1990) *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.
- Munby, Jonathan (1999) *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ray, Robert B. (1985) *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schatz, Thomas (1981) *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. New York: Random House.
- Slater, Philip (1970) *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at Breaking Point*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Thomson, David (2002) *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. London: Little, Brown.
- Walker, Michael (1993) ‘Melodramatic Narrative: Orphans of the Storm and The Searchers’, *CineAction* 31, 62–73.
- Williams, Chester ([1968] 1975) *Gable*. New York: New American Library.
- Wood, Robin (1977) ‘Ideology, Genre, Auteur’, *Film Comment*, 13, 1, 46–51. Reprinted in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen & Leo Braudy (eds) (1992) *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fourth Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 475–485.