THE DECLINE OF SENTIMENT

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American Film in the 1920s
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1 Toward a History of Taste

The real war had been fought during the decade before 1920, when almost every new writer was a recruit to the army against gentility, and when older writers like Dreiser and Robinson were being rescued from neglect and praised as leaders. In those days, Mabel Dodge’s salon, the Provincetown Playhouse and, in Chicago, the Dill Pickle Club were the rallying grounds of the rebel forces. The *Masses* (1911), *Poetry* (1912), and the *Smart Set* (of which the greatest year was 1913) and the *Little Review* (1914) were its propaganda organs. Every new book was a skirmish with the conservatives, and some were resounding victories—as notably “Jennie Gerhardt” (1911), “American’s Coming-of-Age” and “Spoon River Anthology” (1915), “Chicago Poems” (1916), “The Education of Henry Adams” (1918), “Winesburg, Ohio” and “Our America” (1919). In that same year, Mencken began publishing his collected “Prejudices.” The appearance and suppression and eventual re-issue of “Jurgen” were a major triumph. Then, in 1920, came the success of “Beyond the Horizon,” the first play by a member of the group to be produced on Broadway, and the vastly greater success of “Main Street.” By that time, the genteel critics were fighting rearguard actions to protect their line of retreat. The “young intellectuals” were mopping up territory already conquered.


In the years prior to and immediately following World War I American literary culture may be said virtually to have defined the term *culture wars*. Fueled not only by disagreements about what constituted literary merit but also by attempts at censorship, the debates were vociferous and prolonged. This study is concerned with how these perturbations within the field of letters affected Hollywood film. Of course the American cinema is often said to have altered during the 1920s. Historians frequently characterize the decade in terms of the development of the stereotype of the flapper—epitomized by the stars Clara Bow and Colleen Moore—and of a new sexual permissiveness, both reflected in films and, perhaps, reinforced by them.¹ Some historians have explained the new representations of sexuality seen in the films with reference to the emergence of a culture of consumption.² It seems to me that these by now standard interpretations of the period do not account for the nature or full extent of the cinema’s
transformation. In what follows I shall describe a decisive shift in taste that was manifested in critical discourse, in filmmaking technique, and across a broad spectrum of film genres. I will contrast the films that came to be identified as “sophisticated,” on the edge of what censors or more conservative viewers would tolerate, with others that were dismissed as sentimental or simply old-fashioned.3

The changes that occurred within the cinema were congruent with, and to some extent parasitic upon, other cultural trends. The assimilation of jazz and blues by the Tin Pan Alley composers prompted a radical reworking of the sentimental ballad.4 America’s spectacular confrontation with modern art in the Armory Show of 1913 was moderated by a more gradual diffusion of modernist and protomodernist graphic elements into advertising and interior and industrial design.5 But while the new forms of popular song and of graphic design certainly influenced filmmaking, it seems to me that the literary upheavals of the 1910s and 1920s provide the best context for explaining how taste altered. Dissident critics and journalists were articulate about what they admired and what they despised. Their writings, as well as the history of more or less successful attempts at literary and theatrical censorship, provide a vivid record of a transformation that eventually extended well beyond the literary sphere. This is not to propose that film critics and the mass audience for the movies straightforwardly adopted the positions and preferences of advanced literary intellectuals. Many aspects of elite literary taste remained quite remote from popular culture. Moreover, the cinema was distinct from literature both as an institution and as a medium. It had its own critical organs, most importantly the trade press, which figures prominently here as a guide to the industry’s evaluation of its own products. In addition, the cinema had its own narrative and stylistic traditions. Thus it absorbed and reprocessed the ramifications of the literary rebellion of the 1910s and 1920s in distinctive ways. Nonetheless, the culture wars of the early twentieth century had a decisive impact on the ways in which reviewers judged films, on the novels and stage plays chosen for adaptation by the studios, and on the narrative models available to both screenwriters and directors. Before turning to an examination of the cinema, we need therefore to explore the debates that characterized the literary institutions of the period in more detail.

THE CHANGE IN LITERARY TASTE

The literary history of the 1910s and 1920s has been analyzed and described in many ways. In terms of the history of ideas it has been characterized by
the entrance onto the American scene of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, and the consequent questioning of older assumptions about the inevitability of progress and absolute moral values. In terms of the history of institutions it has been associated with the demise of the older organs of genteel culture, the staid monthly magazines and publishing houses, and the ascent of the little magazines and new and more adventurous publishers. In terms of urban history it has been depicted as the time of the formation of the first real American communities of bohemians: the Greenwich Village community that included such disparate types as Emma Goldman, Theodore Dreiser, Floyd Dell, and Randolph Bourne; and also the Chicago community that included Dell (at an earlier point in his career), Carl Sandburg, Margaret Anderson of the *Little Review*, and famously cynical newspapermen of the likes of Ring Lardner and, later, Ben Hecht. In terms of the history of literary forms the period has been frequently celebrated as the point of a radical break with the past: the explosion of modernist experiments in poetry, the novel, and the short story in the United States and abroad.

But, of most importance here, this period may also be understood in terms of a profound questioning of what had formerly been considered the acme of literary achievement, a reevaluation of both the canon and the criteria of literary judgment. Henry May describes William Dean Howells’s birthday dinner in 1912, at which guests included President Taft among other luminaries, as the culmination of a certain kind of progressive ideology and literary culture. Howells was being vilified by 1920. And as Howells’s stock went down, Twain’s went up. Melville, more thoroughly forgotten than Twain had ever been, was rediscovered. Whitman was revivified. This reevaluation of nineteenth-century authors was accompanied by much more vitriolic debates about more recent ones. Although the 1920s are thought of as the time when modernism proper flowered—the time of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce—the change in taste that made it possible to appreciate, even to publish, these authors began much earlier, in the years prior to World War I. This change concerned writers who, from our vantage point in history, are considered more old-fashioned: the naturalists and, most notoriously, Theodore Dreiser as portrayed and promoted by H. L. Mencken. It may well be, as Henry May has argued, that European naturalism had its American advocates at the turn of the century; that Zola, Flaubert, Turgenev, and Ibsen were acceptable to the “most tolerant of the arbiters of American taste,” men like Howells and Henry James. But this acceptance was limited to a small number of critics, and, as May explains, their liberality was at least in some cases a function of “their confident assumption that American society was, and would remain, different from that of Europe. Not life, but the
Second Empire was being terribly described by Zola. There was little danger that a young American, reading Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, would start looking for a fashionable married woman willing to become his recognized mistress. If even Turgenev was a pessimist, it must be because things were sad in Russia. 

Another reason why the European naturalists did not fundamentally disturb the turn-of-the-century American literary scene is that they were not considered seriously as part of the canon. As Kermit Vanderbilt has shown, for most American literary scholars that canon was largely comprised of British authors until the 1910s. Even American letters were not regularly taught within the academy. Referring to Van Wyck Brooks’s experience at Harvard during the years 1904–07, Vanderbilt evokes an atmosphere of Anglophilia and “spiritual toryism,” noting: “Brooks remembered that the academic mood of the period was to equate Americanism with philistinism, following Matthew Arnold’s view that American life and culture were, frankly and simply, not interesting.” Vanderbilt’s history of the creation of the American canon commences with the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, published in four volumes from 1917 to 1921. Discussion about Dreiser becomes heated at just this point: Mencken’s well-known attack on the critic Stuart P. Sherman and defense of Dreiser appears in *A Book of Prefaces* in 1917. Thus, although there had been naturalist writers in America at least since Frank Norris, and defenders of naturalism among even such traditional critics as Howells, the way in which this movement upset the hierarchy of traditional tastes did not become apparent until the 1910s, amid debates about the American literary canon.

Writing in the *Smart Set* in 1912, on the occasion of the translation of some short stories by Zola, Mencken explained why, in his view, naturalism remained important: “Zola, I am aware, did not invent naturalism—and naturalism, as he defined it, is not now the fashion. But it must be obvious that his propaganda, as novelist and critic, did more than any other one thing to give naturalism direction and coherence and to break down its antithesis, the sentimental romanticism of the middle Nineteenth Century—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *David Copperfield*, *La Dame aux Camélias*—and that his influence today, even if he has few avowed disciples, is still wide and undeniable.” This is more than an assessment of Zola, for Mencken himself, as critic and propagandist, would use naturalism in precisely this way, as an attack on what he took to be the sentimental qualities of American literature.

The assault on “sentimentality” in the literary discourses of the 1910s, often conjoined with criticism of the “genteel,” presents a complicated prob-
lem in the history of taste. The negative valuation of sentimentality is as old as the eighteenth-century literature of sentiment itself.\textsuperscript{14} Further, within the context of America in the 1920s, the New Humanists Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, among the most intellectually formidable enemies of journalists such as Mencken, surely despised sentimentality in equal measure. Randolph Bourne, for example, speaks of More’s dislike of “sentimental humanitarianism,” while the idea of “uplift” and progressive political rhetoric was also repugnant to Mencken.\textsuperscript{15} And both ends of this literary spectrum would have frowned upon most popular culture as sentimental “mush for the multitude,” as Mencken dubbed it in one of his \textit{Smart Set} book reviews.\textsuperscript{16} Nonetheless, the discussion about the place of naturalism within the canon gave a new energy and vigor to the rejection of sentiment, an energy that reverberated throughout the culture and eventually affected even the assessment of popular culture made by some intellectuals in the 1920s.

Sentimentality, for the young intellectuals of the 1910s and 1920s, was often associated with a highly moralized view of literature and life. Mencken’s 1917 essay on Dreiser provides a particularly clear instance of this point of attack. Mencken compares Dreiser to Conrad, quoting from Hugh Walpole’s assessment of that author:

Conrad is of the firm and resolute conviction that life is too strong, too clever, and too remorseless for the sons of men. . . . It is as though, from some high window, looking down, he were able to watch some shore, from whose security men are forever launching little cockleshell boats upon a limitless and angry sea. . . . From his height he can follow their fortunes, their brave struggles, their fortitude to the very end. He admires their courage, the simplicity of their faith, but his irony springs from his knowledge of the inevitable end.

Mencken goes on to write:

Substitute the name of Dreiser for that of Conrad, and you will have to change scarcely a word. Perhaps one, to wit, “clever.” I suspect that Dreiser, writing so of his own creed, would be tempted to make it “stupid,” or, at all events, “unintelligible.” The struggle of man, as he sees it, is more than impotent; it is gratuitous and purposeless. There is, to his eye, no grand ingenuity, no skilful adaptation of means to end, no moral (or even dramatic) plan in the order of the universe. He can get out of it only a sense of profound and inexplicable disorder.\textsuperscript{17}

Indeed, according to Mencken, the only problem with Dreiser’s view of the unintelligibility of the universe is that he is still too wide-eyed about it—he insists too much, because the discovery remains something of a shock to his Hoosier soul.\textsuperscript{18}
In contrast to Mencken’s celebration of Dreiser’s amorality, those who rejected naturalism often did so on the grounds of an adherence to fundamental moral values. A prototypical, if rather extreme, example from 1913 is theatrical doyen William Winter’s attack on Ibsen:

It is easy to say, as was said by the despondent, hysterical, inflammatory Jeremiah, in the Bible, that the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. But what good have you done when you have made that statement? As a matter of fact it is only half true. There are in the world many kind, pure hearts and noble minds; not a day passes without its deed of simple heroism; not an hour passes without some manifestation of beautiful self-sacrifice, splendid patience, celestial fidelity to duty, and sweet manifestation of unselfish love. There must be evil to illustrate good, but in art, and emphatically in dramatic art, it must be wisely selected. The spectacle of virtue in human character and loveliness in human conduct will accomplish far more for the benefit of society than ever can be accomplished by the spectacle of imbecile propensity, vicious conduct, or any form of the aberrancy of mental disease.\(^{19}\)

If Winter’s position strikes us as sentimental, it is no doubt because the literary intellectuals of the 1920s won this particular culture war. The kind of affirmation made here in rebuttal of naturalist pessimism itself became a target, and the value of this kind of moral suasion as literary judgment came to be contested.

Mencken’s rebuttal to Sherman’s assessment of Dreiser provides a notorious example of the debunking of moral criteria in the evaluation of art:

I single out Dr. Sherman, not because his pompous syllogisms have any plausibility in fact or logic, but simply because he may well stand as archetype of the booming, indignant corrupter of criteria, the moralist turned critic. A glance at his paean to Arnold Bennett at once reveals the true gravamen of his objection to Dreiser. What offends him is not actually Dreiser’s shortcoming as an artist, but Dreiser’s shortcoming as a Christian and an American. In Bennett’s volumes of pseudo-philosophy—e.g., “The Plain Man and His Wife” and “The Feast of St. Friend”—he finds the intellectual victuals that are to his taste. Here we have a sweet commingling of virtuous conformity and complacent optimism, of sonorous platitude and easy certainty—here, in brief, we have the philosophy of the English middle classes—and here, by the same token, we have the sort of guff that the half-educated of our own country can understand.\(^{20}\)

Although Randolph Bourne had his differences with Mencken, he makes a similar argument, and with almost the same targets:
Read Mr. Brownell on standards and see with what a bewildered contempt one of the most vigorous and gentlemanly survivals from the genteel tradition regards the efforts of the would-be literary artists of today. Read Stuart P. Sherman on contemporary literature, and see with what hurt panic a young gentleman, perhaps the very last brave offshoot of the genteel tradition, regards those bold modern writers from whom his contemporaries derive. One can admire the intellectual acuteness and sound moral sense of both these critics, and yet feel how quaintly irrelevant for our purposes is an idea of the good, the true, and the beautiful, which culminates in a rapture for Thackeray (vide Mr. Brownell), or in a literary aesthetic (vide Mr. Sherman) which gives Mr. Arnold Bennett first place as an artist because of his wholesome theories of human conduct. Mr. Sherman has done us the service of showing us how very dead is the genteel tradition in our hearts, how thoroughly the sense of what is desirable and absorbing has shifted in our younger American life.21

Thus, for Mencken, and for the slightly younger generation represented by Randolph Bourne, the taste for naturalism encompassed both a rejection of morality as a key component of literary judgment and a rejection of those literary works that had the cock-eyed optimism to posit a morally comprehensible universe.

The advocates of naturalism questioned aesthetic as well as moral principles of judgment. Naturalism overturned the rules of decorum that had governed nineteenth-century literature and the nineteenth-century stage. This was, first of all, an issue of censorship: the naturalists took up subject matter considered unfit even to be mentioned in mixed company. One gets a sense of the infraction of decorum by the outrage expressed on the occasion of the first American performance of Mrs. Warren’s Profession, eleven years after the play first caused censorship controversies in England.22 The reviewer for The New York Herald wrote: “The limit of indecency’ may seem pretty strong words, but they are justified by the fact that the play is morally rotten. It makes no difference that some of the lines may have been omitted and others toned down; there was superabundance of foulness left. The whole story of the play, the atmosphere surrounding it, the incidents, the personalities of the characters are wholly immoral and degenerate. The only way successfully to expurgate Mrs. Warren’s Profession is to cut the whole play out. You cannot have a clean pig sty.”23 Revolted as the reviewer was, he quoted extensively from the speech made by the producer Arnold Daly (who also played the role of Frank) in defense of the play. Daly attacked efforts at censorship, singling out Anthony Comstock, the director of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. He
defended the play on the grounds of realism: “We have many theatres . . . devoted to plays appealing to the romanticist or child—New York has even provided a hippodrome for such. But surely there should be room in New York for at least one theatre devoted to truth, however disagreeable truth may appear.”

The terms of this debate were to be repeated throughout the decades that followed. The story of Dreiser’s difficulties with publishers, and the pressure brought to bear by the Society for the Suppression of Vice to inhibit publication of his novels even as late as 1916, are too well known to need recounting here, at least in part because Mencken conducted such a vigorous public relations campaign against censorship in general, and the censorship of Dreiser’s writings in particular.24 Joyce is not usually classified as a naturalist, although one of the many critics who objected to Ulysses considered him as such.25 But the banning of the 1920 issue of the Little Review containing the “Nausicaa” episode from Ulysses raised issues similar to those surrounding Shaw and Dreiser about the province of literature and the boundaries of good taste.26 Patrick Parrinder points out that Joyce’s representations of bodily functions offended not only literary conservatives and, in New York, watchdogs for the Society of the Suppression of Vice but also English novelists from H. G. Wells to Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West; Pound himself was eventually put off by the “cloacal” aspects of the work.27

These and other censorship battles represented more than just a debate over the limits, if any, that could legally be imposed on the novel or the stage. They also represented a decided shift in what was considered appropriate or fitting subject matter. In the United States in the 1910s the naturalists, preceded by muckraking journalists such as Lincoln Steffens (with whom they shared some affinities),28 were the first to open up the terrain of the novel: big city corruption, prostitution, life in a gold-mining camp, work in the meat stockyards, and, one of Dreiser’s specialties, the straitened horizons and ugly surroundings of the lower middle class. I imagine that this departure from the canonical subject matter of the novel imbued writers and literary intellectuals of the period with a tremendous sense of freedom. One gets this impression from Bourne:

The other day, reading “My Literary Friends and Acquaintances,” I shuddered at Howells’s glee over the impeccable social tone of Boston and Cambridge literary life. He was playful enough about it, but not too playful to conceal the enormity of his innocence. He does not see how dreadful it is to contrast Cambridge with ragged vagabonds and
unpresentable authors of other ages. To a younger generation which feels that the writer ought to be at least a spiritual vagabond, a declassed mind, this gentility of Mr. Howells and his friends has come to seem more alien than Sologub. We are acquiring an almost Stendhalian horror for those correctnesses and tacts which wield such hypnotic influence over our middle-class life. 29

Thus, what came to be stigmatized as “sentimental” or “romantic” or “genteel” was, in part, a refusal to accept subject matter that violated middle-class correctness and tact: explicit descriptions of sexual urges and encounters; an interest in the body and emphasis on the primacy of the instincts; exploration of the modern city or ugly industrial milieux that bore down upon and sometimes controlled the naturalist protagonist.

With the change in subject matter, the naturalists also abandoned the idea of a polite or refined style. Mencken spends a whole section of his 1917 essay on Dreiser documenting that author’s brutal accumulation of detail and the unfinished quality of his language. Dreiser’s awkwardness as a writer is used as a scourge against the taste for elegant and polished prose. 30

The reaction against genteel stylistic conventions may help to explain why it was Dreiser, and not Henry James, who became the canonical pre-War American writer for the literary intellectuals of the 1910s and 1920s. For present-day critics, James certainly ranks higher, and he is considered to have broken new ground as a stylist. Writing in 1966, Richard Bridgman argued that despite the obvious differences in their respective styles, Henry James and Mark Twain shared an innovative tendency to incorporate colloquial language into both dialogue and narrative prose, thereby loosening the more formal and rigid characteristics of the literary style they had inherited. 31 In a 1975 study comparing James’s style with that of popular Victorian novelists such as Susan Warner, Fanny Fern and E. D. E. N. Southworth, William Veeder concluded that James’s language, at least after the period of his apprenticeship, typically qualified the superlatives in which the best-selling novelists so frequently indulged, and that the resulting complications of his style helped to prepare the way for his essentially modern representation of characters’ mental processes. 32 But this was not at all the evaluation of James during the 1920s. Veeder refers slightingly to the “Brooks-Parrington thesis that Henry James was an ivory tower émigré aloof from the turmoil of his times.” 33 This was, however, the predominant 1920s view of James, and it encompassed a judgment not only about his life choices and the restriction of his novels to middle- and upper-class characters of the Northeast and their European counterparts but also about his
style. In his monograph on James, one of the few works on the author to be published in the period, Van Wyck Brooks acknowledged that James had good reasons for feeling alienated from the American scene, among others, “the little tales, mostly by ladies, and about and for children, romping through the ruins of the language in the monthly magazines.” For Brooks, the prose of the mature Henry James was the opposite of this, too perfect: “His sense, like Adam Verver’s, had been kept sharp, year after year, by the collation of types and signs, the comparison of fine object with fine object, of one degree of finish, of one form of the exquisite with another; and type and object and form had moulded his style. Metaphors bloomed there like tropical air-plants, throwing out branches and flowers; every sound was muted and every motion vague.” James’s prose thus registered as different from the despised models of the lady novelists, but it did not provide what the intellectuals of the 1920s considered a viable alternative. For them the models were Whitman and, above all, Twain.

One gets great insight into the transformation of literary tastes by considering the reevaluation of Twain. In part this was a function of the rediscovery of The Mysterious Stranger and the belated publication of What Is Man? which enabled critics to see his atheism and pessimism and thus assimilate his work to the world view of a Conrad or Dreiser. Predictably for Mencken, this is to Twain’s credit, while for Sherman it is the object of a gentle remonstration. But in addition to revising the biographical view of Twain as genial humorist, literary intellectuals came to a new appreciation of his language. In a 1911 Smart Set review, “Twain and Howells,” Mencken refers to the “straightforward, clangorous English of Clemens and the simpering, coquettish, overcorseted English of the later Howells.” In his 1920 study of Twain, Van Wyck Brooks bemoans the restrictions placed on Twain’s language by his contemporaries. He cites a memorandum by Twain, in the form of a dialogue with his wife, written when they were going over the manuscript of “Following the Equator”:

Page 1,020, 9th line from the top. I think some other word would be better than “stench.” You have used that pretty often.

But can’t I get it in any where? You’ve knocked it out every time.

Out it goes again. And yet “stench” is a noble, good word.

Page 1,038. I hate to have your father pictured as lashing a slave boy.

It’s out, and my father is whitewashed.

Page 1,050, 2nd line from the bottom. Change “breech-clout.” It’s a word that you love and I abominate. I would take that and “offal” out of the language.

You are steadily weakening the English tongue, Livy.
Both Mrs. Clemens and William Dean Howells come in for criticism for this bowdlerization of Twain’s language. Van Wyck Brooks concludes:

We can see from this that to Mrs. Clemens virility was just as offensive as profanity, that she had no sense of the difference between virility and profanity and vulgarity, that she had, in short, no positive taste, no independence of judgment at all. We can see also that she had no artistic ideal for her husband, that she regarded his natural liking for bold and masculine language, which was one of the outward signs of his latent greatness, merely as a literary equivalent of bad manners, as something that endangered their common prestige in the eyes of conventional public opinion. 39

Brooks’s characterization of Howells’s role in the process follows, and it accords with Mencken’s description of Twain’s friend and editor: “And in all this Mr. Howells seconded her. ‘It skirts a certain kind of fun which you can’t afford to indulge in,’ he reminds our shorn Samson in one of his letters; and again, ‘I’d have that swearing out in an instant,’ the ‘swearing’ in this case being what he himself admits is ‘so exactly the thing Huck would say’—namely, ‘they comb me all to hell.’” 40 Van Wyck Brooks’s monograph on Twain represents an angry protest against what he considered the genteel strictures on prose style: excessively polite, restricted in usage, and clearly (to poor Howells’s detriment) identified as feminine.

Quite beyond their appreciation of the beauties of Twain’s prose, the intellectuals of the 1910s and 1920s became interested in the literary appropriation of colloquial speech as a means of avoiding the constraint and formality of prior styles. For Van Wyck Brooks, Sherwood Anderson, Edmund Wilson, and others, Twain became the reference point to which they could compare other authors, such as Ring Lardner, who were experimenting in the vernacular. 41 Twain’s language was also a crucial point of departure for Hemingway, whose alter ego in Green Hills of Africa asserts that “all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn.” 42 The engagement with the vernacular is evident in H. L. Mencken’s magnum opus, The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States. 43 Mencken excoriated the professional teachers of English and grammar for keeping alive what he claimed was, for most Americans, a dead language, one which could only “serve admirably the obscurantist purposes of American pedagogy and of English parliamentary oratory and leader-writing,” as well as providing “something for literary artists of both countries to prove their skill upon by flouting it.” 44 He discoursed at length on the felicities of the vernacular:
Such a term as rubber-neck is almost a complete treatise on American psychology; it reveals the national habit of mind more clearly than any labored inquiry could ever reveal it. It has in it precisely the boldness and contempt for ordered forms that are so characteristically American, and it has too the grotesque humor of the country, and the delight in devastating opprobriums, and the acute feeling for the succinct and savory. The same qualities are in rough-house, water-wagon, near-silk, has-been, lame-duck and a thousand other such racy substantives, and in all the great stock of native verbs and adjectives.\textsuperscript{45}

Many of Edmund Wilson’s reviews from the latter half of the 1920s indicate the ongoing fascination with the vernacular. In his 1927 “Lexicon of Prohibition” Wilson lists one hundred and five words denoting drunkenness, arranged “in order of the degrees of intensity of the conditions which they represent.”\textsuperscript{46} In addition to tweaking Prohibition, one of Mencken’s favorite pastimes, Wilson echoed the compilations of idiomatic expressions found in Mencken’s \textit{The American Language}, as well as an early 1913 essay in which Mencken had listed fifty American synonyms for “whiskers.”\textsuperscript{47} In his drama reviews Wilson compared the stodgy and pretentious language of the theatrical avant-garde with the racy vernacular of popular American stage successes. In 1925 he complained about the slow and ponderous speech of the actors in the current crop of “serious plays”—Joyce’s \textit{Exiles} at the Neighborhood Playhouse, Wedekind’s \textit{Erdgeist} produced in New York as \textit{The Loves of Lulu}, and \textit{What Price Glory}—contrasting it with the swift pacing of the “musical shows” praised by Gilbert Seldes.\textsuperscript{48} Similarly, while criticizing the literary quality of George Abbott’s and Philip Dunning’s 1927 play \textit{Broadway} as “melodrama,” Wilson nonetheless praised the language, “written entirely in New York slang,” for its flavor and color. In the same review he complained that T. S. Eliot’s play “Wanna Go Home, Baby?” published in the \textit{Criterion}, lacked the linguistic resources exhibited by the authors of \textit{Broadway}: “It is written in a vernacular—part English and part American—which Mr. Eliot appears to have acquired in somewhat the same fashion as Sanskrit.”\textsuperscript{49}

The changes in literary taste and culture of the 1910s and 1920s thus included an affirmation of naturalism, a rejection of decorum in the selection of literary subject matter, sometimes to the point of courting legal censorship, and an appreciation of the rough and inventive aspects of American slang over more polished and formal rhetorical conventions. This particular rapprochement provided some literary intellectuals with the opportunity to engage seriously with popular culture and, indeed, to set many of the terms by which we have appreciated it ever since. Edmund
Wilson’s 1924 review of Gilbert Seldes’s *The 7 Lively Arts* characterized it as “a genuine contribution to America’s new orientation in the arts which was inaugurated by [Van Wyck Brooks’s] *America’s Coming of Age*, in 1915, and more violently promoted in 1917 by *A Book of Prefaces*.”

Seldes’s well-known essays on the Ziegfeld Follies, on vaudeville performers Fanny Brice and Al Jolson, on jazz, on George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, and on the films of Charlie Chaplin and Mack Sennett argued for such works and artists as constituting an American vernacular culture, one free from the restrictions of genteel good taste and from pretentiousness and sentimental bunk.

The conjoining of the taste for naturalism with the taste for slapstick is perhaps most appropriately exemplified in the case of Sennett, in addition to being lauded by Seldes, Sennett was praised and interviewed by Dreiser. In 1924 Seldes, looking back to the films Sennett made in 1914, wrote that he believed that slapstick was in danger, that in the intervening decade “the remorseless hostility of the genteel began to corrupt the purity of slapstick.” While he praised Chaplin’s work after he left Sennett, and in addition the independent work of Ben Turpin, Al St. John, Mack Swain, and Chester Conklin, he remained suspicious of Harold Lloyd, who he suspected was “a step towards gentility.” His approbation of slapstick’s vulgarity becomes clear in contrast to his evaluation of the most important polite comedians of the mid-teens:

Let us . . . look for a moment at the comedy which was always set against the slap-stick to condemn the custard-pie school of fun—the comedy of which the best practitioners were indisputably Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew. In them there was nothing offensive, except enervating dullness. They pretended to be pleasant episodes in our common life, the life of courtship and marriage; they accepted all our conventions; and they were one and all exactly the sort of thing which the junior class at high school acted when money was needed to buy a new set of erasers for Miss Struther’s course in mechanical drawing. The husband stayed out late at night or was seen kissing a stenographer; the wife had trouble with a maid or was extravagant at the best shops; occasionally arrived an ingenuity, such as the romantic attachment of the wife to the anniversaries contrasted with her husband’s negligence—I seem to recall that to cure her he brought her a gift one day in memory of Washington’s birthday. These things were little stories, not even smoking room stories; they were acted entirely in the technique of the amateur stage; they were incredibly genteel, in the milieu where “When Baby Came” is genteel; neither in matter nor in manner did they employ what the camera and the projector had to give. And, apart from the agreeable manners of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew, nothing made
them successful except the corrupt desire, on the part of the spectators, to be refined.53

In contrast with such polite one-reel films, Seldes held up the unpretentious and, he claimed, more cinematic, 1910s features of Douglas Fairbanks and Charles Ray. But, most important, he opposed the films of the Drews to those of Keystone:

It is equally bad taste, presumably, to throw custard pies and to commit adultery; but it is not bad taste to speak of these things. What is intolerable only is the pretense, and it was against pretentiousness that the slap-stick comedy had its hardest fight. It showed a man sitting down on a lighted gas stove, and it did not hesitate to disclose the underwear charred at the buttocks which were the logical consequence of the action. There was never the slightest suggestion of sexual indecency, or of moral turpitude, in the Keystones; there was a fuller and freer use of gesture—gesture with all parts of the human frame—than we are accustomed to. The laughter they evoked was broad and long; it was thoracic, abdominal. . . . The animal frankness and health of these pictures constituted the ground of their offense. And something more. For the Keystone offended the sense of security in dull and business-like lives. Few of us imagined ourselves in the frenzy of action which they set before us; none of us remained unmoved at the freedom of fancy, the wildness of imagination, the roaring, destructive, careless energy which it set loose.54

This praise of anarchic comedy is now familiar, having been elaborated in numerous subsequent scholarly works on both silent and sound film comedy.55 But it is important to note both the originality of Seldes’s argument with respect to film in 1924 and the way that his argument came out of prior literary debates about the canon. In appreciating Sennett, Seldes defied both the strictures of genteel taste regarding the subject matter fit for representation and the preference for a polite and polished style.

Dreiser’s interview with Mack Sennett was published in Photoplay in 1928, and since presumably he would not have been paid for an article that was derogatory to the movies one must be wary. Nonetheless the grounds for praise of Sennett seem both typical of Dreiser and of Seldes’s earlier defense of slapstick. Dreiser began the interview:

My admiration for Mack Sennett is temperamental and chronic. I think it dates from that long ago when he played the moony, semi-conscious farm hand, forsaken by the sweetly pretty little milkmaid for some burlesque city slicker, with oiled hair and a bushy mustache. . . . For me he is a real creative force in the cinema world—a master at interpreting the crude primary impulses of the dub, the numskull, the weakling,
the failure, clown, boor, coward, bully. . . . Positively, if any writer of this age had brought together in literary form—and in readable English—instead of upon the screen as has Sennett—the pie-throwers, soup-spillers, bomb-tossers, hot-stove-stealers, and what not else of Mr. Sennett’s grotesqueries—what a reputation! The respect! The acclaim!56

The interview turned repeatedly to ideas of genre. Sennett’s “burlesque,” described as “grotesque” by Dreiser and by Sennett himself as “rough,” is opposed to the “sentimental” or “melodramatic” tendencies of the drama. Sennett recounted the origins of his own comedies at Biograph in contradiction to the genres that he claimed were then made at the studio (conveniently forgetting the Mr. and Mrs. Jones comedies directed by Griffith): “They didn’t make comedies then, just sentimental romances and very meller melodramas and tragedies—what tragedies! These were awfully funny to me; I couldn’t take them seriously. I often thought how easy it would be, with the least bit more exaggeration—and they were exaggerated plenty as it was—to turn those old dramas into pure farce.”57 Sennett also described his own failure to make a convincing melodrama: despite his best efforts, audiences found it funny.

After discussing the famous comedians that were trained at Keystone, the two men speculated on the absence of comediennes, with Sennett citing the exceptions of Mabel Normand, Louise Fazenda, and Polly Moran.

“I was just thinking of a nice woman we had out there at the studio.” He laughed at this point. “Good actress, too. Played crazy parts that we created for her, but did it under protest sometimes because she didn’t always like it. . . . Well, we got up a part in which she had to wear a big red wig and a cauliflower ear.” And here he went off into another low chuckle that would bring anyone to laughing.

“What a shame!” I said, thinking of the hard-working, self-respecting actress.

“I know,” he replied. “It was sort of rough.” And he laughed again. “But we couldn’t let her off.” And into that line I read the very base and cornerstone of that ribald Rabelaisian gusto and gaiety that has kept a substantial part of America laughing with him all of these years. Slapstick vigor—the burlesque counterpart of sentiment—the grotesquely comic mask set over against the tragic.58

Like the dirty joke as discussed by Freud, this interchange takes as its object the unnamed actress, identified with good taste and, perhaps, vanity, who is undone by the Rabelaisian vigor of slapstick. While casual and semicomic in tone, the interchange brings together several aspects of
advanced early-twentieth-century literary taste: the misogyny (quite remarkable in *Photoplay*, which was essentially a woman’s magazine) attendant upon the simultaneous rejection of sentimentality and celebration of the vulgate.

The intellectual appreciation and approbation of slapstick by the likes of Seldes and Dreiser came at a cost. The system of taste that admitted these films excluded others. This is most apparent in the case of *The 7 Lively Arts*, in which Seldes made clear his distaste for most serious and ambitious Hollywood feature filmmaking of the 1910s, which he scornfully typified as “Elinor Glyn–Cecil De Mille–Gilbert Parker” or “le côté Puccini.” Even Griffith, after *The Birth of a Nation*, was thought to be overly dignified and genteel. Seldes failed to find value in works justly lauded today: Cecil B. DeMille’s dramas and society comedies of the late 1910s, Griffith’s *Way Down East* and *Broken Blossoms*, Maurice Tourneur’s lovely *Victory*, and Frank Borzage’s *Humoresque*. In making judgments like these, Seldes produced and helped to promote a very selective definition of popular culture, one that highlighted artists whose works could be valorized as inventive, masculine, and genuinely vulgar. This view of authentic popular culture is also reinforced, it should be noted, when Sennett, in his interview with Dreiser, dismisses Biograph films other than his own as sentimental romances, exaggerated “meller melodramas” and tragedies.

One can see why Seldes, one of the most perceptive critics of the 1920s, was predisposed to dismiss most film drama of the late 1910s and early 1920s. Many early narrative films emulated nineteenth-century models. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance, one of Mencken’s hated triumvirate of works characteristic of “the sentimental romanticism of the middle Nineteenth Century,” has had a long and important history of silent film adaptation beginning as early as 1903. After 1914, once feature filmmaking was the industry norm, the adaptation of well-known plays and novels became the mainstay of an industry seeking higher ticket prices, longer runs, and greater cultural respectability. The films of Griffith, of Tourneur, and of Cecil B. DeMille and William C. deMille, among others, can be seen as more or less self-conscious efforts to emulate the norms of the official culture and to claim an elevated status for the cinema (although it seems to me that Cecil B. DeMille’s efforts, in particular, always resulted in such bizarre and sensational works that they can hardly be characterized as “genteeel”). I have no doubt that the best dramatic features of the 1910s provided little, if any, ammunition for the advocates of naturalism and the critics of America’s congenital optimism and sentimentality. Seldes’s judgments had their own logic and necessity.
The problem is that the intellectuals of the 1920s set an agenda that is still with us. While few would now accept the claim boldly made by Seldes in “An Open Letter to the Movie Magnates” that most film drama of the 1910s represented an imposition of bogus, middle-brow taste upon a genuinely popular form, the best present-day scholarship continues to look back to the prefeature cinema, and to the preclassical cinema, when it tries to imagine film’s relationship to the rebellions and cultural perturbations that presaged modernism. Noël Burch’s important work on early cinema, for example, posits an affinity between primitive and avant-garde film. Tom Gunning and Ben Singer, while engaging a very different account of the nature and origins of modernism than Burch’s, still turn to preclassical examples, the cinema of attractions and the early crime serial, respectively, as instances of a genuine vulgate informed by the ethos of modernity and bearing the traces of modernist aesthetics. But I think it is important to begin to question the very idea of the vulgate as rough and shocking, anarchic and masculine. I would insist that the enthusiasm for the sentimental or pathetic—Uncle Tom’s Cabin if not La Dame aux Camélias—was just as profound an aspect of popular taste as that for slapstick or burlesque. The older traditions of stage melodrama and the illustrated story papers give ample evidence of this, and I hope to show that the films of the 1910s and early 1920s were no exception in this regard. If we are to understand how changes in literary taste and in the canon rebounded upon the institution of the cinema, it will not do to accept blinkered definitions of “authentic” popular culture elaborated in the 1920s, definitions that already presuppose a rejection of sentiment as bogus or middle-class. We must get an independent sense of how the canons of popular taste were configured and how they changed over time.

A HISTORY OF POPULAR TASTE

Taste, however capricious, always depends on more than taste. Any aesthetic system, however loosely held together, is inextricably bound up with a whole series of forces, religious, political, nationalist, economic, intellectual, which may appear to bear only the remotest relation to art, but which may need to be violently disrupted before any change in perception becomes possible. Dealers and artists, historians and clergymen, politicians and collectors, may all at one time or another have different motives for wanting to change or to enforce the prevailing aesthetic hierarchy. Enforcement can indeed be just as dominant an urge as change.

There are clear models for writing the history of elite taste in art. Francis Haskell examines changes in the canon of Old Master paintings in England
and France in the period after the French Revolution by considering how what he calls rediscoveries in art were affected by “the availability or otherwise to the collector or connoisseur of recognized masterpieces; the impact of contemporary art; the religious or political loyalties that may condition certain aesthetic standpoints; the effects of public and private collections; the impression made by new techniques of reproduction and language in spreading fresh beliefs about art and artists.” Haskell has the advantage of being able to study concrete artifacts that were bought and sold, exhibited or not, under conditions he can specify. The question of how to conduct a study along similar lines in the case of the cinema has not really been posed. Most film scholars have been concerned with either the history of exhibition or the history of reception; the latter has been most successfully approached via the study of specific viewing communities such as Lexington, Kentucky, or Sacramento, California. Work of this kind has some bearing on the history of taste, but it is primarily aimed at reconstructing the reactions of groups of actual spectators. What interests me above all is something more abstract: the systematic assumptions and categories that structured film preferences. According to what logic were films ranked? What was their cultural status? How were they grouped together?

This book uses two basic strategies to explore alterations in the system of taste. The first is the discursive analysis of the industry trade press, augmented to some degree by other journalistic sources. The second is the examination of the historical development of films directly influenced by literary naturalism, as well as four popular narrative types—the sophisticated comedy, the male adventure story, the seduction plot, and the romantic drama. All four types elicited discussion about what was old-fashioned and what was not. They provide a spectrum of comedic and dramatic forms. They also permit a contrast between films that were supposed to appeal to men and films that were supposed to appeal to women. By examining successive iterations of these plots, it is possible to hypothesize a sort of feedback loop between reviewing and film production and to chart alterations in both the critical judgments made by reviewers and the ways filmmakers handled precisely circumscribed sets of narrative conventions.

My use of the trade press requires some comment, since it differs from that of histories of reception, which take it as evidence of how audiences might have actually reacted to films. Here the trade press is considered as producing a discourse on films and on audiences, not as a reflection of what real spectators did with the movies they watched. Many of the critical judgments found in the trade press were framed in terms of a film’s poten-
tial profitability and appeal in the market. The nature of this market gives us some insight into the way in which the trade press constructed its idea of the audience. As Richard Maltby has insightfully pointed out, while those involved in film distribution and exhibition did not do audience research in the 1920s, they did know a great deal about theaters. By the early 1920s three major film companies, Paramount, First National and Loew’s, were vertically integrated, encompassing film production units, distribution exchanges, and theater chains. Ticket sales for affiliated theaters would have been carefully monitored by distribution personnel. All theaters were classified according to their location and the population they served and were on this basis assigned a “run” and a minimum ticket price, and thereby a place in the distribution hierarchy. Reviewers for the trade press, particularly Variety, tried to estimate where a film would fit within this hierarchy: in the major downtown picture palaces, in the subsequent-run theaters in urban neighborhoods (the “nabes” in Variety parlance), or in small towns and rural areas. The reviewers also made some estimate about how long a film would play—whether it would last only week or be “held over” on Broadway, whether a film was appropriate for a split week (three or four days) in a neighborhood theater or, even worse, only a single day in what was called a “grind” house. Some films were deemed fit only for the second half of a double bill. There was frequently an estimation of the budget spent on the film and its worth relative to this: Variety sometimes praised a cheaply made independent film on the grounds that it was a “good independent” and able to hold an audience despite its low cost. Similarly, the reviewer would make an estimation about whether a high-budget film was worth roadshowing at special prices—what was called a “$2 special.” Sometimes studios were chastised for trying to sell an ordinary big budget film as a special; at other times they were praised for refraining from trying to elevate a simple “programmer” to this status. Variety’s judgments about where a film would play, how long it would play, and at what cost were linked to judgments about its potential audience. For example, Variety reviews often assume that audiences in neighborhood theaters are working class and less educated than those in downtown theaters. In the case of Hook and Ladder No. 9, a drama about firemen, the Variety reviewer wrote (December 21, 1927: 25): “This picture will be most appreciated by unsophisticated customers. Best for the neighborhoods and small towns. In the best places it would encounter tough sledding.” However, on some occasions the neighborhood theaters were connected with female, as opposed to working-class, viewers, as in this review of Three Hours (March 9, 1927: 16):
Corinne Griffith’s last for Asher, Small & Rogers and First National hints at being one of those pictures that will roll off the laps of men but which women may like. The male population at the Strand Sunday afternoon wasn’t overly interested, but the symbolized death of a child had a few of the girls blowing their noses. . . . Neither great nor bad, and on its feminine appeal apparently a better matinee picture than as after-dinner entertainment. Which brings about the conclusion its sphere is in the neighborhoods, where the Griffith name should mean something and where mothers predominate. A woman’s picture. 71

Presumably women were associated with the neighborhood theaters because these tended to be located in suburban shopping districts where housewives ran their errands. 72 The biggest picture palaces on Broadway in New York, or in the Loop in Chicago, were presumably too remote and too expensive for all but the wealthiest women to use regularly, as a place to drop in casually after shopping.

The trade press thus provides a subtle, professional estimate of the market for a given film: as urban or rural, male or female, for the “classes” or the “masses.” 73 Trade press reviews do not comprise direct, empirical evidence about the composition of a film’s audience. Nor is a single, isolated review necessarily trustworthy in its forecast about how well an individual film will perform either in the market as a whole or in particular sectors of the market. Nonetheless, reviews provide a record of an informed reporter’s tastes and preferences. Moreover, read en bloc for a given genre or plot type, they permit us to understand how the industry assessed its audience and understood the appeal of particular sorts of films. What follows derives from an examination of two industry trade papers, Variety and, as a point of comparison, Film Daily (called Wid’s Daily until 1922). I also refer to the trade papers Moving Picture World and the Exhibitor’s Trade Herald, to the fan magazine Photoplay and the more refined Exceptional Photoplays, and to the New York Times and Life. I believe that Variety is the single best source for understanding how the industry evaluated its product. Film Daily, Moving Picture World, and the Exhibitor’s Trade Herald were largely for the exhibitor: they published advice about how to advertise and exploit the coming films, tried to anticipate audience response, and occasionally gave warnings about films to be avoided. Variety seems to have been directed to the interests of producer-distributors (although, of course, exhibitors read it). It tended to make more careful judgments about genre, to write about plot in more detailed terms, and frequently to assess a film’s technique. It also usually gave the best general account of where a film fit in the distribution hierarchy.
For the most part I cite trade papers rather than critics, as most reviews in the trade press—including, for example, those in Moving Picture World and Exhibitor’s Trade Herald—were published anonymously. Presumably many of the reviews in Wid’s Daily in the late 1910s and early 1920s were by the editor Wid Gunning, but it seems unlikely that he was responsible for all of the films discussed. Variety reviewers were identified by three- or four-letter “dog-tags.” Only some of those working in the 1920s can be named on the basis of an article by Robert J. Landry published in that paper in 1974. The decision to refer to journals rather than individuals seems appropriate given that the trade press sought impersonal evaluations of film. As Landry noted, “Nobody is hired by Variety as a critic. Instead as a reporter. Criticism is on the side, hopefully not too bad, but surely in a wide range of quality.”

While Variety reviewers, like others working for the trade press, were not encouraged to cultivate distinctive profiles, they collectively invented a highly distinctive house style. According to H. L. Mencken, the lexicographer W. J. Funk, writing in 1933, identified the Variety editor Sime Silverman as one of the ten “most fecund makers of American slang.” Walter Winchell credited the Variety reporter Jack Conway with finding palooka, belly-laugh, S.A. (sex appeal), high-hat, pushover, baloney (bunk), and felicitous verbs such as to scram and to click. In addition to providing what is, in my view, the best account of a film’s genre and market among the trade papers of the 1920s, Variety is also, indubitably, the most fun to read.

The film industry trade press provides not only evidence of how films were evaluated in relation to the distribution hierarchy of theaters but also of how they had fared or would be likely to fare under the restrictions of political censorship as administered by the states. Discussions about censorship, or films likely to cause outcry in rural communities, provide important additional clues for the historian of taste. To an even greater degree than novelists or dramatists, film producers could not ignore the strictures of the moral guardians of decency. With the backing of a producer or publisher willing to fight, authors such as Shaw, Dreiser, and Joyce were able to challenge the dictates of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. When their work was subject to regulation, there was a public debate about its censorship; by 1933 even Ulysses was granted constitutional protection by the courts. However, the Mutual decision of 1915 excluded film from the category of “speech” as defined by the First Amendment. State censor boards operated in Florida, New York, Massachusetts, Kansas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland, and in the city of Chicago a board was run by the police. The sphere of influence of these boards actually
extended beyond their geographical boundaries, since distribution was run through exchanges that served more than one city or state: thus prints altered for one state board would have been distributed to the entirety of the area served by the exchange.\textsuperscript{76}

To avoid having state censors cut their films, producers had to make concessions to what Randolph Bourne called middle-class tact and correctness. In my view, the problem censorship posed for the industry was not simply one of enforcing a particular moral agenda but also, and more importantly, of negotiating very different sets of assumptions about the subject matter deemed fit for inclusion in a film and the manner in which it could be represented: it was an issue of decorum as much as of morality. The difficulty was exacerbated by the wide range of Hollywood’s audience. Films would play in rural districts or conservative sections of large towns that would never have been exposed to the latest succès de scandale on Broadway. Writing in 1926 about the film \textit{The Far Cry}, an exhibitor in Melville, Louisiana, complained to the \textit{Moving Picture World}: “Here it was a case of ‘another lemon from the First National orchard.’ These pictures may have gone over big in the large cities, but the average country patron does not enjoy eight reels of a cigarette smoking heroine, who makes unchaperoned visits to the hero’s studio.”\textsuperscript{77} The industry was clearly aware of the disparities in taste with which it had to deal. The Formula, one of the first self-regulatory policies adopted by the film industry in 1924, states: “The members of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., in their continuing effort ‘to establish and maintain the highest possible moral and artistic standards of motion picture production’ are engaged in a special effort to prevent the prevalent type of book and play from becoming the prevalent type of picture.”\textsuperscript{78} But it was not simply a matter of ignoring current literary and dramatic productions: Broadway was a more important market than Melville, Louisiana, and it was in major metropolitan centers that the vertically integrated producer-distributors owned their theaters. Film producers thus had to steer a course between the minority whose tastes might be epitomized by the hip and irreverent \textit{Smart Set} and the vast majority who remained loyal to Norman Rockwell and the \textit{Saturday Evening Post}. The trade press estimates of the kinds of films that were likely to be censored or provoke offense provide an extensive record of the attempt to negotiate this passage and show the distinctions made between what was held to be old-fashioned or sentimental and what was deemed more up to date or too far outside of mainstream tastes.

The trade press also allows us to broach the complicated question of the relationship between gender and taste. Any analysis of the reconfiguration
of taste in the 1920s must deal with this issue, since women were held to epitomize gentility in the literary discourses of the 1910s and 1920s and are still assumed to have a preference for sentimental, sad, and stirring tales. In Variety, assumptions about gender often took the form of a comparison between a particular film and the works of one of a number of lady authors, most commonly E. D. E. N. Southworth or Laura Jean Libbey. Sometimes a film’s plot was said to have originated in True Confessions magazine or to be of that ilk. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Variety assumed a predilection for sentiment among diverse sectors of the audience. Films criticized by Variety for being soppy were said to appeal sometimes to women, sometimes to lower-class viewers, and sometimes to small-town audiences. For example, a Variety review of a low-budget independent release, Tessie (September 23, 1925: 39), complained about the preponderance of lachrymose tales in the nabes: “The important thing about Tessie is that it is the first of many features lined up by Arrow for the new season and that it is mercifully free from the pathos and bunk which have permeated so many features from the independent market. This one is a breezy and ingratiating little comedy able to hold up the feature end of a program in the intermediate and neighborhood houses.”79 There was also sometimes a confusion between the presumed sentimentality of female viewers and working-class ones. Noting that Hearts of Youth was adapted from a novel by E. D. E. N. Southworth, the Variety reviewer posited a sentimental feminine appeal for the original novel (May 20, 1921: 41): “If you ask your ‘living ancestors’ of the feminine sex about it they will tell you how they wept over the tribulations of Ishmael Worth” and a working-class audience for the film: “It is rather well done in approved 10–20–30 fashion and should appeal to the proletariat.”

Moreover, contrary to our present-day conceptions, the trade press in the 1920s was far from assuming a universal feminine taste for lachrymose tales. The industry lore on this question is far better summed up in a Variety article of 1931 headlined “Dirt Craze Due to Women” (June 16, 1931: 1 and 24): “Women love dirt. Nothing shocks ‘em. They want to know about bad women. The badder the better. . . . Women who make up the bulk of the picture audiences are also the majority readers of the tabloids, scandal sheets, flashy magazines and erotic books. It is to cater to them all the hot stuff of the present day is turned out. . . . Women are far more interested in anything with sex interest to it than are men.” The reporter’s statistics are dubious: there is no solid evidence that women made up either the bulk of motion picture audiences or the bulk of the readers of “flashy magazines and erotic books.”80 But, as I will argue in chapter 6, patterns of filmmaking
and reviewing in the 1920s help us to understand how this could have been a plausible depiction of feminine viewing preferences for someone in the industry who had been keeping up with the latest trends in filmmaking and carefully reading the trade press.

Examples such as these lead me to investigate the process by which certain plots, whether dubbed “sentimental” or “sophisticated,” came to be associated with women. In addition I shall consider the problem of gender in differential terms, contrasting what was considered “masculine” with what was considered “feminine” taste in film within the trade press discourse and the genre conventions of the 1920s. Rather than assuming that women have always liked weepies, I pose the question of how films were sorted by gender and by whom, and at what point this occurred in the history of the decline of sentiment.