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Article Summary: Hollywood's 1934 version of *A Lost Lady* disappointed Willa Cather so much that she prohibited further dramatization of her work. Only when copyrights expired after seventy-five years did producers gain access to her writings.

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Photographs / Images: Irene Rich as Marian Forrester in the 1925 production of *A Lost Lady*; 2 inset advertisements for showings of *A Lost Lady* in Red Cloud

# A Lost Lady in HOLLYWOOD

By Andrea I. Faling

The experiences of great American novelists with Hollywood movie-making have been, for the most part, unsatisfying both to the author and to the audience: F. Scott Fitzgerald, perhaps the classic case of the great writer victimized by Hollywood, voiced his dismay at the studio system through Monroe Stahr, the title character of *The Last Tycoon*. Stahr, believing that "anybody that'll accept the system and stay decently sober" has the potential to provide grist for Hollywood's mill, concludes, "We don't have good writers out here."<sup>1</sup> Ernest Hemingway, in an attempt to maintain strict control of the screen interpretation of his works, was able to impose his casting choices upon the studios. Hemingway's forcefulness led to the signing of Gary Cooper as the hero in *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and Spencer Tracy in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Nebraska author Willa Cather needed only one disastrous encounter with Hollywood to sour her on the experience. The repercussions of that episode, the 1934 production of *A Lost Lady*, are still being felt today as film producers of the 1990s eagerly await the expiration of copyright restrictions so they can finally, legally, bring film versions of Cather's works to the screen.

Yet Cather's initial experience with the film interpretation of *A Lost Lady* did not cause her to condemn movies. Al-

though her opinion of the 1925 silent production starring Irene Rich has not been recorded, Cather's agreement in 1929 to allow a talking version of the film to be made indicates that, while she may not have been enamored of the Hollywood system, she was not yet angered by what she later perceived to be a gross misinterpretation of the spirit of her work.<sup>2</sup> The 1934 production, starring Barbara Stanwyck, accomplished Cather's final disillusionment with Hollywood's ability to be faithful to her novels.

The legal history regarding publication rights of *A Lost Lady* is complex, and many lawyers have been involved in clarifying the ownership of the work for seventy-five years. *A Lost Lady* was originally published in the April, May, and June 1923 issues of *Century Magazine* and was copyrighted by the Century Company. In July 1923 the Century Company assigned the copyright in the story back to Cather. Two months later the story was published in book form by Alfred Knopf. Cather retained the copyright, but later editions of the book were published without separate copyright claims. The story appeared again in *Ainslee's* of March 1926 and, serially, in the *Golden Book* from September to December 1931.

The motion picture rights were no less confusing. Cather assigned the rights in the story to Warner Brothers. The rights were exercised and a seven-reel (silent) photoplay based on the novel was copyrighted by Warner Brothers on December 17, 1924. That copyright was removed in 1952, but since the film was nowhere to be found by then, its availability for reissue became moot.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently Cather did not feel the first film version of *A Lost Lady* had damaged the novel, because in 1929 she again agreed to do business with Warner Brothers. This time, however, with "talkies" the rage across the country, she assigned the sound and talking motion picture rights in the story to Warners "forever." A film treatment based upon the Cather novel, but titled *The Reckless Hour*, was scripted within the year. Although it was never filmed, its appearance indicates that *A Lost Lady*, with its acceptance as a silent film, was seen as a bankable property for conversion into sound.

That *The Reckless Hour* was not made left the door open for another rewrite. This script ultimately emerged as the Barbara Stanwyck version of *A Lost Lady*. The film was so detested by critics, by audiences, and especially by Cather, that the author's will expressly forbade film adaptations of her known works and of any writings that might appear after her death.

The 1925 silent version of *A Lost Lady* starred Irene Rich, an actress little-known today. In the 1920s, however, she was cast in leading roles in dozens of films, among them a series starring Will Rogers in which Rich played his wife. Although the Irene Rich vehicle was not in most senses even a close rendering of Cather's story, enough superficial similarities remained to make it recognizable as a stepchild to the published work. Cather's characters appear in the film, and Marian Forrester's initial flirtation with Frank Ellinger and later decline after Captain Forrester's death is detailed by her youthful admirer Neil

Andrea I. Faling is associate director for Library/Archives and state archivist at the Nebraska State Historical Society. She has previously published Nebraska History articles on film and sports history.

Herbert, although the sense of Marian being something more than a dissatisfied jazz age wife is lacking.<sup>4</sup>

The *New York Times* reviewer considered Marian “a dolt who does not know on which side her bread is buttered.” Although she possessed a fashionable home and an affectionate, though elderly, husband, Marian yearns for a mate closer to her own age, “and is hopelessly indiscreet in her actions the minute her eyes alight upon an unwrinkled male countenance.” Her affections are easily transferred from a reverential Neil to “a despicable lounge.” The reviewer loses all sympathy for her, and Marian’s shallowness is emphasized at the expense of Cather’s characterization.<sup>5</sup>

Although it is not known whether Cather ever saw the Irene Rich version of *A Lost Lady*, it is likely that if she did attend a screening, she would have done so in the company of her Red Cloud neighbors when the film made its Nebraska premiere on January 6, 1925. Cather happened to be vacationing in Red Cloud when the film had a three-day exhibition. Although the local newspaper did not indicate that Cather viewed any of the screenings, it does evaluate the production as being “very well acted and filmed.” While the local press commented on the resemblance of one of the actors to a former Red Cloud citizen, the reviewer opined, “The other characters are calculated in a way to represent Red Cloud people, although there has not been so great [an] effort to present their personal appearance, and the author has not attempted to make the play a faithful presentation of their personalities and characteristics.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the closest one can come to an understanding of Cather’s feelings about films is through a 1929 letter she wrote to Harvey E. Newbranch, a friend since their days together at the University of Nebraska and, in 1929, editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*. Written before “talkies” were a mainstay in motion picture theaters, Cather denigrated the artistry of films in comparison to plays, claiming “Only real people speaking



Irene Rich as Marian Forrester in the 1925 production of *A Lost Lady*.

## A Lost Lady

the lines can give us that feeling of living along with them, of participating in their existence." To Cather, moving pictures were merely pictures of plays and, as such, could not appeal to the emotions or arouse anything more than interest, curiosity, or astonishment. Cather believed

The "pity and terror" which the drama, even in its crudest form, can awaken in young people, is not to be found in the movies. Only a living human being, in some sort of rapport with us, speaking the lines, can make us forget who we are and where we are, can make us (especially children) actually live in the story that is going on before us, can make the dangers of that heroine and the desperation of that hero much more important to us, for the time much dearer to us than our own lives.<sup>7</sup>

Although Cather felt plays were far superior to films in expressing human emotion, this belief did not inhibit her desire to reap the financial rewards that might accrue from the filming of her works. In a 1932 letter to her editor, Ferris Greenslet, Cather encouraged him to seek a high price for the film rights to *The Song of the Lark*. She did, however, ask that Greenslet provide a letter assuring that the Houghton Mifflin company would not try to induce her to consider a film proposition for *My Ántonia*. Apparently, this work was too close to Cather's heart to be debased by a film treatment.<sup>8</sup>

Three years prior to her directive to Greenslet, Cather had acted upon her desire to make money from her novels via film adaptations by entering into another agreement with Warner Brothers, this time for a sound version of *A Lost Lady*. Although the 1934 production was the ultimate outcome of this contract, a 1930 screenplay by Francis Edwards Faragoh was prepared. It was never filmed, and had it been, there is little doubt that Cather's displeasure with Hollywood would have begun with its screening.


The Faragoh treatment of Cather's work went far afield from the original story. Characters not in Cather's novel were invented so the fall of Marian Forrester could be told in retrospect and as a parable to a young woman who

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*Commercial Advertiser (Red Cloud, Nebraska), October 12, 1934*

would follow in her path. At some point in the conception of the story, the screenplay was retitled *The Reckless Hour*, referring to Marian's single night of abandon with Frank Ellinger. It is unclear why this screenplay never went into production, but its shelving meant a sound version of *A Lost Lady* was still a possibility.<sup>9</sup>

The existing void was recognized by screenwriter Gene Markey, who scripted the 1934 version that would star Barbara Stanwyck. Perhaps the problem with Markey's work can best be shown by how he viewed the transformation from

novel to film when he wrote producer Hal Wallis, "I think it [*A Lost Lady*] can be made into a picture of dignity and great dramatic power. However, there is much to be done with it . . . the creation of a whole new beginning . . . and a whole new ending . . . to avoid the low-key depressing effect of the last half of the novel."<sup>10</sup> It should come as no surprise that, with a new beginning and a new ending and the spirit of Cather's work removed from the whole, the film was merely a conventional and familiar story of a woman married to a man she does not love and tormented by her desire for a man she cannot have.

Markey and his co-writer, Kathryn Scola, had a great deal more to do with the filmed story than did the novel. To most viewers of the film, it was simply coincidence that the film bore the same title as Cather's novel. William Boehnel, film critic for the *New York World-Telegram*, derided Hollywood's attempt at filming great literature when he wrote, "Most of the qualities which tore across the pages of Miss Cather's novel have flown out through the wide studio windows of Hollywood, and what we see upon the screen . . . is a rather faint, gray shadow of a beautifully stirring narrative—a tedious and blundering adaptation of a graceful novel."<sup>11</sup>

Cather's novel was a poignant story of a respected and beautiful woman transformed, through circumstances beyond her control, into a desperate and flirtatious pursuer of men. This transformation is seen through the gradually disillusioned eyes of a youthful admirer. In the film, Barbara Stanwyck's Marian Forrester, after witnessing the murder of her fiancé by a jealous husband, finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage to a kind, decent older man. Although Daniel Forrester is entirely devoted to her, for Marian it is a marriage of convenience. Marian's emotions are rekindled when a dashing aviator enters her life.<sup>12</sup>

Forrester is shattered both physically and spiritually when Marian tells him she has fallen in love with someone else

and wants a divorce. After a long period of penance in which she succumbs to drink—becoming the lost lady of the title—Marian realizes her obligation to, if not her love for, her husband and returns to him. Marian is redeemed when she proclaims her love for Forrester, stays with him through his final illness, and renounces her former lover. Her last line in the movie, in which she declares Forrester to be “the finest husband any woman ever had,” is meant to convey Marian’s maturity and understanding. That it appears contrived is because the story was Hollywood’s and not Cather’s.

Barbara Stanwyck’s career was not advanced by her portrayal of Marian. Several critics wished Greta Garbo had been allowed to tackle the role in a screenplay more in keeping with the novel’s storyline. One critic wrote kindly that Stanwyck “dresses well, suffers well, renounces nobly,” but the assessment indicates that Stanwyck’s wardrobe was as important to the plot as was the character and storyline.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the national press, one local critic was kind to the film. Jack Reel (possibly a pseudonym), writing for the *Omaha Bee-News*, praised the work of both Stanwyck and Frank Morgan, who played the noble and loyal Daniel Forrester and who, in the critic’s view, stole the show. Yet Reel would not have replaced Stanwyck with Garbo. He commended her performance as one comprising “fine accuracy and delicate shading.”<sup>14</sup> That her motivation and the underlying theme of the movie were at odds with Cather’s acclaimed novel did not influence Reel’s review. Perhaps he hadn’t read Cather’s book and therefore did not comment on the liberties taken by filmmakers in the transformation of book into film.

Cather herself must have evaluated that transformation. William Boehnel theorized that Cather must have been “quietly amazed” at what had been done to her novel.<sup>15</sup> Based on her reaction as reflected in her will, quiet amazement was probably not Cather’s

# Willa Cather's A LOST LADY

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*Commercial Advertiser* (Red Cloud, Nebraska), October 15, 1934

state of mind for long. Codicil seven stipulated that her literary properties remain unlicensed. She directed the executors of her estate to prohibit dramati-

zation of her work for stage presentation, motion pictures, radio broadcasts, television, and any other reproduction method thereafter discovered.<sup>16</sup>



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This prohibition effectively stymied any attempt by Hollywood to use the works of Willa Cather. Only because copyrights have expired in recent years have producers begun to mine the untapped treasure of Cather's writings for cinematic presentation. Starting with the *American Short Stories* PBS production of "Paul's Case"—one of Cather's earliest published works—in 1980, and continuing in the 1980s and 1990s with a series of dramatizations including *O Pioneers!*, *Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, Cather fans can expect additional depictions of her stories as the seventy-five-year protection on published material expires and her books are seen as hot properties for commercial exploitation. If the Hollywood adaptations of Cather's works had reflected some of the depth and artistry found in recent public television dramatizations, perhaps Cather fans might have been able to enjoy filmed adaptations of her works much sooner, and with Cather's consent.

### Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my colleague, Ann Billesbach, for her helpful suggestions and criticisms.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 57–58.

<sup>2</sup> According to Mildred Bennett, Cather did not view this film. Mildred Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 75. Certainly Cather would have had the opportunity to see the film during its Red Cloud premiere, as discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> The legal history of Cather's dealings with Warner Brothers can be found in the documents constituting the *A Lost Lady* collection in the Warner Brothers Archives, University of Southern California. The author wishes to thank Leith Adams for his help in gathering materials for her use.

<sup>4</sup> Although the film no longer exists, the storyline is known from the shooting script in the Warner Brothers Archives.

<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times Film Reviews*, 1925, 230.

<sup>6</sup> *Webster County Argus* (Red Cloud, Nebr.), Jan. 8, 1925.

<sup>7</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 27, 1929, Magazine Section, 9. The letter was also reprinted in the *Red Cloud Commercial Advertiser*, Oct. 28, 1929.

<sup>8</sup> Cather to Ferris Greenslet, Mar. 13, 1932, Houghton Mifflin Records, bMS Am 1925 (341), by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>9</sup> Copies of the story treatment and the screenplay of *The Reckless Hour* are part of the Warner Brothers Archives file. These copies, along with the legal documents described above and materi-

als relating to the cinematic history of *A Lost Lady*, have been deposited at the English Department, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Contact Professor Sue Rosowski for further information.

<sup>10</sup> Gene Markey to Hal Wallis, Feb. 21, 1934, Warner Brothers Archives.

<sup>11</sup> *New York World-Telegram*, Oct. 4, 1934.

<sup>12</sup> Dashing aviators were a popular character contrivance at this time. *It Happened One Night*, also released in 1934, has the female lead escaping her father's control so that she can elope with a renowned aviator.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Daily Mirror*, undated clipping from Warner Brothers Archives. The local press is noticeably silent on the quality of the 1934 film. It played in Omaha at the Brandeis Theater Oct. 5–11. No review appeared in the *Omaha World-Herald*, or in the *Nebraska State Journal* when the film played in Lincoln October 25–28. Only the *Omaha Bee-News* published a local review.

<sup>14</sup> *Omaha Bee-News*, Oct. 6, 1934. The film appeared in Red Cloud for a three-day run October 14–16, 1934. There was no local review, as such. The playbill noted, "Willa Cather wrote the book," and touted the film as "clean entertainment."

<sup>15</sup> *New York World-Telegram*, Oct. 4, 1934.

<sup>16</sup> A copy of Willa Cather's 1943 will is on file in her papers in the Library/Archives Division, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.