

## **A Night to Remember: Cultural Representations of Titanic in the 1950s**

In the early morning hours of April 15, 1912, the thought to be “unsinkable” passenger steamship, the RMS *Titanic*, sank to the depths of the Atlantic Ocean after her collision with an iceberg a few hours prior. With her, she took 1,503 of her passengers and left 700 to witness this event that historians would call one of the great “social dramas” of the twentieth century. Over the last 100 years, *Titanic* has inspired a wealth of representations across various media forms and across different national and cultural contexts. These representations have used the *Titanic*, both consciously and subconsciously, to reflect on, articulate, and justify a wide range of ideological positions on issues such as gender, family, class, and national identity. Thus, *Titanic’s* ultimate historical significance does not lie with her wreckage at the bottom of the Atlantic, but instead with the reverberations of her sinking and the cultural reaction she inspired. Though *Titanic’s* career as an ocean liner was brief, her tenure as a cultural symbol endured.

Many of the most known cultural representations of the Titanic have been films. Over the last century, a number of films have told and retold the story of Titanic, not in deference to the facts of the event but in the service of the needs of the people telling the story. An example of the most extreme case being the Nazi’s use of the ship as a subject for a 1943 propaganda film. But, the historical narrative of Titanic is also ripe for dramatic adaptation. The basic skeleton of the plot is recognizable and intriguing to audiences but the unknown individual stories of the passengers allows for the opportunity to craft compelling tales of human interest

and drama. James Cameron's 1997 eponymous blockbuster smash was not the first Hollywood production to use the ill-fated ocean liner as the background and context for a story of human melodrama.

Hollywood first attempted a Titanic film in 1938 with Alfred Hitchcock attached to direct. The project failed to materialize due to lack of funding, competition from Howard Hughes, and also Hitchcock's potential realization of the difficulty in injecting suspense into a story where his audience already knew the ending. Interest in the project dwindled during WWII, but in 1952, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox finally gave the project a green light. The film would star Barbara Stanwyck and Clifton Webb and would be directed by Jean Negulesco, best known for his helming of melodramas and romantic comedies such as *How To Marry a Millionaire*. In the 1950s, the Cold War had set in and the social fabric of America had begun to fray as women of all ages, races, and classes flooded into the workplace, the family structure began to change, and previously secure gender roles began to alter with a struggle over the meanings of femininity and masculinity. A family-centered culture rooted in traditional gender roles was promoted as a bulwark against the spread of communism and America's social stability. Both cinema and television became powerful forums for these concerns with both producing melodramas focusing around the nuclear family, gender-identity formation and the importance of middle-class American values during the dawn of the Cold War. In these melodramas, the family is the central problem and its preservation the goal. While the familial institution and its preservation were the melodrama's main focus, the genre also concerned itself with topics surrounding the family. Various approaches to family

were offered and societal concerns were worked into the fabric of the film through the topics explicitly discussed and also through the topics avoided. Negulesco's film would use the *Titanic* as both the setting and the catalyst for the contemporary family melodrama and its embedded topical issues of gender and national ideology. It avoids the issue of class conflict almost altogether, as at the time America was trying to promote the notion of 'classlessness' and a consumerist democracy.

To compete with television melodramas, film studios sought to capitalize on the sensationalism or topicality of 1950s controversy, but with various twists in order to entice a paying audience. *Titanic*, scripted and produced by Charles Brackett, a two-time Oscar winner for *The Lost Weekend* and *Sunset Boulevard* and the president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at the time, would employ one of these tactics for his treatment of *Titanic*: the presentation of contemporary issues in the thinly disguised setting of a historical period. The film fit into the proven Hollywood pattern of family melodrama featuring bankable stars and the promise of spectacle. According to the trailer, the *Titanic* served as an "immense canvas on which is thrown the gripping story of young love, of cowardice and heroism, of faithfulness and adultery, of sinners and saints." The film would be "TITANIC IN EMOTION! TITANIC IN SPECTACLE! TITANIC IN CLIMAX! TITANIC IN CAST!"

The film centers around the story of wealthy socialites Richard and Julia Sturges, played by Clifton Webb and Barbara Stanwyck, and their two children, Annette and Norman. For several years they have been living a decadent, "rootless," superficial life traveling around Europe, "being in the proper places at the proper

time,” but now Julia wants to return to America, specifically Michigan, with her children to “rescue” them from their rootless existence and pursue a more virtuous, wholesome, and down-to-earth lifestyle for her family in the heartland of America. They board the *Titanic* under the guise of attending a family reunion, but Richard figures out Julia’s plan and gains admittance on the ship by bribing a third-class immigrant family for their father’s ticket. Richard surprises Julia at dinner and declares his intention to take his children back to Europe with him. Against this background, the film will portray anxieties about family life embedded in broader anxieties of gender and class that will be resolved by the assertion of middle-class American family propriety.

Richard and Julia’s initial confrontation at dinner outlines the conflicting worlds and values that they are to represent, initially.

#### Dinner Clip (2:20)

Richard is portrayed as superficial, Europeanized, and effeminate, while Julia is portrayed as a wholesome, American girl who lost her way but now has seen the error of her ways and the life she and her family have been leading. Julia is ‘rescuing’ her children from the ‘rootless, purposeless, and superficial’ lives they have been living as ‘hotel children’ in Europe. She is going to take them home to Michigan or what Richard views as the “wilderness” – the antithesis of the European high society lifestyle that he finds superior. Richard’s world is presented as artificial and corruptive and is contrasted against the wholesome and down-to-earth reality

of small-town America. Here the conflict of national identity is explicitly raised. The materialistic, pretentious culture of high society Europe is contrasted against the wholesome and productive values of middle-class America.

Embedded within this conflict of national identity are issues of gender and its stereotypes. This conversation confirms certain gender norms and expectations with both parents wanting Annette to marry a suitable man and Norman to become one. Julia and Richard just differ on the means to these ends. But simultaneously, these gender stereotypes are subverted by the behavior and appearance of Richard and Julia. Julia is portrayed as the dominant partner throughout most of the film. She is persistent in her goal to bring her children to America and takes charge. Her 'masculinity' is emphasized by the suit-like nature of her dress. Richard's effeminacy is highlighted by the boutonniere that Annette has 'never seen her father without.' This flower symbolizes both Richard's feminine qualities and his socialite lifestyle. Also, Clifton Webb's reputation for playing effeminate and sexually ambiguous characters further emphasizes Richard's effeminacy. His last quip to Julia, "Twenty years ago I made the pardonable mistake of thinking I could civilize a girl who bought her hats out of a Sears Roebuck catalog" detaches Richard from the intended audience, while also identifying Julia with 'average US women' prompting the audience to sympathize with Julia's maternal aspirations and desire to be a proper mother.

Until the Titanic starts to sink, the film continues to fill in this outline of contrasting ideologies of gender and national identity within the central family drama between Julia and Richard. Julia reveals to Richard that Norman is not his

son. This type of controversial theme was not uncommon in Hollywood melodramas of the time as film studios were seeking to cover issues television could not, but the interpretation of Julia's indiscretion is compelling. Julia explains that "it happened after one of those endless rows and private humiliations" where she had again worn the wrong dress to a party and a simple compliment from Richard was all she needed. Interestingly, Julia is not vilified for her indiscretion. Instead, Richard's ineptitude as a husband and his preoccupation with appearance and superficiality are blamed. Richard begins to see the error of his ways, telling Julia, "You are asking me to do something which involves character. And, as you have pointed out, I'm not a man of character."

Up until the wreck, the social institutions have been askew. Richard's failure as a husband and a proper man has caused this social upheaval of his family and has forced his wife, Julia, to take charge. He has 'rocked the boat' and caused this marital and family crisis. When disaster strikes, Richard is able to ultimately prove his character and worth as a man, as a husband, and as an American. As Titanic is brought to her downfall, Richard is able to right his own course and restore the roles to their traditional setting. As he learns of both his and Titanic's doomed fate, he quickly and stoically assures that both his family and the third-class immigrant family are safely in the lifeboats and that the rule of 'women and children first' is adhered to throughout the ship. As Richard and Julia say their final farewell, Julia tearfully repents her previous assessment of her husband, "I beg your pardon sir. I put you down as a useless man. Somebody to lead a cotillion." Richard tells a distraught Julia, "That summer when I asked you to marry me, I pledged my eternal

devotion. I would consider it a great favor, Julia if you would accept a restatement of that pledge.” With this, they rekindle their romance and reconcile their family.

Norman, in a last-second chivalric effort, gives up his seat in the lifeboat and reunites with his father. They embrace and Richard proudly declares his love for Norman and declares him his son. The ship goes down as they are shown arm-in-arm singing the hymn, “Nearer, My God to Thee.”

The sinking of the Titanic acts as the catalyst for the re-establishment of traditional gender roles and the superiority of American family values. When disaster hits, the reversed gender roles of Richard and Julia are put back in their rightful place: it is time for women to cry and men to die. A sub-plot involving a romance between Annette and Giff (played by Robert Wagner), a tennis player whose sweater “stands for Purdue not for Princeton” also emphasizes the superiority and desirability of the American Way. By contrasting America against superficial and affected Europe, the definition and values of post-war America are more easily defined. If Europe is aristocratic and rootless, then America is egalitarian and purposeful. The Sturges have returned home both geographically and spiritually. During the ship’s final moments, the British Captain, EJ Smith, gazes helplessly at the old, tattered Blue Ensign that waves in the wind atop the floundering ship. The American way has survived and archaic, effete Europe has sunk.

Though the film emphasizes conservative views such as the sanctity of the nuclear family, the superiority of American middle-class values, and traditional gender roles, it is not that simple. In a study of 1950s Hollywood melodramas, Jackie

Byars writes that although these mainstream films “tended to reinforce dominant notions of family and gender, the genre also enables a presentation of alternatives.” These alternative views can be found in *Titanic* upon closer viewing. In portraying traditional gender roles as needing restoration, the film also exposes that they are a social construction, and thus fictitious. The emphasis on the relationship between dress and gender shows gender as a performance rather than something innate. Though Julia reverts back to her traditional gender role, she is successful in her goal of returning to America and rescuing Annette from the corrupting power of Europe. She is not vilified or punished for her adultery or masculine behavior; Richard is the one who ends up paying the ultimate price of his life for his lapse in character.

Released on the 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the wreck, *Titanic* would be a decent box office success for Twentieth Century Fox and Charles Brackett would pick up his third Oscar for penning the screenplay. Though the film is not the most historically accurate or critically renowned *Titanic* adaptation, it is valuable to cultural historians as it provides a useful insight into the complex ideological struggles taking place in post-war America. The film also stirred an interest in *Titanic* for a new generation. Two years later, Walter Lord would publish his best-selling seminal account of the wreck, *A Night To Remember*. In 1958, the British would add their own entry to the *Titanic* film catalog with their adaptation of Lord’s book that would tell a very different *Titanic* story. Just as Negulesco’s *Titanic* was a *Titanic* for post-war America, *A Night To Remember* would be a *Titanic* for a post-war Britain. Again, *Titanic* became a vessel through which a different story could be told and certain

views articulated. For the 1950s and decades onward, the Titanic has indeed been  
'A Night To Remember.'