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James Cagney's Portrayal of Gangsters in Films

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By

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The gangster genre has been around for almost a century. It was most popular during the 1930s. Perhaps the actor most famous for playing gangsters was James Cagney. He set a standard that others would later follow and try to imitate. Most of the gangster films made were based on real people or ripped from the headlines. Whatever the angle, each shared one theme in common: crime doesn't pay. "...how well the film [*The Public Enemy*] reflects its own disclaimer that it sought to identify an important social problem and demonstrate that crime does not pay."<sup>1</sup>

James Cagney was born in 1899 in New York City. Cagney's family was Irish Catholic and practiced faithfully. His mother was the one that kept the family together. His father was an alcoholic and gambler. Cagney had three brothers (Harry, Eddie, and Bill) and a sister (Jeanne).<sup>2</sup> Not all of James' siblings survived; two (Gracie and Robert) died within a year of being born. "My childhood was surrounded by trouble, illness, and my dad's alcoholism, but as I said, we just didn't have time to be impressed by all those misfortunes."<sup>3</sup> Even with all these hardships, the family held on to a close relationship. All did their part to put food on the table and defend one another (street fights were quite common). Each had a sense of humor, which they carried with them throughout life.

As a child living in New York City, James interacted with all types of people. Later, when he would begin his acting career, Cagney would base characters and their mannerisms off of the people he knew growing up. "The polyglot nature of my neighborhood is the basic reason why all my life I've had such an appreciation and

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Briley, "Reel History: U.S. History, 1932-1972, as Viewed through the Lens of Hollywood," *The History Teacher* 23, no.3 (May, 1990), 220.

<sup>2</sup> James Cagney, *Cagney by Cagney* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

understanding of dialects.”<sup>4</sup>

Cagney couldn't recall a time when he wasn't working. At fourteen, he held a job at the *New York Sun* as an office boy. He would later work at the New York Library with his two other brothers. At this time, James also worked a few night jobs to earn some extra money. Each paycheck went to his mother. “I was carrying a load that seemed to weigh more than I did, and my reward once a week was a packet containing five bucks, which I handed to my mother unopened.”<sup>5</sup> By 1918, Cagney was enrolled in the Student Army Training Corps at Columbia University. “So at one fell swoop I became art student, soldier, and college boy.”<sup>6</sup> His father would later die that year from the flu epidemic.

Many of the guys Cagney knew growing up eventually ended up in jail. James was often asked why he and his brothers did not share the same fate. He explained that they had a mother to answer to. She never let them get out of line. “We loved her profoundly, and our driving force was to do what she wanted because we knew how much it meant to her.”<sup>7</sup>

Cagney began to learn to dance as a chorus girl. The production was *Every Sailor* and it was a female impersonation act. One of the men was leaving the show and Cagney took his place. Thus began his career in vaudeville. He didn't know much at first, but would learn by watching others perform. He then returned to a “regular” job after the play was closed. Cagney hated returning to the office and soon began to perform on the stage again. His next performance was in *Pitter Patter*. “I went from chorus boy to

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 25.

specialty dancer – and in the show I met the great girl who became my wife.”<sup>8</sup> James would continue in vaudeville for many years. He would have jobs on and off as each show closed and a new one opened. Times were trying in his early career, but he always had his “Bill” (wife). “It is vital for me to say that outside my Bill it is vaudeville that has had the greatest single effect on my life, both as individual and performer.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1929, Cagney was cast in *Maggie the Magnificent* under the direction of George Kelly. James was to play across Joan Blondell. A few years later, they would be working together in *The Public Enemy*. The play only lasted a few weeks, especially since it was released during the stock market crash. Soon after, Cagney was working in *Penny Arcade* with Joan Blondell. The play only lasted a few weeks, but Al Jolson saw it and liked the play and actors. “This was the beginning of Hollywood for me, and for Joan too, because on Jolson’s recommendation we were given an offer from Warner Brothers to re-create our original roles. I came out on a three-week guarantee and I stayed, to my absolute amazement, for thirty-one years.”<sup>10</sup>

In January 1920, the eighteenth amendment was passed and the manufacturing and selling of alcohol was prohibited. Soon after, there began a rise in crime and the creation of organized crime. Speakeasies sprung up all over the country. Instead of cowboys fighting Indians, the new game was gangsters battling cops. Once Prohibition was passed, Americans started looking for new heroes; gangsters became their hope. They were the ones providing illegal booze for the masses. World War I was over and men came back to find their jobs were replaced by those who did not serve in the Army. Some would turn to crime, such as bootlegging. “The national disillusionment stemming

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

from America's participation in the War and the despair brought on by the ever deepening Depression helped place *The Public Enemy* among the most popular films of the 1930's."<sup>11</sup> Even if the authorities were ignoring what was going on around them, everyone knew it was happening. It is no wonder that films of the 1930s started to focus stories around these individuals (gangsters). These films had two elements that people wanted to see: sex appeal and violence.

Prohibition had been in effect for almost a decade when Hollywood began creating gangster films. Most movies were either based off of famous criminals such as Al Capone or on events ripped from the headlines. "The archetypical gangster films, *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* were based on the headlines, the news events of their day."<sup>12</sup> This would later lead to the decline in the genre's popularity. Gangsters were becoming more secretive with their activities and there was less to read about them in the papers. Also, America was headed into World War II and films started to focus on preparedness and the working man. "The stories in the headlines were no longer gangster stories and social problem at home were giving way to a new involvement in world affairs."<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, many studios would try their hand at gangster films. Warner Brothers had decided to focus their efforts on this genre because it seemed to be popular and it cost little to make. "This is not to say that Warner Brothers was the only studio to make gangster films, but it was the studio which achieved the greatest success in the genre. Warner Brothers created more of the significant films and classic characters

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Louis Karpf, *The gangster film: Emergence, variation, and decay of a genre, 1930-1940* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

than its competitors and worked in the genre the longest.”<sup>14</sup> Within a few weeks, a new film would be produced. Studios didn’t have to shoot on location which saved time and money. Almost every storyline was the same: good versus evil and evil always lost. Also, the dialogue did not call for a dramatic delivery by an actor. All of these elements were the reason so many gangster films were produced.

In 1931, Cagney was cast as Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy*. This would be the role that made him a star, but in doing so, would also typecast him as a gangster for most of his career. The film begins with a foreword, “It is the ambition of the authors of ‘*The Public Enemy*’ to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal. While the story of ‘*The Public Enemy*’ is essentially a true story, all names and characters appearing herein, are purely fictional.”<sup>15</sup>

This statement is meant to tell the audience that the studio is merely showing a story that affects society and not to portray a gangster as the hero. The story starts in Chicago during 1909, when Tom (Cagney) and his friend, Matt (Edward Woods), are kids. The shots of the neighborhood provide background information as to the environment that these boys live in. Alcohol is extremely important, as the audience witnesses the boys bringing home a bucket of beer for their fathers from the local brewery. “Pampered by an indulgent mother and beaten by a harsh father, he quickly adopts a through disrespect for authority.”<sup>16</sup>

Now it is 1915 and Tom and Matt have taken up petty larceny. They decide to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>15</sup> *The Public Enemy*. Produced by Warner Brothers and directed by William A. Wellman. 84 min., 1931. DVD.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and dead ends: The American gangster/crime film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977), 46.

join “Putty Nose” (small-time gang leader) and break into a fur coat company. The heist goes wrong and one of Tom’s friends is killed. In attempting to escape, Tom kills a police officer. When they go to Putty for help, he leaves them out to dry. Eventually, Putty pays for this incident. At Larry’s (fur robber) funeral, one woman tells the grieving mother that, “He got in bad company.”<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in the other room, the men are speaking about how awful Larry was. This scene depicts what society usually thinks. Men or boys aren’t bad individuals until they encounter the wrong element. Other crooked individuals bring them into the criminal world. They are not held responsible for their own actions, even though they should be.

America is now at war with Germany and Tom’s brother, Mike (Donald Cook), has decided to enlist in the Army. He asks Tom to stay at home more and look after their mother. Throughout the story, both brothers are at each others throats and Mike seems to take the high road. He attends night school, works an “honest” job, and has enlisted in the Army. Each time Mike denounces Tom’s work, Tom responds and shows that Mike isn’t as moral as he pretends to be. Tom accuses him of stealing from the street car company he works at and that he and Mike are one in the same.

A particularly interesting scene is when the people are getting ready for Prohibition to go into effect. Everyone is frantic and running into liquor stores to purchase the remaining booze. A husband and wife are seen together: she is carrying their infant, while he is pushing the carriage filled with liquor bottles. Soon after, Mike returns from the war, Tom and Matt have made it big stealing and selling liquor. To welcome him home, Tom puts a keg on the table. After a few minutes staring at it, Mike

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<sup>17</sup> *The Public Enemy*. Produced by Warner Brothers and directed by William A. Wellman. 84 min., 1931. DVD.

can take no more. He says:

You think I'd care if it was just beer in that keg? I know what's in it! I know what you've been doing all this time...where you got the clothes and those new cars – you've been telling Ma that you've gone into politics...that you're on the city payroll! I know everything! YOU MURDERERS! It's not beer in that keg! It's beer and blood. Blood of men!<sup>18</sup>

Tom responds:

You ain't changed a bit. And say...you ain't so good yourself. You killed...and you liked it! You didn't get all those medals for holding hands with them Germans.<sup>19</sup>

The treatment of women is also an important aspect of this film. Cagney treats them as objects and merely there for pleasure. His first girl, Kitty (Mae Clark), soon displeases him. Perhaps the most famous scene of the film is when Tom hits Kitty in the face with a grapefruit. “This bit of business derived from a real incident in Chicago when a hoodlum named Hymie Weiss was listening to his girl friend endlessly yakking away at breakfast one morning. He didn't like it, so he took an omelet she had just prepared and shoved it in her face.”<sup>20</sup> He is in charge and no one can control him, at least not for now.

Later on, Matt and his girl (Joan Blondell) announce their engagement and they go out to celebrate. At the club, Tom notices Putty Nose and decides to pay him a visit. Matt and Tom follow Putty Nose home. Putty Nose begs them not to kill him, but to no avail. As he is playing the piano, Tom shoots him. The shot never shows the murder taking place; only Matt looking on with disgust as the audience hears a few gunshots and a body hit the piano keys. “His death, then, is proper on grounds of vileness, and for the violation of both human and gangland codes. But Tom's motive is not primarily one of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Cagney, *Cagney by Cagney*, 45.



social, human, or professional justice.”<sup>21</sup>

Soon after, Tom takes up with Jean Harlow’s character, Gwen. She sees that she can control him and pushes him to the brink. It is only when he plans on leaving her because he cannot understand her that she gives in to him. At that precise moment, Tom receives news that Nails Nathan, his business partner has been killed by a horse. Tom leaves Gwen to take care of the matter and their romance soon ends.

Once Nathan is gone, the mob breaks up into little groups, all vying for the top position. Eventually, Paddy’s (Tom’s friend) bar is bombed and Tom and some others are forced into hiding. While hiding, Tom encounters a third woman, a prostitute, who takes advantage of him. On realizing what had happened, Tom slaps her in the face. He decides to leave the apartment and Matt follows him. What they don’t know is a rival gang is across the street waiting to kill them. Matt is gunned down and Tom decides to exact revenge.

It’s raining heavily and the audience can see Tom standing in the shadows as a car pulls up. Men get out of the car and go into a bar. Tom crosses the street and enters. Suddenly, the audience hears a gun open fire. Tom exits the bar and falls into the gutter, muttering, “Aw, I ain’t so tough.”<sup>22</sup>

Tom is now in the hospital and can barely move. His family enters and he apologizes to them. This scene tries to show the audience that criminals hurt their families and later regret what they have done. Later on at home, his mother begins to fix his room preparing for Tom’s return. Meanwhile, Tom has been kidnapped by a rival gang. Paddy speaks to Tom’s brother and tells Mike that he informed the other gangs he

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<sup>21</sup> Shadoian, *Dreams and dead ends: The American gangster/crime film*, 50-51.

<sup>22</sup> *The Public Enemy*. Produced by Warner Brothers and directed by William A. Wellman. 84 min., 1931. DVD.

would retire from the business if they would return Tom. A phone rings and Mike answers it. He believes it is one of Paddy's men. Instead, it was a rival gang member. Mike goes to answer the door and Tom falls face forward to the ground, dead. "It is a shocking image, suggesting the true end of criminals like Tom – the crowning indignity – but the dull thud of his drop has a brutal, chordal finality, and his mummified appearance the ghastly grandiloquence of myth."<sup>23</sup> The film ends with a statement that tries to provide a warning to the audience, "The **end** of Tom Powers is the end of every hoodlum. 'The *Public Enemy*' is not a man, nor is it a character – it is a problem that sooner or later we, the public, must solve."<sup>24</sup>

Cagney would appear in a number of films during this decade. The next Cagney gangster movie that had an impact on the genre was *Angels with Dirty Faces* in 1938. This film focused on the influence a criminal has over juveniles. Again the movie would start much like that of *The Public Enemy* with shots showing the city (New York) the characters lived in. "*Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) is a study of a great city's slums and specifically of how these environs affect the lives of boys growing up in such an unattractive and vice-ridden atmosphere."<sup>25</sup>

Cagney portrays Rocky Sullivan and Pat O'Brien as Father Connolly, his childhood friend. While stealing some pens, the two boys are chased by the authorities. Cagney is caught and O'Brien escapes. This is a deciding moment in the film; Cagney goes to a reformatory and O'Brien becomes a priest. "Newspaper advertising for *Angels*

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<sup>23</sup> Shadoian, *Dreams and dead ends: The American gangster/crime film*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> *The Public Enemy*. Produced by Warner Brothers and directed by William A. Wellman. 84 min., 1931. DVD.

<sup>25</sup> Karpf, *The gangster film: Emergence, variation, and decay of a genre, 1930-1940*, 125.

*with Dirty Faces* carried a famous blurb, ‘Last one over the fence lands in the chair’.”<sup>26</sup>

As the years go by, Rocky is in and out of prison. He eventually returns to his old neighborhood and has his wallet stolen by the Deadend Kids. Rocky realizes what has happened and goes to his old hideout (Deadend Boys place now). He gets his wallet back and shows the boys the two initials on the wall: R.S. They realize who he is and follow his every step from then on.

Father Connolly soon encounters Rocky at church. He asks for Rocky’s help in getting the boys involved in basketball so they don’t turn to a life on crime. Rocky agrees and gets the boys to play. However, while playing the game, the Deadend Kids resort to cheating. Rocky puts an end to it by hitting them each time they try to cheat. Eventually, they play a fair game.

While in prison, Rocky has Frazier (Humphrey Bogart), his lawyer, look after his finances. When he returns to collect his money, Frazier has turned on him. In order to get his money back, Rocky kidnaps Frazier and takes incriminating documents to blackmail him. In one scene, Frazier sends men out to kill Rocky. Rocky is clever enough to figure out what is happening and has one of the thugs go into the phone booth. When the hit men enter to kill him, they instead mistakenly kill one of their own (guy in phone booth). This is quite common in gangster films. The lead character is always trying to outsmart his opponents and usually succeeds until the end of the picture. “Rocky is the type of character who gracefully eludes all traps and with great humor inflicts appropriate retribution in all quarters.”<sup>27</sup>

In the end, Father Connolly asks Rocky to stop his life of crime so that the boys

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 127.

will not idolize what he does. Rocky refuses and Father Connolly wages a crusade against crime. During one of the final scenes, Rocky goes to Frazier to stop him from killing the priest. When he realizes Frazier will not do what he asked, Rocky kills him. The police pursue him and he is cornered inside a building. The police use tear gas to bring him out, but he won't budge. Father Connolly goes in to talk to him. Rocky then uses the Father as a hostage, but is caught.

Most certainly the scene that is most remembered in *Angels with Dirty Faces* is Rocky's walk to the chair. Before he is put to death, Father Connolly comes to him and asks Rocky for a favor. He wants Rocky to turn "yellow". The kids will look up to him if he goes out swinging. Rocky will have no part of it. Father Connolly says, "That's what I want you to do. I want you to let them down. You see, you've been a hero to these kids and hundreds of other, all through your life. Now you're gonna be a glorified hero in death, and I want to prevent that, Rocky. They've gotta despise your memory. They've gotta be ashamed of you."<sup>28</sup>

Rocky responds, "You're askin' me to pull an act, turn yellow so those kids will think I'm no good? You're asking me to throw away the only thing I got left that they can't take away. You want me to give those newspapers a chance to say, "Another rat turned yellow."<sup>29</sup>

Rocky makes his way down the hall to the chair. Father Connolly begs him one more time, but Rocky will not concede. As the priest begins to pray, the camera focuses on a silhouette of Rocky and two guards. Suddenly, the audience hears screams, crying, and a man pleading for his life. Rocky had turned "yellow". "Cagney's treatment of the

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<sup>28</sup> *Angels with Dirty Faces*. Produced by Warner Brothers and directed by Michael Curtiz. 78 min., 1938. DVD.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

death scene is a frightening episode. Done in shadows and silhouette, his agonizing screams or mercy, the sound of a man crying, shows a depth to Cagney's gangster characterization that he was rarely permitted to show – an unsure man eaten with fear.”<sup>30</sup> When Father Connolly meets the boys they ask if what the papers said was true. He tells them that it was and they all leave to play basketball in the gym.

Arguments still occur over whether or not he truly was scared or if he did it for the kids. Cagney stated in his autobiography that, “I think looking at the film it is virtually impossible to say which course Rocky took – which is just the way I wanted it. I played it with deliberate ambiguity so that the spectator can take his choice. It seems to me it works out fine in either case. You have to decide.”<sup>31</sup>

Within a year, Cagney and Bogart were starring in *The Roaring Twenties* (1939). This film took a different approach than previous movies. By this time, the subject of gangsters was losing interest with the audience. *The Roaring Twenties* decided to make this film set in the recent, but distanced, past.<sup>32</sup> It used headlines and newsreels to inform the audience what was occurring during that time. After a certain period of time elapsed, more headlines would appear. The story begins with a foreword:

It may come to pass that, at some distant date, we will be confronted with another period similar to the one depicted in this photoplay. If that happens, I pray that the events, as dramatized here, will be remembered. In this film, the characters are composites of people I knew, and the situations are those that actually occurred. Bitter or sweet, most memories become precious as the years move on. This film is a memory – and I am grateful for it.<sup>33</sup>

Three men dive into the same shell-hole and they end up meeting each other in

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<sup>30</sup> Karpf, *The gangster film: Emergence, variation, and decay of a genre, 1930-1940*, 128.

<sup>31</sup> Cagney, *Cagney by Cagney*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Sklar, *City boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 108.

<sup>33</sup> *The Roaring Twenties*. Produced by Warner Brothers and directed by Raoul Walsh. 106 min., 1939. DVD.

the future yet again. Eddie (Cagney), George (Bogart), and Lloyd (Jeffery Lynn), each take a different path. From the start, the audience realizes that Bogart has no heart, Lynn is sympathetic, and Cagney tells it as it is. Lynn cannot kill the enemy because he is a fifteen year old boy. Lynn is shocked when Bogart shoots the boy. Bogart replies, “He won’t be sixteen.”<sup>34</sup>

When the war has ended, they return home. Lloyd is practicing law and Eddie finds that he no longer has his old job. Many of the men that come back realize that they are unemployed. Eddie decides to visit a girl, Jean (Priscilla Lane) who was writing to him during the war. When he realizes that she is still in high school, he tells her maybe in a couple of years. In order to make some money, Eddie’s buddy, Danny (Frank McHugh), offers to let Eddie use his taxi when he’s not driving.

Soon after a customer asks Cagney to deliver a package to Panama Smith in the Henderson Club. When he does, he is arrested by undercover officers. This is where Eddie meets up with Lloyd (lawyer) again. He is found guilty and can either pay the fine or go to jail. Since he has no money he lands in prison. Panama is found innocent and she tells him she’ll help him some day. After a few days in jail, Panama bails out Eddie. They then become partners.

One night Eddie goes to a theatre to pick up money owed to him and he notices Jean on stage. He meets up with her after the show and takes her to a carnival. Then they take the train back to her house. He asks her how work is and she says she’ll be out of work in a week. In the next scene Eddie gets Jean a job at a club. Here the audience notices that Panama is in love with Eddie, but he is only interested in Jean. By now, Eddie and Danny are making their own liquor. With the profits they are buying taxis as a

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

front to their illegal activity. Lloyd is also keeping Eddie's books. When Eddie asks a man named Nick for better liquor and he refuses, Eddie decides to steal his stock. This just happens to be on a boat with George as the captain. Eddie and George decide to become partners.

Meanwhile, behind Eddie's back, Lloyd and Jean are seeing each other. George notices it and tries to tell Eddie that he hasn't got a chance. Eddie won't listen. During one of Jean's performances, Nick comes by to talk to Eddie. A fight breaks out and Lloyd tells George and Eddie that he wants out. George threatens Lloyd and tells him that he will be killed if he speaks.

In order to make peace with other gangs, Eddie holds a meeting. Nick doesn't show up, but George says he sent Danny to get him. When Jean goes in to tell Eddie that she loves Lloyd, a car speeds by and drops off Danny's dead body. There's a note attached which reads: "Let me alone and maybe I'll let you alone<sup>35</sup>." Eddie goes into his office to get his gun and George says he won't go with him to Nick's. Their partnership is then ended when George informs Nick that Eddie is going to pay him a visit. Nick is killed in a shootout with Eddie. When Eddie returns, he goes to George's apartment and tells him if he ever finds out that George had something to do with it, he will kill him.

It is now 1929 and the stock market has crashed. Eddie is in debt and needs money. He goes to George and asks him for help. George proposes to buy the taxi company for \$250,000.00 (cheap price) and leave Eddie one cab so he could make some money. Eddie has no other choice and agrees to it. He then takes to drinking because Jean has left him and he has no money. He had not had a drink throughout the film (always had milk) until this point.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Eventually Eddie becomes a drunk and is taken care of by Panama. While working one day, he runs into Jean and brings her home. He then finds out that if Lloyd doesn't drop the case against George, he will be murdered. Lloyd will not listen to reason and Jean begs Eddie to do something. Eddie is reluctant at first, but eventually agrees to help.

Eddie enters George's home to ask that he not murder Lloyd. He refuses and tells Eddie that his men will escort him home. Eddie realizes that he is going to be murdered if he leaves with them. George knows that Eddie still loves Jean and will do anything for her, and so he must die. Eddie escapes George's thugs and kills George in the process. As Eddie leaves the house, he encounters more gunshots, but gets outside. As he runs away, Eddie is hit from behind. He makes his way to a church and falls on the steps, dead. Panama runs to his side. An officer asks, "What was his business?" She responds, "He used to be a big shot."<sup>36</sup>

After a decade had gone by, Cagney made another gangster film, *White Heat* (1949). This movie would be somewhat different than the previous three films he had starred in. Cagney was cast as Cody Jarrett, a psychotic gangster who answered only to his mother. The original script was not written that way. Instead, Cagney was supposed to play an ordinary mob boss. "For some kind of variant, I said to the writer's, "Let's fashion this after Ma Barker and her boys, and make Cody a psychotic to account for his actions."<sup>37</sup>

The film begins with Cody and his gang robbing a train. He then shoots two men

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<sup>36</sup> *The Roaring Twenties*. Produced by Warner Brothers and directed by Raoul Walsh. 106 min., 1939. DVD.

<sup>37</sup> Cagney, *Cagney by Cagney*, 125.



when one recognizes him. Soon after a member of his gang gets burned by steam, but Cody won't bring him to a hospital because it would blow their cover. They then return to their hideout, where Ma and his wife, Verna (Virginia Mayo) are waiting. This is the first time the audience witnesses one of Cody's fits. He leaves the room so the other members don't see it, but they all know. His mother follows him and comforts him by rubbing his head and letting him sit on her lap.

When a storm is approaching, Cody decides it is time to leave. Instead of bringing along the man who has been burned, Cody orders someone to kill him. He goes inside and fires a few shots in the ceiling, but leaves the man alive with a cigarette. The cops eventually find the body and are able to use new technology to place the man at the scene of the train robbery (dust and fingerprint).

The police soon find where Cody is hiding and trail his mother from the store. She realizes she is being followed and loses them. Unfortunately for her, she didn't notice that they tied a string to her car. The police eventually find the car and Cody as well. Before they can bring him in, Cody manages to escape by shooting a detective. He then goes to the drive-in with his wife and mother. There he tells them he has a plan. Cody is going to give himself up for another job that happened the same day as the train robbery (shorter sentence, no murders).

Once Cody is sentenced, an undercover cop (Edmund O'Brien) is put in the same cell as him to become his friend. Eventually, Vic saves Cody in the metal shop when Big Ed hires someone from the inside to kill Cody. The plan backfires and the man who tried to kill Cody will pay. Now that he trusts Vic, they devise a plan to escape from prison.

While in jail, Big Ed moves in on Verna. Ma notices it and is going to take care of Ed. Verna comes from behind and shoots Ma in the back. Ed will later use this against Verna so she doesn't go back to Cody. All is going well until Cody finds out that his mother is dead. Perhaps one of Cagney's greatest scenes is when he receives the news. He goes into another fit and stands up on the table in the mess hall. Cagney continuously falls down walking on the table. He then hits every person that tries to detain him. Eventually he is put in a straightjacket waiting to be put in a mental institution.

Cody manages to escape by pretending to appear insane to the doctors. He gathers a group of prisoners, including the man who tried to kill him in the metal shop (Parker) and makes his way out to a car. The guards open the gates because they believe it is the doctor leaving. Once they have made it to the outside, Cody takes care of Parker by shooting the trunk of the car. "Or you should scan the exquisite indifference with which he "lets a little air" into the trunk compartment of an auto in which is locked a treacherous "friend"."<sup>38</sup>

Cody goes to pay Ed a visit and runs into Verna. She tells him that Ed is the one who killed his mother. Cody then kills Ed and the gang moves on to their next heist. They plan to hide in a gasoline truck and put the stolen money in the tank (like the Trojan Horse). When Cody goes to bed with Verna, Vic creates an oscillator to attach to the truck.

The next day they leave for the heist. When they stop at a gas station, Vic leaves a note for the police. Eventually they get the message and follow the oscillator. While

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<sup>38</sup> Found in: *The New York Times film reviews, 1913-1968*, vol. 4 (New York: The New York Times, 1969), 2357. Original article written by: Bosley Crowther, *White Heat*, (Sept. 3, 1949).

inside, a former criminal that was put away by Vic notices him and tells Cody that he is a cop. Cody tries to use Vic as a hostage, but it is no use. There is a shootout and most of Cody's gang is killed. When one man tries to turn himself in, Cody shoots him in the back. He then makes his way to the top of a chemical tank. After he is shot three times and still will not go down, Cody shoots the tank and it explodes. In his final words Cody shouts, "Made it Ma! Top o' the world!". The detective then responds, "He finally got to the top of the world and it blew up right in his face."<sup>39</sup>

All four movies had one lesson for the audience to learn: crime does not pay. Although O'Brien tells Cagney that crime seems to pay (*Angels with Dirty Face*), by the end of the film Cagney has been executed. "One of its [*Angels with Dirty Faces*] greatest attributes is a realistic point of view. Father Connolly admits to tough Rocky Sullivan that crime appears to pay."<sup>40</sup> The public was split over whether or not gangster films had an influence on society. Most of the film critics thought they had a positive affect. For instance, Mordaunt Hall (N.Y. Times film critic) wrote, "Slugging disloyal bartenders, shooting down rival beermen, slapping their women crudely across the face, strutting with a vast self-satisfaction through their little world, they [Cagney and ] contribute a hard and true picture of the unheroic gangster."<sup>41</sup>

Some of the public believed these films were teaching children that gangsters were heroes, even if they died in the end. Something had to be done. As a result, many moral reformer groups were created to try and undermine the influence of these films.

The Legion of Decency (created 1934), made up of Catholics, was one such group that

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Found in: *The New York Times film reviews, 1913-1968*, vol. 2 (New York: The New York Times, 1969), 1551. Original article written by: Frank S. Nugent, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, (Nov. 26, 1938).

<sup>41</sup> Found in: *The New York Times film reviews, 1913-1968*, vol. 1 (New York: The New York Times, 1969), 716. Original article written by: Mordaunt Hall, *The Public Enemy*, (April 24, 1931).

attacked these movies. At one point, Catholics were asked to sign a pledge which would denounce any film that portrayed a gangster as a hero. “The Catholic Church possessed an economic power much greater than that of any other reform groups because it could issue edicts to its members to boycott particular films or theaters or even to boycott the movies altogether.”<sup>42</sup> The Catholic Church appeared more concerned with portrayals of gangsters in films during the early 1930s than with pictures with sexual undertones.

During the time these pictures were produced, codes were in place that fined any movie which glorified gangsters or hoodlums. The Hays Code was created in 1934. “Criminal acts were ‘never to be represented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against the law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation’ . . . . Murder must be presented in a manner that ‘will not inspire imitation’ and ‘revenge in modern times shall not be justified’ .”<sup>43</sup> In response to many complaints about these films, Hays hired August Vollmer, a former police officer, to view these movies and give an evaluation. Vollmer believed none of these pictures would encourage crime and instead, would hinder illegal behavior.<sup>44</sup> He believed there was educational value to these films. Still, the public was not completely behind this ideology. The ending of *Angels with Dirty Faces* serves as one example.<sup>45</sup> It obeys the Hays code by having the criminal die, but still has Rocky appear to be a hero because he turned “yellow” to save the Deadend Kids.

In one newspaper article written in 1931, the Mayor of East Orange, New Jersey

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<sup>42</sup> James Combs, *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 137.

<sup>43</sup> John Springhall, “Censoring Hollywood: Youth, Moral Panic and Crime/Gangster Movies of the 1930s,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 32, no. 3 (Winter, 1998), 136.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment,” *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (June, 1990), 61.

<sup>45</sup> Simon Louvish, “Top of the world,” *Sight and Sound* 14, no. 7 (July, 2004), 37.

criticized gangster films. He was upset with Hollywood and felt it was up to the community to teach their youth. “Efforts to guide youth morality by the exhibition of gangster films are erroneous. Schools and churches make no efforts to preserve the morals of youth by showing them the wrong side of life. They bend all their energy toward showing them the right and that is what motion pictures are failing to do.”<sup>46</sup> Instead of showing what one should do, Hollywood was portraying what not to do. Others believed that when the police were defeated, it helped promote an even more glamorous view of the gangster. “However, when crime films showed the police as ineffectual, they added to what Wingate felt was the dangerous break-down in respect for law which had been brought about by Prohibition.”<sup>47</sup> Films would later change and have G-men and police officers as the heroes to go along with the public’s opinion.

Many people believed young boys were being corrupted by gangster films. One book published in the 1930s entitled “Our Movie Made Children” reported on the influence of gangster films on children. The author exaggerated in many instances, telling stories on boys who were greatly influenced by these pictures which caused insomnia, excitability, rapid eye movements, and other unwanted behaviors.<sup>48</sup> Children would be interviewed after leaving a movie theater about the film they just saw. In one story, a boy tells the interviewer that, “I feel like the big shot that knows schemes and hiding places and knows how to kill and capture cops and get a lot of money.”<sup>49</sup> The public was becoming more and more concerned over the influence of gangster films after this book was published.

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<sup>46</sup> Found in: Gene Brown, *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film 1929-1936* (New York: NYT Times Books, 1984). Article: *Hays calls gang film a crime deterrent* (June 27, 1931).

<sup>47</sup> James Combs, *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> John Springhall, “Censoring Hollywood,” 139.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

People were also upset because the central characters in these movies were gangsters. Instead, they believed the story should focus on policemen. Many cities across America started banning the release of these films. “Gangster movies were depicted as supplying the spark that led to delinquency.”<sup>50</sup> Even when studios decided to release their films without a seal of approval, there is no record of them receiving a fine. Although these groups wanted to blame movies for influencing and corrupting their youth, other factors such as environment, domestic, and psychological, played a much larger role in determining whether or not a child would turn to a life of crime.<sup>51</sup>

Each of these four films shared many similarities. Every ending had Cagney die: two by rival mobs, one suicide, and one by the death penalty. “Violence as we knew it on the screen in the early ‘30s was an entirely different thing than it is today because society itself was different....most of them had gangster themes – and gangsters mostly killed themselves.”<sup>52</sup> Each lesson was the same: crime does not pay. Each film was based on an actual person or event that had happened before. Every girl Cagney had, with the exception of Anne Sheridan in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, was a “bad” girl. Cagney was the tough guy who took out anyone who got in his way. “...they had the ultimate hero. He [Cagney] was virile and fearless. He was a kid who talked and acted like a man. He mused up the big boys. He took over. He manhandled women.”<sup>53</sup>

Cagney recalls the character of Rocky Sullivan as a man he used to see in his old neighborhood. Each day the guy would stand on a corner and greet people with,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Louvish, “Top of the world,” 142.

<sup>52</sup> Raymond Lee, *Gangsters and hoodlums: The underworld in the cinema* (New York: Castle Books, 1971), 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 12.

“Whadda ya hear? Whadda ya say?”<sup>54</sup> Cagney used that exact line six or seven times in *Angels with Dirty Faces*. He believed the only way to act was by watching others. People could learn a lot about speech and mannerisms by observing people. Cagney always tried to add life to his characters as with the case of Rocky Sullivan.

There was both an upside and downside to Cagney’s successful portrayal of a gangster. He was able to receive lots of work because of his wonderful performances, but he was type-cast as well. “If it [*The Roaring Twenties*] also seems to be good entertainment of its kind (and it is, barring the false dignity the Warners have attached to it), credit it to James Cagney in another of his assured portrayals of a criminal career man.”<sup>55</sup>

All of these films showed why Cagney became a criminal. In *The Public Enemy* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*, Cagney began stealing at a young age. *The Roaring Twenties* used World War I disillusionment for Cagney’s venture into criminal activities. Lastly, his mother was to blame for his delinquent and psychotic behavior in *White Heat*. With the exception of *White Heat*, each film showed flashbacks whether it was his childhood or service in World War I.

There were differences as well. Although Cagney was killed by rival mobs in two of these films, the way in which he was murdered was different. In *The Public Enemy*, he was kidnapped and shot in the head. Then, the rival gang dropped off his body in front of his house. On the other hand, *The Roaring Twenties* had Cagney exact revenge before he was shot in the back fleeing from the scene. *Angels with Dirty Faces* truly focused on having Cagney die by way of punishment. He couldn’t be seen as a hero gunned down

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<sup>54</sup> Cagney, *Cagney by Cagney*, 73.

<sup>55</sup> Found in: *The New York Times film reviews, 1913-1968*, vol. 3 (New York: The New York Times, 1969), 1652. Original article written by: Frank S. Nugent, *The Roaring Twenties*, (Nov. 11, 1939).

by a rival mob. Instead, the judicial system sentenced him to death for the crimes he had committed. *White Heat* went to another level by having him commit suicide to show how some criminals are insane.

By the early 1940's, the gangster genre had been played out. "The dirty decade has served too many quickie quatrains to rate an epic [*The Roaring Twenties*] handling now."<sup>56</sup> The public had been watching rival gangs shot it out for more than a decade. Prohibition had ended and there weren't many headlines about gangsters in the newspapers. "The reliance on 'stories from the headlines' which gave the gangster genre its life blood in the 1930's became the cause of its decline as the decade wore on."<sup>57</sup> The criminal activity of the mob had moved underground. America was headed for war with Germany and Japan. People no longer cared about social problems; they wanted to watch global conflicts on the silver screen. Cagney and others began to star in patriotic and working man films as a result. Times were changing and films were too.

Although James Cagney played a in a number of gangster films, he never won an Oscar for any of these performances. Instead, he was rewarded for his portrayal of George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, as a song-and-dance man, a role he always loved to play. His roles in gangster films are still considered some of the best work in that genre. A critic once commented that the gangster film lost interest in the early 1940's because the character had no room to grow; he always had to die. No matter the ending, these films entertained the masses particularly because of a man named Cagney.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Karpf, *The gangster film*, 207.



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