

A Study of Women's Roles and Star Personas in the Films of Frank Capra

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ABSTRACT

The Golden Era of cinema (1930-1950) produced some of the most memorable and influential films throughout history. One of the most influential directors of this time was Frank Capra. In Capra's films audiences get a taste of hard-pressing traditional American values; however at the same time, Capra produced some of the most complex and progressive female characters during this time of female suppression. This study explores Capra's use of female characters and their roles in his films, as well as how the actresses' star personas affects the portrayal of the characters. More specifically, this research inquires how the star personas of actresses, Barbara Stanwyck and Jean Arthur, affect the female characters they portray in Capra's films and how the actresses' star personas affect audiences response to the characters as well as the films. Along with reading scholarly articles and books on the films and actors, research was conducted in January 2010 at the UCLA film archives, where the films were viewed in their original format along with additional research including, but not limited to, news reels of the films and actors, interviews with Capra, Stanwyck, and Arthur, documentaries, and audition tapes. The findings were analyzed in order to make correlations among the films, the actresses' star personas, the female characters, and audience response. Interestingly, it was found that Capra was able to narrow in on specific aspects of the actor's personas in order to create more complex and believable female characters. Overall, it was found that Stanwyck and Arthur's star personas had a definite effect on the type of female characters they portrayed in Capra's films as well as audience response to those films.

INTRODUCTION

Women's representation on the silver screen has been scrutinized over decades of film viewing. In many cases it is found that women are portrayed as subordinate to men and are restricted to the domesticated lifestyle. Even today, it is argued that women in contemporary films are still subordinate to men. According to Richard Corliss of *Time Magazine*, women have made great accomplishments in society, "Yet onscreen they're [women] an endangered species – the ivory-billed woodpeckers of cinema" (67).

However, when looking back nearly eighty years ago during what is considered "Hollywood's Golden Era" one cannot help but think of the powerhouse female actors including Irene Dunne, Joan Crawford, Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, and Barbara Stanwyck, all of whom tended to be assertive, independent women full of gumption both on screen and off screen. "Hollywood's Golden Era" spanned from the 1930s to the late 1950s, and according to Molly Haskell, the author of *From Reverence to Rape*, "Women, in the early and middle ages of cinema, dominated" the screen (11). Some of these women, including Katherine Hepburn and Barbara Stanwyck were, "Powerful, eccentric, or intimidating enough to choose their projects and determine their own images" (Haskell 122).

With that in mind it is important to understand how particular female actors' "star" personas affect the film and the direction of the characters. Haskell states, "The personality of the star, the mere fact of being a star, was as important as the roles played, and affected the very conception of those roles" (5). In fact, "star" personas and "star" qualities were used to cast actors in particular roles. For example, when Frank Capra was casting *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* he wanted Jean Arthur as the main female lead. Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia studios, did not want to use Arthur because she was relatively unknown and not as attractive as other female actors (Haskell 122). Though Jean Arthur was eventually cast in the role and found international stardom, she very well may have lost the role to a more recognizable actor.

When studying films and the female characters, not only is looking at the character itself important, but looking at the character development is equally important. The female character, the director, and the "star" persona of the

female leads all affect how audiences receive the film. Richard Dyer explains this in writing, “Producers of films respond to the public demand” (18). Therefore, if the audiences appreciate strong female leads; there will be an influx of strong female characters in films.

One of the most influential filmmakers during the “Golden Era” of cinema was director, Frank Capra. Capra’s career spanned from the early 1930s to the early 1960s, and is typically recognized for his politically centered and populist films; those that are inundated with iconic American images such as montages of American flags, the Liberty Bell, American soldiers, and of course the song “Yankee Doodle Dandy.” Capra is often times overlooked when the discussion of portraying progressive women in film arises. In Capra’s films audiences get this taste of hard-pressing traditional American values; however at the same time, Capra produced some of the most complex and progressive female characters during this time of female suppression. It was found in this study that Capra was able to utilize the star personas of Stanwyck and Arthur in order to create realistic and complex female characters. This study explores Capra’s use of the female character and her role in his films as well as how the actress’ star persona affects the character. More specifically, this research inquires how the star personas of actresses Barbara Stanwyck and Jean Arthur affect the female characters they portray in Capra’s films and how the actresses’ star personas affect how audiences respond to the characters as well as the films.

THE CAPRA WOMEN

In order to fully understand how star personas add to the portrayals of the woman’s role in Frank Capra’s films, it is important to know the different types of female characters in those films. After analyzing several of Capra’s films, it was found that within the majority of the films, audiences are subjected to a dichotomy between two very different types of women. One woman is a motherly figure while the other woman is a sensual seductress. This dichotomy in Capra’s films leads to an interesting discussion about women and women’s roles in Capra’s films.

In Frank Capra’s 1933 film *Lady for a Day*, the audience gets a sense that the woman should be more of a motherly figure than a romantic figure. The main character Annie Apple (May Robson) is not only an actual mother, but she also acts as a surrogate mother for her cohorts who also live on the street. *Lady for a Day* revolves around Apple Annie a poor woman who gave her daughter up years ago, and has been telling her daughter that she is a high society woman. When Apple Annie’s daughter comes to visit, Annie and her cohorts must figure out a ruse for Annie’s daughter and future in-laws to believe that she is a high-class socialite. Annie gets involved with a mobster named Dave the Dude (Warren William), who believes that Annie is his good luck charm and ultimately helps Annie become a high-class socialite in order to help his own career. Molly Haskell argues that “she [Apple Annie] is their surrogate mother; they, the ‘apples’ of her eye, are true ideal children, knowing and accepting who she is” (Haskell 122). We see how this maternal melodrama illustrates the lengths at which Annie is willing to go for her daughter, and how her cohorts go to great depths to help their “Mother.”

Apple Annie has a complete lack of sexuality due to her age and maternal roles, which is significantly different to the other female character in the film, Queenie. Queenie is a sensual showgirl and The Dude’s girlfriend; however, she is the character that helps feminize Apple Annie and organizes the “children” (cohorts) of Apple Annie to help her masquerade as a society woman.

This comparison of motherliness versus sexual seductress is also evident in Capra’s 1946 film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, a film about George Bailey (James Stewart) and journey through life helping others in little ways. George marries Mary (Donna Reed), and they create a life together, which is full of ups and downs. After a magical night, George realizes that money is not always the answer to one’s happiness, but it is the people in one’s life that truly matter. Mary is depicted as your stereotypical 1940’s housewife. Mary is also seen as motherly because she tends to ground George, and helps him see the life he has isn’t as bad as he thinks. However, Mary always seems to be coming up with ideas to get George out of financial trouble. There are two scenes in the film where this is apparent; the first is when the customers of the bank want to withdraw their money when the bank has no money. Mary decides that George should use the money for their honeymoon to pay off the customers, thus saving the day. The second situation arises at the very end of the film, during the infamous scene where the community comes together to help out their dear friend George. Though it is rather subtle, it was Mary who clearly initiated the help from the community, thus saving her husband once again.

Mary is then compared to the other female character Violette (Gloria Grahame), who is depicted as a very sexual being who squanders her money. In fact, we see Violette get help from George when she has money problems. Thus Violette is illustrated as one who needs a man in her life, a feeling that we don’t necessarily get from Mary. This provides for interesting relationships between the characters in the film, because George has to rely on Mary for support and Violette has to rely on George for support.

Capra also uses this dichotomy in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). In this film, the main female character, Clarissa Saunders played by Jean Arthur, is a very intelligent Senatorial aid, who is not necessarily the

most attractive of women. Subsequently, the audience gets a sense of a mother-son relationship between Saunders and Smith. Part of this is due to the complete naivety of the main character Jefferson Smith (James Stewart). Saunders basically has to show him the ropes of Washington and ultimately ignites the cause in which Smith fights for. She is also the person who, ever so motherly, talks Smith into coming back and finishing the fight he started. Saunders is “not at the extremes of madness and idealism, but always holding down the center, the sweet small voice of reason” (Haskell 122).

Saunders’ intelligence and motherliness is juxtaposed to the character of the Senator’s daughter who is portrayed very sexually. The sole purpose of the Senator’s daughter’s role is to lure Jefferson Smith away from his duties at the capitol, so he is unable to pursue his noble intentions. The Senator’s daughter is depicted as a sexy seductress, who ultimately is used as a distraction.

It is also important to note that though Saunders is depicted as motherly, the relationship between Smith and Saunders turns romantic. Though the dichotomy may seem to unravel because motherly figures are not usually depicted as sexual beings, Capra is able to work around this with Jean Arthur’s star persona, and by that time in the film Saunders is stripped of her motherly characteristics and becomes more feminine. By Saunders becoming more feminine, she loses her sense of motherliness, therefore making the relationship between Saunders and Smith more realistic in the eyes of the audience.

In the 1941 film *Meet John Doe*, this dichotomy between the two women gets a little more complicated. Meet John Doe is about Ann Mitchell, played by Barbara Stanwyck, a newspaper journalist who just lost her job and creates a scheme to keep it. Mitchell creates the John Doe movement and gets John Willoughby (Gary Cooper) to be the face of the movement. Mitchell is more outgoing and characterized more femininely and sexually than the other main female characters we have come across in Capra’s films thus far. Mitchell is the character who initially sparks the “John Doe Movement” and uses her intelligence, wit, and occasionally her sexuality to do so. Mitchell is juxtaposed to the Soda jerk’s wife who is depicted as wholesome, motherly, and is ultimately silent throughout the film until the very end after Mitchell has fully exhausted herself and faints.

This is where the complexity of this dichotomy takes over. In *Meet John Doe* the “sweet small voice of reason” (Haskell 122) is not that of Ann Mitchell, the heroine of the narrative, but rather that of the soda jerk’s wife, who seemingly is the silent force of action throughout the whole film. Furthermore, Mitchell ignites the idea of the movement but we come to find out the creation of the “John Doe Clubs” and the reason the club comes to keep John from committing suicide, are all the ideas of the soda jerks wife.

Though the dichotomy gets complex with certain characters in Capra’s films, it is obvious that Capra’s “women are closer to visionaries than his men” (Haskell 122). The women in Capra’s films tend to be the grounding force of the over eager young males in the films. Audiences clearly see this in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe*. The audience comes to find that in the eyes of Capra, women who are intelligent do exist; however they tend to be the quieter and or less attractive women taking on a motherly role. In the case of Ann Mitchell and the Soda jerk’s wife we see them both as intelligent women. However, Mitchell is a little more feminine and sexual in her presence as well as being a little more outspoken and manipulative. She is ultimately reduced to fainting in the end of the film and the Soda Jerk’s wife is there to speak up for or perhaps in the place of Mitchell. It could be argued that the women who are sensual and outspoken can only get things accomplished to a certain extent, and that the silent wholesome women who are more motherly are left standing to fill or replace their shoes.

The Capra women consist of the maternal figure and the sexual seductress. The maternal figures are women who are intelligent, wise and manipulate men through their wisdom and lead them through life. In contrast, the sexual seductress character is intelligent, independent, witty, and uses her sexuality to manipulate men. Often times, the sexual seductress is portrayed as the villain in Capra’s films. For example, in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Violette is demonized throughout the film and is often pitied by the other community members for her use of sexuality as manipulative device. However in many of Capra’s films, for example *Meet John Doe*, the sexual seductress encounters some kind of moral battle and confusion, which then makes her a more likeable character in the eyes of the audience. This point will be discussed in more detail below, but first we must understand how the actor’s star persona can complicate or solidify the mother and seductress roles. We will find, that depending on the particular actor’s star persona audiences may perceive these notions of motherliness and sexual seductress differently, and that Capra was able to narrow in on certain aspects of the actor’s persona to make a more realistic and complex character.

STAR PERSONAS

A star persona is produced just as a character is produced. During the Golden Era of cinema the studio system had control over every aspect of the films, including the actors and their public image, or rather their star persona

(Dyer 10-11). Often times there would be promotional events that the actors were forced to attend and studios would pick and choose the films the actors participated in rather than the actors deciding for themselves. The star personas of the actors during the Golden Era of cinema were produced not only by the studio systems, but also by the media, much like in today's society with the paparazzi (Dyer 11). Both Barbara Stanwyck and Jean Arthur had created star personas and public images that were completely different from their private lives. It is important to note that star personas also greatly affect the types of roles in which the actors are able to play realistically.

Barbara Stanwyck

Barbara Stanwyck's formation of her star persona began when she changed her name from Ruby Stevens to Barbara Stanwyck (DiOrio 5). Stanwyck was stripped of her childlike name and given a name of a woman. Stanwyck was an extremely independent woman in her private life as well as in the media realm, especially because she was one of the very few actors, men and women alike, who were independent from the studio system. Instead of just working under one contract with one studio, Stanwyck worked under three. She worked with Columbia Pictures, Warner Brothers' studio, and Metro Golden Mayer (Schickel *Barbara Stanwyck*:). This not only allowed Stanwyck to choose the types of films she did, but also allowed her more control over her public image. Stanwyck coined herself "a broad from the Bronx" – which illustrates how Stanwyck was extremely down-to-earth and what the public saw was what they got (DiOrio 20). Stanwyck stayed out of the limelight as much as possible because in reality she was shy and trusted few people. However, with the people she was close to, she was very real, honest, and down-to earth (Schickel, *Barbara Stanwyck*:).

Because Stanwyck was independent from the studio system, she was also portrayed as independent in the media. The media tended to portray Stanwyck as a very closed mouth and shy woman, who was always in control of the situation. Often times in newsreel footage Stanwyck was portrayed as by herself or whispering into a friend's ear (*News Reel Footage*). Stanwyck was also only one of three actors to be given the title of Miss or Mr. This title illustrates the respect that the industry as well as the media had for Barbara Stanwyck (DiOrio 65).

Stanwyck's Star persona also is credited to Frank Capra. In 1932, Capra and Stanwyck worked on their first picture together, *Ladies of Leisure*. Initially, Capra had Stanwyck in glamorous dresses, lots of make-up, and in extremely soft lighting and camera angels. After the first couple of reels of footage, Capra realized that having a glamorous Stanwyck was not working. Instead, Capra stripped Stanwyck of all the glamour and make-up and filmed her in a gritty more realistic fashion, which presented an actor who was real, independent, gritty, all the while maintaining her sexuality (DiOrio 61). The most important aspect to Stanwyck's star person was the fact that she was able to maintain her sexuality while still being deemed as a mature, independent, and strong woman. Stanwyck's ability to maintain her independence and sexuality is unlike the star persona of Bette Davis, who was not an attractive actor but was viewed as very independent. Even the great Katherine Hepburn was unable to maintain her sexuality and her independence.

Capra attempted filming Stanwyck in a glamorous fashion only one other time, in his film *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*. Capra was trying to be extremely artistic, and through the use of a unique camera lens, Capra was able to create an aura like glow around Stanwyck (Schickel, *The Men Who Made the Movies*). Though the film was artistic, and was well received from critics, audiences hated the film in part because Stanwyck was not playing her typical role and because she was portrayed in a much different fashion than her previous films. The audiences were also upset that Stanwyck was playing a character that had a love affair with a Chinese man, and they condemned her for it. Though Stanwyck did not care about what her audiences thought about her, it illustrates that the types of women that Stanwyck played did affect audience response (Feldman, *Barbara Stanwyck*:).

Jean Arthur

Similarly to Stanwyck, Jean Arthur also changed her name when entering into the film industry. Jean Arthur's birth name was Gladys Green, and because "Jean Arthur" sounded vaguely like "Joan of Arc," she decided to go with that name (Oller 3). In doing this Arthur is suggesting to the public that she wanted to be viewed as an independent, fiercely strong woman.

Even though Arthur worked only for Columbia Pictures, defining Jean Arthur's star person is a difficult task due to the fact that Arthur lived an extremely reclusive lifestyle. Author John Oller stated that Arthur had given only about ten interviews in her life and that the majority of them occurred after her time as an actor in Hollywood (102). Due to this seclusion, the media and Arthur never had a respect for one another, and this led to certain a tension with the media being extremely harsh on any move Arthur made (Oller 102). However, audiences still went to Arthur's films and still seemed to love Arthur as an actor. Oller states, "Everyone liked her, but nobody knew her" (2).

Therefore, Arthur's star persona came from what audiences saw on screen. Arthur was known for her abilities as a comedic actress. In fact, it was with Frank Capra's 1936 film, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, that Jean Arthur made

international stardom (Oller 86). It was Capra's ability to highlight Arthur's "intelligent girl next door" persona that sparked the career of Arthur. Arthur attempted to play a more sexual character, as a showgirl in a different film, and it tanked. Neither the critics nor the audiences liked the film, and that was mainly due the fact that Arthur was portrayed in a more sexual light (Oller 110).

Arthur was able to maintain her "intelligent girl next door" persona through all her comedic films, and did so effortlessly. Arthur never portrayed brainless female characters, but strayed from the frumpy smart girl image that was often portrayed on screen. Arthur always maintained her character's likeability by portraying an almost intelligent naïveté. Many times Arthur's characters come off as either naïve and child-like or very smart and bitter. Then by the end of the film we see the child-like character take on intelligent characteristics and visa-versa.

STAR PERSONAS IN FRANK CAPRA FILMS

Frank Capra was able to utilize both Stanwyck's and Arthur's star personas to create complex, memorable, and independent female characters. The two films that illustrate the differences between the two types of Capra women and Capra's ability to utilize star persons to his advantage are, *Meet John Doe*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Meet John Doe

Capra's 1941 film, *Meet John Doe*, revolves around Ann Mitchell played by Barbara Stanwyck. In the beginning of the film the audience learns that Mitchell lost her job as journalist. Furious with the editor's decision, Mitchell writes her last story as a letter from John Doe, a man so fed up with society he threatens to commit suicide on Christmas Eve. When the paper prints this letter, Mitchell informs the paper that the letter is a fake and creates a huge scheme in order to increase readership and keep her job in order to support her mother and two sisters. Mitchell creates the "John Doe" movement and sets out to find a man who is willing to pretend to be John Doe and be the face of the John Doe movement. Mitchell finds John Willoughby (Gary Cooper) to be her John Doe. As the film progresses the John Doe movement progresses, and Mitchell begins to fall in love John. Mitchell gets tangled up with D.B. Norton, a newspaper mogul, who pays Mitchell to write him an opposing speech to the John Doe movement. Soon, John finds out about Mitchell and Norton's deal and the John Doe movement begins to crumble. By the end of the film, it is up to Mitchell and the other people in the John Doe movement to save John from committing suicide on Christmas Eve.

The role of Ann Mitchell in *Meet John Doe* is to move the plot forward, being the mastermind behind the John Doe movement. It is clear from the very beginning of the film, that Mitchell plays the role of the sexual seductress, in that she uses her wit, intelligence, and sexuality to manipulate all the people around her in order to keep her job. However, like in other Capra films with the sexual seductress as the protagonist, Capra has to create a moral dilemma for Mitchell and make her more likable in the eyes of the audience. He achieves Mitchell's likeability in two ways. The first way that Capra makes Mitchell more likable, is by having her constantly struggling with her choices to manipulate everyone to create the John Doe movement. Audiences see her moral dilemma come to life when she contemplates her choices with her mother. In these scenes the audience is able to tell that Mitchell is experiencing an inner moral battle, in that Mitchell knows she is a hypocrite for creating the John Doe movement while being paid to write material opposing the John Doe movement. Because of this moral battle Mitchell experiences, audience see Mitchell less as a villain and more as a torn heroine. Also, because Mitchell created this scheme in order to support her family, she is seen in a more likable light. Though Mitchell could be considered a sensual seductress in that she uses both her intelligence and sexuality to manipulate the male characters in the film, she manipulates from an almost motherly perspective. The only reason that Mitchell creates the John Doe movement is to provide for her family, and therefore the audience sees no fault with Ann Mitchell's actions and intentions, thus Mitchell remains the heroine of the film.

The other way in which Capra was able to make Ann Mitchell's sexual seductress role more likable to audiences is through Barbara Stanwyck's star persona. Because Stanwyck's persona is much like the character of Ann Mitchell, in that she is both intelligent and sexual, audiences feel like they are watching Stanwyck on screen. Stanwyck's persona as sexual and intelligent makes the character of Ann Mitchell believable and likable. It is clear that Stanwyck can easily play both roles of a motherly figure and sexual seductress in one film. Stanwyck's star ability makes her likeable regardless of the role she is playing in the film, something that Capra knew and utilized to his benefit.

Capra knew the importance for Mitchell to be a likable character because he wants his audiences to be engaged with the main character. It can be difficult for audiences to care about the main character if she was unlikable. If Mitchell were an all around unlikable character, then the audiences would not want her to succeed with the John Doe movement and in her relationship with John Doe. By Capra portraying Mitchell in a more sympathetic light, he is able to create that bond between her character and the audience. Also, by creating a sexual seductress character

with a likeable side, Capra creates a multi-dimensional character. It was found in this research that Capra's characters are not all good and not all bad. This creates for complex characters who, in the case of the females, stray from typical stereotypes. Mitchell is not portrayed solely as a seductress who manipulates men, but as a woman who is both intelligent and sexual while being self-conscious about the things she does as a person. Because Capra has complex female characters, he is also suggesting to a larger audience that females in society are just as complex and can have a sexual side to them without being all bad people.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

Capra's 1939 film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, is about Jefferson Smith (James Stewart) a young naïve man, leader of the Boy Rangers, who is appointed to the senate by the corrupt and scheming governor. While in Washington, Smith quickly learns that the Senate is a harsh and sometimes corrupt place and he leans on his senatorial aid, Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur) for guidance and help while in Senate. After being accused of being a liar and corrupt Senator, Smith holds a filibuster to show the world the truth.

Clarissa Saunders's role in the narrative is more of a motherly figure. In the majority of the film Saunders is showing Jefferson Smith the ropes of the Senate and trying to show him the realities of the real world. Near the end of the film, Saunders uses her motherly role in manipulating Smith to go back to the Senate and fight for the cause that he believed in so much. Rather than using sexuality to manipulate Smith, like Mitchell used in *Meet John Doe*, she used her wisdom and intelligence to get Smith to come back to the Senate. Again, Saunders is the epitome of what Molly Haskell declares, "sweet small voice of reason" (122).

Throughout the majority of the film Saunders is portrayed as a frumpy bitter senatorial aid, and it is hard for audiences to believe that there will be a romantic relationship between her and Jefferson Smith. Also, audiences would find a romantic relationship difficult because Saunders takes on that motherly role, and mothers are not typically portrayed as being sexual figures. These complications are where Jean Arthur's star persona comes into play and Capra uses it to his full advantage. Because Jean Arthur is deemed the intelligent girl next door, Capra can use that at the very end of the film in order for the audience to believe and accept the romantic relationship between Saunders and Smith.

There is one moment at the end of the film where the intensity increases and the emotions run high. At this point all Saunders can do is watch Smith fight his own battle from afar. Saunders is eventually overtaken with emotion and lets out an emotional scream, and at that very moment, Capra stripped Jean Arthur of that motherly role and played into her intelligent girl next door persona. Audiences can now believe that an intelligent girl could help a man like Smith get to where he was, but that the naïve girl next door would be unable to control any emotion and let out a scream at the end, as Saunders did.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing several of Frank Capra's films, it is apparent that Capra uses two types of women in his films to illustrate complex and believable characters during a time known for producing many female stereotypes. The motherly figure and the sexual seductress are neither innately good nor bad, but illustrate to audiences the complexities of not only female characters, but also women in society. Capra is illustrating to his audiences that women can be helpful and knowledgeable, like the motherly figure, but at the same time can be more sexual and desirable without completely harming man's ability to function.

These two types of female characters are also significant when looking at how actor's star personas affect the characters they play. It is clear that star personas have an effect on the types of characters actors portray, as well as the types of films the actors are in. Often times an actor like Jean Arthur was subjected to one or two types of roles because her star persona was so narrow and would only allow certain types of roles to be portrayed realistically. In contrast, Barbara Stanwyck was able to avoid playing the same types of roles due to her broad and diverse star persona. Stanwyck was able to play both the motherly roles as well as the sexual seductress, which lent for a broader range of female leads to play. It is arguable that because Stanwyck had a more defined and broader star persona than Jean Arthur, that Stanwyck was able to carry a film more so than Arthur. Meaning, often times Stanwyck played the lead role in her films, whereas Arthur played more of the secondary roles to the male characters in her films. Because Arthur's star persona was the intelligent girl next door, she was only able to play roles that were less dynamic than the roles Stanwyck could play.

Director Frank Capra understood the effects of the star persona and used them to his advantage in his films. Capra realized the unique ability for Jean Arthur to be a smart intelligent character while maintaining a sweetness and innocence. He used Arthur's persona to overcome an almost detrimental obstacle to *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. If any other actress were to play Clarissa Saunders, Capra would have run into a major dilemma in

transforming the motherly role into a romantic figure. However, because of Arthur's unique persona, Capra was able to avoid this dilemma.

Capra was also able to use Stanwyck's realistic and gritty persona to his full advantage in *Meet John Doe*. Because Stanwyck is a versatile actor she is able to take on many roles in one character, as she achieved as Ann Mitchell. Without Stanwyck's versatile persona and ability to be independent and maintain her sexuality, the character of Ann Mitchell would have been unbelievable and extremely unlikable, thus causing a film that would be disliked by audiences.

Had Ann Mitchell or Clarissa Saunders been played by any other actors during this time in cinema, one could argue that not only would the characters lose their believability and likeability, but that the films would lose a piece of their message. Without Stanwyck's ability to be both independent and sexual, *Meet John Doe* loses that message of big industry manipulating the little man, because Mitchell's character would be unable to have her moral dilemmas due to her complex behaviors. Likewise, in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, without Arthur's ability to be the intelligent girl next door, Saunders would have been unable to teach Smith the lesson of sticking up to big government and fight for what he believes in. Without these two actors in these roles, there would have been two extremely different films with less powerful messages.

Frank Capra had the unique ability to connect with his audiences. He used Stanwyck's and Arthur's star personas to make humanistic films that have realistic characters and can strike a chord with any audience member. Capra was able to hone in on the important and genuine aspects of Stanwyck and Arthur's personas, which led to some of the most likable and authentic characters known to the silver screen.

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