

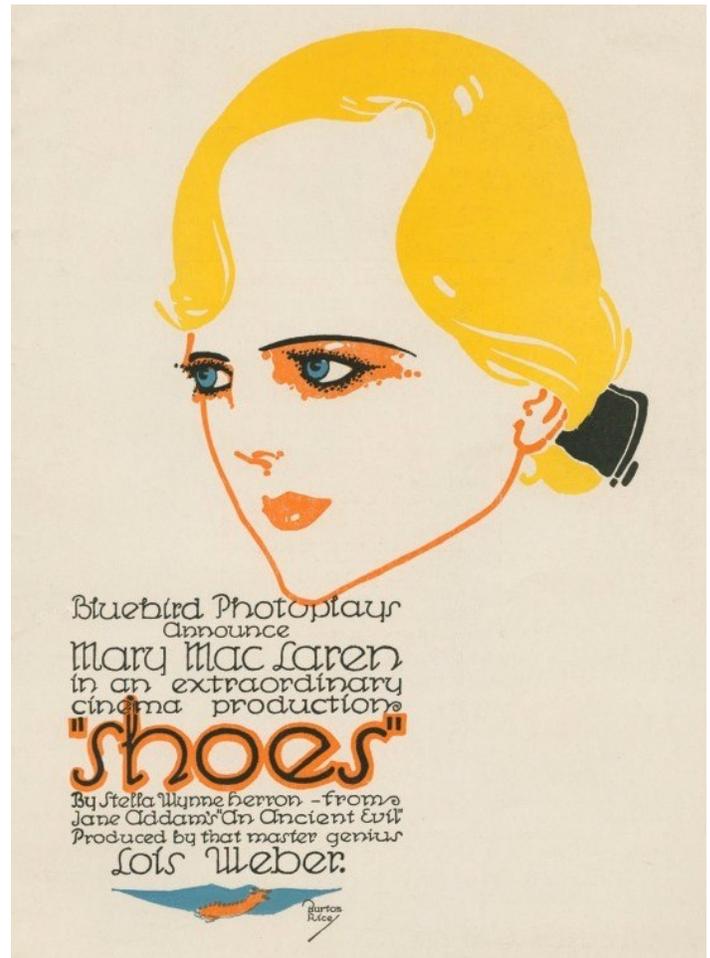
Shoes

By Shelley Stamp

A profile of director Lois Weber published shortly after the release of “Shoes” celebrated her ability to probe “complex questions which are challenging intelligent thinkers the world over” in a “dignified and dramatic manner.”¹ Working at Universal in the mid-1910s, where she enjoyed enormous respect and substantial creative control, Weber wrote and directed ambitious features on highly topical and deeply contentious issues of the day, including drug addiction, capital punishment, and the fight to legalize contraception. She considered cinema a modern “voiceless language” capable of engaging popular audiences in critical cultural debates, much as a newspaper editorial or a religious sermon might do.

In “Shoes” Weber tackled one of the early twentieth century’s most pronounced social phenomena – the influx of young, single women into the wage labor force where they were often exploited and underpaid. Eva Meyer (Mary MacLaren), the film’s central character, supports her entire family with the meager salary she earns working in a five-and-dime store. They are destitute as a result, often unable to buy basic necessities. In one of the film’s most harrowing scenes, Eva lies awake at night haunted by the specter of poverty that grips her family. Standing on her feet all day without adequate breaks, Eva quickly wears out the thin soles on her boots, but her family’s impoverished circumstances do not permit her to replace them. A pair of boots in a shop window she passes on her way to work every day becomes an emblem of Eva’s deprivation and longing. Surrounded by merchandise in the store where she works, Eva is unable to participate in the consumer economy her labor supports. In the end, the film suggests, she trades sex for the coveted pair of boots.

Weber’s interest in under-paid shop girls like Eva Meyer echoed concerns expressed by many Progressive Era social reformers who worried openly about the fashion tastes and spending habits of underpaid female workers, as well as the sexual economy spawned by wage inequities between young men and women. In her 1911 survey of retail workers, for instance, Louise De Koven Bowen lamented that shop girls “work surrounded by, and selling, the luxuries which they all crave for a wage compensation inadequate for a life of decency and respectability.”² Making its own link to these studies clear, “Shoes” opens with a passage from Jane Addams’ well-known 1912 book “A New Conscience and An



This advertisement appeared in the June 24, 1916 edition of Motion Picture World. [Courtesy Media History Digital Library.](#)

Ancient Evil” about a young woman who had “yielded to temptation” and “sold herself for a new pair of shoes.”³

Interviewed during the making of “Shoes,” Weber explicitly allied herself with reformers like Addams and Bowen, recalling her own early “missionary work in the slums of New York and on Blackwell’s Island.” Especially vivid were her experiences working “among poor girls,” she said. “I know them and their problems, and not a few of my stories have been suggested by incidents recalled from those early experiences.”⁴ Universal’s publicity for the film also stressed Weber’s realist approach, noting that the entire contents of a five-and-dime store had been transported to the studio for the retail scenes, that sets in Eva’s tenement apartment had been equipped with furniture “specially bought from just such people as the Meyers were,” and that corned beef and cabbage had been cooked on a functioning stove during filming.⁵ Reviewers, too, echoed this rhetoric. The “Los Angeles Examiner” praised the film’s “exact portraiture of the appalling currency of

poverty” and Louella Parsons enthusiastically endorsed “Shoes,” linking its message to “societies and organizations that are working night and day for the establishment of a minimum wage scale for women.”⁶

For her script Weber also drew inspiration from Stella Wynne Herron’s short story “Shoes,” originally published in “Collier’s” magazine.⁷ While the outlines of the plot remain the same – an underpaid shop girl trades sex for shoes – Weber added elements to her script that complicate the treatment of sexuality and consumer desire. Whereas Herron’s story begins simply with Eva arriving home on a Saturday evening clutching her weekly pay, the film devotes substantial energy to intervals between work and home, particularly moments when Eva is poised in front of the shop window admiring the boots on display. Before we ever learn of her destitute family and her desperate need to replace her worn footwear, viewers are invited to share Eva’s interest in the shoes as items of fashion. Moreover, in Herron’s story no extended seduction leads up to Eva’s sexual “downfall.” Weber, on the other hand, added a detailed subplot in which Eva is courted by an unscrupulous cabaret singer, eventually succumbing to his overtures. Emphasizing Eva’s interest in fashion, as well as her participation in the heterosexual dating economy, Weber’s script complicates the circumstances under which Eva trades sex for shoes. Though they are underplayed in Herron’s story, consumer desire and sexual desire play significant and significantly intertwined roles in Weber’s film.

Weber also employed a host of cinematic devices that visualize Eva’s longings, articulate the imbalances of power in her household, and allow us to share her experiences of exhausting labor and humiliating poverty. Working with pioneering cinematographers

Dal Clawson and Allen T. Siegler, Weber used superimpositions, matte shots, tracking shots and optical point of view in highly imaginative ways. Woven throughout the film are moments when we are encouraged to share Eva’s viewpoint, to understand what it means to work hard, to feel ashamed of one’s circumstances and fearful about the future, and to long for one potent symbol of escape – a new pair of shoes.

¹ Ernestine Black, “Lois Weber Smalley,” *Overland Monthly* 68 (Sept 1916): 198.

² Louise De Koven Bowen, *The Department Store Girl* (Chicago: Juvenile Protection Association of Chicago, 1911), 1.

³ Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York: MacMillan, 1912).

⁴ “Lois Weber Talks Shop,” *Moving Picture World*, 27 May 1916, 1493.

⁵ “Shoes,” *Moving Picture Weekly*, 24 June 1916, 34.

⁶ “A Pair of Shoes,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 17 July 1916, n.p. Env. 2518, Robinson Locke Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; quoted in “Shoes,” *Moving Picture Weekly*, 24 June 1916, 12.

⁷ Stella Wynne Herron, “Shoes,” *Collier's*, 1 January 1916, 8-9, 25.

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