

Baby Face

By Gwendolyn Audrey Foster

In the Pre-Code era, it seemed that one could get away with almost anything in Hollywood, but no one in cinema history has quite as much tenacity, single-mindedness and consistency of aim as the character of Lily Powers, the protagonist of "Baby Face," brilliantly played by Barbara Stanwyck. "Baby Face," directed by Alfred E. Green, concerns a "gold-digging" young woman from a small town who moves up the economic ladder by using her brains and her sexuality. As one of the film's tag line notes, "she climbed the ladder of success -- wrong by wrong," while another adds "she had it [sex appeal] and made it pay."

In "Baby Face," Stanwyck is utterly ruthless and unstoppable in her climb to the top, and the frank rawness of the film was one of the reasons that the Motion Picture Code was enforced with new vigor in 1934, and remained in force until the 1960s. "Baby Face" doesn't sugarcoat anything; if anything, it shows that everything in life is a racket, and that in tough times, any and all tactics to get what you want are perfectly acceptable. Lily Powers is thus a threat to the patriarchal power structure that seeks to subjugate her, and as a result, while she emerges victorious in the film, in the real world, the censors had the last word – until the restored version was released in 2005.

While most readings of "Baby Face" understandably emphasize Lily's use of sexuality to conquer and rise to the top, perhaps it is also Lily's blatant embrace of modernism and its brazen capitalist predatory zeal and Art Deco style that assures her success. Stanwyck takes to the role with a gusto that is contagious; she enjoys the role thoroughly, and isn't the slightest bit ashamed of the sexual mechanics behind Lily's rise to power. The audience easily identifies with her struggle to get ahead in the midst of the Depression, particularly when she beds, and then discards a young John Wayne (in the role of mid-level executive Jimmy McCoy, Jr.) on her way to the top of the corporate ladder, along with a slew of other men who "help" her as she moves up through big



The frank, man-to-man story of a man-to-man girl!

**BARBARA
STANWYCK**
in "Baby Face"*

This ad featuring the film's star appeared in the April 15, 1933 edition of Motion Picture Herald. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

city corporate society.

Lily not only seduces men on her way to the top, but she conquers the modern city skyscraper, floor by floor, as the camera cuts to an exterior of the Art Deco "Gotham Trust Company" each time she successfully manages to get a better job through seduction, flirtation, or changing her appearance, all in a cynical and highly successful embrace of American modernism. Lily's persona is embodied in the modern skyscraper; it is in turn emblematic of her hardening process, and her quick-change class passing from old-fashioned clothing and hair, to dazzling bleached blonde, deco-gowned "modern woman." In forging her new identity, Lily, in turn, embodies the problematic emergence of modernist emphasis on capitalism, and luxury.

Lily's traumatic and troubled backstory includes being forced to turn tricks by her father, Nick (Robert Barrat), who runs a gutter level speakeasy in Erie, Pennsylvania, in the shadows of a string of coal mines and rundown factories. Lily's "home life" is a travesty – her father is really her pimp, and has been

using her as bait for his customers for years, where Lily has been forced to work as a waitress. When her father calls her a “tramp,” Lily responds bluntly “yeah, I’m a tramp, and who’s to blame? My father - a swell start you gave me. Ever since I was fourteen, what’s it been? Nothing but men! Dirty rotten men! And you’re lower than any of them. I’ll hate you as long as I live!” No wonder Lily has no interest in the past. She moves forward with the passion and tenacity of a luxury freight train. She’s only interested in the future; her future.

Lily’s only friend, the cobbler Adolf Cragg (Alphonse Ethier), is a sort of informal mentor, who encourages her to read Friedrich Nietzsche. Lily initially dismisses this as a waste of time, rhetorically responding that it’s no use, because “what chance has a woman got?” Cragg testily replies “more chance than a man. A woman, young, beautiful, like you, can get anything she wants in the world. Because you have power over men! But you must use men! Not let them use you. You must be a master! Not a slave. Look, here, Nietzsche says, ‘All life, no matter how we idealize it, is nothing more nor less than exploitation.’ That’s what I’m telling you! Exploit yourself! Go to some big city where you will find opportunities. Use men! Be strong! Defiant! Use men to get the things you want!” Gazing at Cragg as if she’s now been put on the right track to success at last, Lily starts to put this strategy in motion.

Lily has no interest in studying Nietzsche as if he were a classical antiquity; instead, she parlays his ideas into modernist capitalist ideology. Her class passing is dependent upon trampling over anyone in her way. With her friend Chico (African-American actor Theresa Harris), Lily leaves Erie for Manhattan, and sleeps her way to the top in a dizzying display of ruthless self-interest, piling up a huge amount of cash and valuable jewels, admitting “I’ve gone through a lot to get those things. My life has been

bitter and hard. I’m not like other women. All the gentleness and kindness in me has been killed. All I’ve got are those things. Without them, I’d be nothing.”

When a rather schematic love interest, powerful executive Courtland Trenholm (George Brent) finally enters her life, Lily for the first time meets someone who understands completely what motivates her, and yet admires her honesty in pursuing power and influence. There is a sort of a happy ending tacked on to the film, but it’s merely a sop to the audience at the last minute; the real pleasure of “Baby Face” is watching Stanwyck manipulate all the men around her and get away with it – in spades. Lily knows what she wants, and she’s tired of being played for a fool.

“Baby Face” is, in the end, a stunning indictment of the sexism of the era, which still prevails today. When first released, “Baby Face” was heavily censored, but the restored version – which still runs a scant 75 minutes – reveals the film in all its unvarnished intensity. “Baby Face” is not only an invaluable document of the hard luck 1930s; it’s also one of the most brutally honest films about corporate America at the time, and of the obstacles that women in the workplace faced then, and in many cases, still face today.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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