

Mildred Pierce and the Warner Brothers Style

[• home](#)[• collections & archives](#)

Joan Crawford had worked on a star rating for thirteen years at MGM, before a string of roles that were too alike turned her into 'box-office poison'. Even after signing with Warner Brothers she spent two years in the wilderness, until Jerry Wald found the perfect vehicle to bring her back to the screen. She was known for playing women tainted by humble origins and blighted in love; Jerry Wald's production unit at Warner Brothers specialised in noir-melodrama. It was the ideal combination to bring James M. Cain's corrosive novel, *'Mildred Pierce'*, to the big screen.

Releases

- [Mildred Pierce](#)
- [Synopsis](#)
- [Credits](#)
- [Cast](#)
- [Biographies/ Filmographies](#)
- [Quotes from Marketing](#)
- [Quotes from Film](#)
- [Mildred Pierce and the Warner Bros Style](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Hollywood Greats](#)

The studio had a reputation for straightforwardness and toughness reflected by the films and the stars. Warners had Cagney, strutting between mobster and Yankee Doodle Dandy (1942); Bogart, gangster and epitome of world-weary film noir hero (*The Big Sleep*, 1946), and Bette Davis, queen of melodrama (*Now, Voyager*, 1942). They also had Michael Curtiz, director of *Kid Galahad* (1937) and *Casablanca* (1942).

The Warners look was bound by tight budget restrictions and the art direction reflected this. Sets were regularly reused, and their cheap construction was disguised by low-key lighting and many night scenes. The shadowy sets were not purely a matter of expediency, they also suited Warners' aesthetic strategy. Anton Grot was a major art director at Warners during the studio era, and his work on *Mildred Pierce* typified the studio style. He not only designed sets, but suggested camera angles and lighting for them. His sets were impressionistic, conveying a mood; they were not literal reproductions of life. He is quoted as saying "I, for one, do not like extremely realistic sets. I am for simplicity and beauty and you can achieve that only by creating an impression." The end result was art design that was both economic and in total sympathy with the studio's cinematography.

The lighting in *Mildred Pierce* was influenced, as was the whole noir genre, by German Expressionist cinema. Shadow, silhouette and striking angular perspectives underlined themes of nervy paranoia and alienation in a world of threat and danger. Dominant shadows suggest that characters' motivations are hidden from each other and, by implication, from the viewer, and a woman is rarely what she appears to be.

The opening scenes of *Mildred Pierce* are a fine example of the classic noir set-up. In Wally's club Mildred is a true 'femme fatale'. Low level light and Mildred's wide-brimmed hat create a shot in which her face

is half in shadow, with the eyes in particular in darkness. She entices Wally to the beach house and locks him in, attempting to frame him for the murder of her second husband. When he discovers the body Wally panics and runs through the house desperate to escape. A kaleidoscope of light from the low table lamps and the dappled effect on the ceiling, seemingly caused by reflections from the sea, trap Wally in a cage of shadows.



Warners specialised in contemporary stories. The elaborate costumes of period musicals and lavish historical drama were a costly business, and an emphasis on an up-to-date urban image suited the Warners budget and style. *Mildred Pierce* begins with a rags to riches story in reverse. Initially Mildred is seen in a fur coat, the ultimate fashion symbol of wealth and power. Though icy, she is never evil enough to be a true femme fatale (that role belongs to her daughter Veda, a femme fatale in bobby sox). In the first flash-back Mildred is wearing an apron in a suburban domestic setting. High-level lighting shows a brighter world than the nightmarish atmosphere that pervades the opening sequence. The viewer is presented with an 'after and before' introducing the dominant issue of the story-line, not only who killed the husband, but how had this transformation taken place?

The costumes designer, Milo Anderson, along with other Warner designers such as Orry-Kelly, made modern clothes for ordinary people. The original publicity for *Mildred Pierce* pointed out that Joan Crawford 'usually has a wardrobe to make most women gasp with envy. For her present role, however, she had fourteen apron and twenty-one house dress changes - a new kind of record for one of the screen's most glamorous personalities!'

Her on-screen change in image marked the beginning of a series of films for Warners which took her through the Forties as a hard-working, strong middle-aged woman, who fought fate to live by her own ideals. The harder image suited the social upheaval of the post-war years, when women who had coped alone successfully while their men were away were faced with the possibility of finding their new liberation curtailed on the men's return.

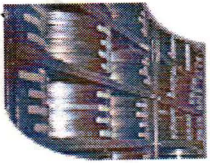
The mood of *Mildred Pierce* is assisted by a score typical of Warners films in the studio era. The highly individual background music by Max Steiner was very much in the style of the middle European tradition of romantic composition, as in *Jezebel* (1938) and *Now, Voyager* (1942). Steiner used Wagner-like leitmotifs throughout *Mildred Pierce*, wholly appropriate support for the heightened melodrama of the action.

In the 1930's and 1940's the Warners style was a composite one; the product of creative personnel working under the control and direction of corporate management. Film after film reinforced the elements of lighting, art direction, costume, subject, music and star image which will always signify a Warner picture.

Last updated Wednesday April 25, 3901 contact: feedback@bfi.org.uk

• text only

▲ TOP OF PAGE



Synopsis

• [home](#)

WARNING: This gives away some of the plot.

• [collections & archives](#)

Releases

- [Mildred Pierce](#)
- [Synopsis](#)
- [Credits](#)
- [Cast](#)
- [Biographies/
Filmographies](#)
- [Quotes from
Marketing](#)
- [Quotes from Film](#)
- [Mildred Pierce and
the Warner Bros
Style](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Hollywood Greats](#)



Six shots ring out from the gun of an unseen killer and Monty Beragon (Zachary Scott) dies gasping the name 'Mildred'. A policeman stops distraught Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford) drowning herself in the sea. The owner, business associate Wally Fay (Jack Carson), calls her into a cocktail bar. Mildred invites Wally for a drink at her beach house. She locks him into the house with Monty's body. He is arrested on suspicion of murder.

At home, the police are waiting with Mildred's daughter, Veda (Ann Blyth). Monty, Mildred's second husband, has been murdered. The inspector tells Mildred that the murderer has been caught; it is her first husband Albert Pierce (Bruce Bennett). Insisting he is innocent, she tells her story...

Flashback to four years previously. Bert's real estate partnership with Wally Fay has collapsed and Mildred bakes cakes to help make ends meet. Her determination to put the happiness of her daughters above all else, is too great a strain on their marriage. Bert leaves. Spoilt Veda asks her mother to marry Wally, but she refuses to act purely for financial gain. Mildred takes work as a waitress in a restaurant run by wise-cracking Ida Korvin (Eve Arden). Veda discovers her mother's secret job, and is full of scorn. To win back her daughter's affection Mildred opens her own restaurant with Wally's help.

Society playboy Monty Beragon, owner of the property, flirts with Mildred. Wally advises Mildred to divorce Bert to protect her new investment. Mildred and Beragon become lovers, but Mildred's younger daughter, Kay, dies of pneumonia and vowing to protect Veda, Mildred throws herself into work. On the successful opening night of the restaurant Monty continues his pursuit of Mildred. Bert sees them together and there is a jealous exchange.

In the police station, Mildred confesses to the murder and her attempt

to frame Wally. Her story resumes....

Mildred's success in business is tainted by Veda's demands and Monty's financial dependency. Afraid that Monty is a bad influence, Mildred pays him to leave. Meanwhile, Veda has secretly married young socialite Ted Forrester. His family insist on a divorce and Veda pretends to be pregnant to secure financial compensation. Her scheming horrifies Mildred who destroys the cheque and throws her out of the house.

Veda works as a cabaret singer at Wally's bar. Mildred begs her to return home, but she refuses. Mildred asks Monty to marry her to provide Veda with the society lifestyle she so desires. Monty agrees on the condition that he receives a third share in her business. Mother and daughter are seemingly reconciled when Bert brings the 'prodigal' Veda home as a wedding present.

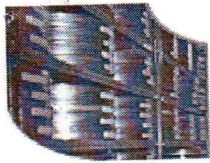
On Veda's birthday, Mildred is faced with bankruptcy. Forced to hand over the business to Wally she discovers that Monty has sold his share behind her back and drives out to the beach house to confront him. She finds Monty and Veda in an embrace and leaves. Monty and Veda argue. Veda shoots hi and persuades her horrified mother to take the blame.

Mildred's story confirms the inspector's suspicions. Veda has already been arrested and Mildred walks free, accompanied by Bert.

Last updated Wednesday April 25, 3901 contact: feedback@bfi.org.uk

• text only

▲ TOP OF PAGE



Quotes from the Original Marketing Campaign

• [home](#)

• [collections & archives](#)

Releases

- [Mildred Pierce](#)
- [Synopsis](#)
- [Credits](#)
- [Cast](#)
- [Biographies/ Filmographies](#)
- [Quotes from Marketing](#)
- [Quotes from Film](#)
- [Mildred Pierce and the Warner Bros Style](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Hollywood Greats](#)



'Mildred Pierce; she had more to offer in a glance than most women give in a lifetime' - taken from original marketing campaign



'Mildred Pierce; knew what she wanted and wasn't particular how she got it' - taken from original marketing campaign



'The kind of woman most men want but shouldn't have' - taken from original marketing campaign



'Loving her was like shaking hands with the devil' - taken from original marketing campaign



'Even a woman like me can be hurt once too often!' - taken from original marketing campaign

• [text only](#)

▲ [TOP OF PAGE](#)