# Hollywood's Portraits of the Artist as a Kept Man

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the early 19th Century, the male artist has been both celebrated as a heroic figure who represents self-expression and freedom from traditional work and a figure whose financial dependence of a patron undermines his masculinity. In the USA after World War Two, men faced increasing suburbanization and consumerism, and often longed for the rebellious freedom represented by artists like Jackson Pollock, Ernest Hemingway, and Jack Kerouac. But in the post-war Cold War culture, those who rebelled were threatened with the label of communist or homosexual. Focusing on three films made after World War Two--*Humoresque* (1946), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and *An American in Paris* (1951)--the article explores the portrayal of the male artist as a "kept man," and discusses visual and narrative elements in each film that work to reinscribe traditional gender roles. Specifically, each film uses a love triangle between the artist, an older, wealthy, female patron who threatens the artist's masculinity and artistic integrity, and a younger, more traditionally feminine woman who, by the end of the film, will help the male artist reassert his traditional masculine role.

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For at least two centuries, the image of the male artist has created conflicting perceptions in regard to heteronormative models of masculinity. Romantic writers, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, promoted an image of the male artist as tortured hero and rebel. Discussing the "heroic artist," Wanghui Gan explains how, "according to this trope, the artist is an inspired visionary, a prophet-like figure marked by potency, legitimacy, and creativity. Often a solitary genius and tortured outsider following the inclinations of his desires in self-imposed exile, he is romanticized as a countercultural rebel who is more authentic and honest than the masses because he is more attuned to beauty and truth" (1). To men who follow the model of traditional masculinity—husband, father, breadwinner who sacrifices his personal needs to satisfy the material needs of his family—the male artist may represent freedom and escape from social and labour conformity.

But this lack of conformity, and the desire to express oneself honestly through one's art, often come with economic instability—the trope of the "starving artist." As Amelia Yeates explains, "The figure of the male artist in the nineteenth century was a locus for various concerns surrounding the construction of masculinity, such as the issue of labour and production, the role of the patron and the marketplace and the gendering of aesthetics" ("Introduction" 133). Katarzyna Kosmala captures two aspects of the artist's relationship to work:

> The career in the arts' sectors is often referred to as having a protean form, that is, a form of a boundary-free organization of creative practice and linked to an occupation whereby the motivation and a drive for a success are internally infused and self-driven (Baruch, 2004; Hall, 2004). A notion of creative career is also closely linked to the idea of non-career, which is reflected in a pattern of working that is nonlinear, not easily approximated with the monetary value or with a form of financial recognition (Hearn, 1977), until it enters the art market through either patronage, networks or recognition. (17)

To achieve "recognition," artists usually relied on a patron, a relationship that undermines the connection between masculinity and financial independence. In 19th Century England, according to Yeates, some people felt that "the emasculation

of artists through their subservience to patrons automatically rendered them prostitutes," as "within nineteenth-century discourses …, women were frequently linked with exchange and transaction, a connection that rendered problematic artists' activity in the marketplace" ("Slave" 175).

During the period on which I focus this article—the decade after World War Two—the conflicting feelings about the artist as rebel were further complicated by the Cold War, an increasingly materialistic American culture, the growing corporatization of white collar male labour, and male anxiety about the perceived influence of women: "In the 1950s American men strained against two negative poles—the overconformist, a faceless, self-less nonentity, and the unpredictable, unreliable nonconformist" (Kimmel 236). While, as Michael Kimmel suggests, overconformity was questioned—conformity was associated with communism—"mid-century therapeutic culture pathologized the man who sought a lifestyle outside of the conventions of the time. Moreover, the increased awareness of the (invisible) male homosexual in every walk of American life added to the sense that a man was compelled to fulfill the life trajectory that experts deemed 'normal' and 'mature,' lest he be tainted by the stigma of homosexuality" (Cuordileone 138). Whether men feared homosexuality or suburban drudgery, it was women who usually took the blame for society's social ills:

> In the mid-twentieth century, the enemy for many male critics was less the female reformer proper (the ominous image of Eleanor Roosevelt notwithstanding) but rather self assertive, "civilizing" women in the private sphere, and a looming matriarchy radiating outward from the home. The claims made by mid-century male critics that women maintained a matriarchal grip on the family and society were absurd, yet they reflect new and unresolved tensions about women's mid-century roles. (Cuordileone 139)

In the films I discuss, these related anxieties about male financial dependence and growing female agency come together in the character of a wealthy, middle-aged female patron who offers the male artist monetary support, but at the cost of his sense of masculinity.

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In the decade after World War Two, the most prominent artists in America worked hard to maintain an image of the artist as approachable and heterosexual, thus challenging the stereotype of the artist as elitist and unmasculine. Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, Jackson Pollock[1]—and Gene Kelly (whom I will discuss more later)—all portrayed a traditionally masculine, working-class image. Pollock was hard drinking and wore a tee shirt, jeans, even cowboy boots (Jones 23), and much has been written about Gene Kelly's "athletic" dance style: "Not only did Kelly's American style democratize dance through his embodiment of the 'working man,' dispelling the myth of aristocratic ownership of dance, but his consistent portrayal of 'military man' roles offered a previously unseen, more universally recognizable male identity in onscreen musicals that continued to dispel the other American myth of dance as female" (Guernier 17-18). So, while a rebel against some aspects of society, male artists

> often reassert their manhood through an emphasis on sexual power relations and reconfirmation of their artistry. Thus, the correlation between the performance of machismo and of authentic artistic genius indicates that despite shunning society and being shunned by society, the [artists] still identify themselves within the boundaries of cultural ideologies that serve to assert and maintain male hegemonic power. They often display homosexual panic in grappling with long-standing cultural assumptions that associate artistry and male homosexuality, working to re-masculinize art and aesthetics. (Gan 4)

The popular post-World War Two artists I mentioned all maintained an image of masculinity that seemed to balance virility and heterosexuality with a challenge to the materialism and suburban drudgery that threatened to undermine traditional American manhood.

The three films I discuss—Jean Negulesco's *Humoresque* (1946), Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris* (1951)—do not explicitly address homosexuality; instead, each portrays a relationship between a young, male artist and an older, wealthy, upper-class woman who at first acts as his patron but soon becomes demanding in a way that undermines both his art and his masculinity. Whether buying him nice clothes, providing a place to live and work, or helping him connect with other wealthy patrons of the arts, the older woman places the artist in the position of a "kept man"—a position he reluctantly accepts in trade for the success and stability that his art alone does not provide. Using the narrative device of the love triangle, each film juxtaposes this older woman with a younger woman who, based on age, social class, and potential for love, marriage, and family—the hallmarks of heteronormative gender roles of the time—is portrayed as a more appropriate choice to restore the artist's manhood. And if these normative gender roles are not

clear enough, each film relies on other characters to articulate the expectations that the male artist is transgressing. While the mood and genre of these films range from melodrama to film noir to musical, each film resolves the narrative by restoring the main character's masculinity.

### *HUMORESQUE* (1946)

The film opens near the end of the story, with Paul Boray (John Garfield)—a successful classical violinist—facing a crisis. Through his words to himself, we learn that success has not brought the happiness and satisfaction Paul has always longed for; he still feels "outside, always looking in" and "far away from home," and longs to "get back to the happy, simple kid I used to be" (0:03:55-0:04:22). Flashing back, we see that as a boy, Paul already showed signs of the "heroic artist": despite his father's protests (Rudy played by J. Carrol Naish), Paul wants a violin for his birthday, rather than the baseball bat or fire engine suggested by his father. While his working class, immigrant father seems concerned about the cost of a violin, he also seems to want Paul to choose a more traditionally masculine occupation. Upon returning home, Paul's mother (Esther played by Ruth Nelson) goes to buy the violin, starting a pattern of support for Paul's musical dreams. Is she overindulging Paul, like his father (and many social critics anxious about the impact of "momism"[2] on young men) fears, setting him up for a life of financial dependence? As Rudy tells Esther about successful artists, "Statistics show there's one of them in a million. … Paul Boray: the genius who lives over a grocery store?" (0:18:48-0:19:02). But Paul seems to possess the mix of talent and determination needed to be that one, despite his father's and brother's (Tom D'Andrea) criticisms, which focus on Paul's lack of financial contribution to the family, a situation his mother continues to defend. Now a young man attending a music academy, Paul tells his fellow (somewhat successful) musician Sid (Oscar Levant), his older friend and character foil, "I'm not going to be a parasite from now on. I'm going to pay my way" (0:19:41-0:19:45). Expressing his desire for social mobility, Paul states "I don't want to spend the rest of my life living in a hot box over a grocery store" worrying about unpaid bills (0:20:43-0:20:55). Ironically, it is at this point that Sid explains to Paul the realities of being a successful concert musician: nice clothes, an expensive violin, a manager—all of which rely on an upper-class patron like Helen Wright (Joan Crawford), and thus another form of financial dependence.

Before I discuss Helen Wright, the older, rich, married woman who provides Paul the money and connections he needs to succeed, I want to discuss Gina (Joan Chandler), the young woman who loves Paul, and of whom Esther approves. Early in the film, Paul is walking with Gina, a cellist from the neighborhood who also attends the music academy, telling her about his artistic dreams which, as a musician herself, she can understand and support. Paul then tells Gina, "I never open up like this to most people. Not even mom; it's only you. I don't have to pose with you. I don't have to fight or argue. I can be just what I am: no different, no better, no worse, just me…." Before going

**Fig. 1** | Our first impression of Helen: surrounded by men eager to please her, 0:33:08. Warner Bros., 1946.

inside, she kisses Paul and says, "If I told you I loved you, would you laugh?" Once alone, Paul seems surprised and somewhat pleased, but he does not respond with similarly strong feelings (0:15:39-0:16:38). Maybe Gina is too familiar—they have grown up together—or maybe she symbolizes that "hot box over a grocery store" that he wishes to escape. Esther often speaks of Gina, and later makes clear that she can give Paul what he really wants: "I know you. Inside, Paul, you want a wife, home, children" (1:07:54-1:07:59). However, Gina cannot give Paul the financial support and social connections he needs to fulfill his artistic dreams, which he will not compromise. Unlike Sid, who is full of self-mockery and will acquiesce to the wishes of conductors or producers, and is happy to make any money from his art, Paul is proud and egotistical, regularly clashing with those who do not meet his artistic standards. As Sid says to Paul, "You have all the characteristics of a successful virtuoso: you're self-indulgent, self-dedicated, and the hero of all your dreams" (0:30:32-0:30:39). We see this pride and pugnaciousness on full display when he first meets Helen Wright, a meeting arranged by Sid as a first step toward the patronage that Paul needs and wants. What Paul soon learns is that there are strings that come with the support he will receive.

Our initial perception of Helen Wright as a strong, demanding woman is created by the portrayal of the men who surround her. Before Paul meets Helen, he sees her surrounded by obsequious young men who laugh at her quips (Fig. 1), and he also meets her husband (Paul Cavanagh), who describes himself as "weak" (0:33:27)—likely for putting up with Helen's flirtations. While these other men do as they are told—'"get my glasses for me like a good boy, Teddy"'(0:35:51-0:35:53)—Paul challenges Helen from the beginning—not surprising, given the choice of John Garfield to play Paul. As Stuart Hands discusses, Garfield often played tough characters who combined "dynamic expressions of pent-up anger, vulnerability, cold disillusionment and brimming sexuality" (2). And if the audience misses the associations, a drunken woman at the party makes them clear, insisting to Paul, "You look just like a

**Fig. 2** | A shot through Helen's wine glass—is Paul simply Helen's latest addiction? 0:40:59. Warner Bros., 1946.. Warner Bros., 1946.

**Fig. 3** | Dressing the artist, but with some resistance, 0:55:03. Warner Bros., 1946.

prize fighter" (0:33:41-0:33:43). But then Paul plays, piquing Helen's interest (Fig. 2). Though she hides it behind insults, Helen seems to enjoy the challenge, likely having tired of the "weak" men around her, and the next day sends Paul a gift of a gold cigarette case. Mama seems concerned about Helen's interest, a scene followed by Helen buying Paul a suit (0:54:25-0:55:36). Again asserting his independence, Paul will let her buy him a suit, but he insists on disregarding her opinion and choosing the material himself (Fig. 3).

Paul clearly has conflicting feelings about Helen's help. At the next meeting, he refuses to light her cigarette, and then says to Helen, "The patroness of the arts. What am I? A substitute for this year's trip to Sun Valley? Or the discovery of a new painter? You think it's pleasant to be patronized by a woman?" He fears she has "just added a violin player to your collection, that's all" (0:57:40-0:59:22). Hands argues that "In their initial scenes together, Paul's hostility toward Helen is well-rooted in her social status and the upper-class world she represents. But at times, this anger becomes indistinguishable from his resistance to the emasculation he feels as this strong woman helps and guides his musical career" (57). Paul clearly expresses his conflicting feelings between desiring success and relying on Helen to achieve that success. But his anxiety about being "patronized by a woman" no doubt, if only on a subconscious level, also reflects his ambivalence about his relationship with his mother. Paul may recognize that he has moved from relying on his mother, who has always supported Paul's musical ambitions, even in the face of his father's and brother's criticisms, to relying on Helen, whom he feels more comfortable criticizing. Paul seeks financial independence and artistic success away from his family; nevertheless, he still seeks approval, not from his father but from his mother who will continue to question his relationship with Helen.

While Helen willingly takes on the role of "patroness," she initially defines their relationship as strictly professional: Paul suggests a possible romantic relationship, but she is interested in him "only as an artist" (0:45:00-0:45:06). As Helen describes her past marriages, we learn her reasons for this reluctance, and for her drinking: she has been unlucky with men, and seeks to keep them emotionally at arm's length. She was married at sixteen to "a cry baby" and at twenty-one to "a cave man" (0:44:18-0:44:25), and as we know, is again married to a "weak" man presently. So when Paul comes on to her, she quickly asserts her need for independence: "I don't know how you men get that way, but every time you meet an attractive woman, you begin to plan how and where you're going to club her wings down" (0:44:35-0:44:41)). When Helen does eventually profess her love for Paul—"I love you. I can't fight you any longer, Paul" (1:05:57-1:06:06)—she begins to be a more sympathetic character because despite Paul's claims that he loves her, she quickly learns that she is less important to Paul than his music.

While Esther still distrusts Helen and her interest in Paul—unlike Rudy, Esther is not impressed by the nice apartment Helen has helped Paul move into, and still believes "There's something wrong with a woman like that" (1:26:36-1:26:39)—we begin to see the dark side of Paul the "heroic artist": "the myth of the artist-genius often goes together with artists exhibiting harmful behaviour, notably narcissism, machismo, and misogyny, as the myth provides the justification and impetus for problematic behaviour as natural moral and intellectual superiority, especially when these artists feel a lack of understanding and acknowledgement from those around them" (Gan 2). Helen's husband grants her the divorce she wants, so she can marry Paul, but echoing Sid's statement about Paul's artistic ego, he warns her that Paul is "not soft" and that "nothing means anything to him but his music" (1:29:35-1:29:39). A male friend of Helen's reinforces this criticism of the male artist after he sees the negative emotional impact Paul is having on Helen: "A French philosopher once listed three hundred ways to commit suicide. Only he left one out: falling in love with an artist" (1:39:46-1:39:50).

More than the other two films I will discuss, *Humoresque* portrays the "patroness" as a complex and sympathetic character,

**Fig. 4** | Joe Gillis finally gets some notoriety in Hollywood, 0:02:33. Paramount, 1950.

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and questions the drive and "narcissism" of the male artist. When Helen's friend speaks of "suicide," he foreshadows Helen's fate; Helen soon realizes that despite his claims of love, Paul is not a rebel against gender norms: "You want the homemaker type. Outside of your music, you cherish all the standard virtues," but more than anything, he is "married to [his] music" (1:43:00-1:43:36). Helen shows courage when she confronts Esther and professes her love for Paul, to which Esther replies, "You only make demands. Leave him! Leave him alone!" (1:46:32-1:46:39). Esther has always defended her son, and does not know what the audience knows about Paul's treatment of Helen. Increasingly despondent over her feelings for Paul, and not wanting to interfere with his musical success, Helen's last words echo those of Paul at the beginning of the film: "Here's to love. And here's to a time when we were little girls and no one asked us to marry" (1:51:44-1:51:54). Her suicide by drowning in the ocean—made melodramatic by Paul's concert music playing in the background, as if haunting Helen—suggests that she sacrifices herself for his music. Her death leads to Paul's emotional crisis that begins the film, but also the resolution he seeks: leaving his penthouse apartment, he returns to ground level and to what looks like the old neighbourhood. His final words, to Sid—"I'm not running away" (2:03:30-2:03:31)—suggest Paul has recognized that he can find happiness in returning to the place he so desperately wanted to escape, and while it is not clearly shown, the ending implies that Paul might return to Gina (she was at his concert, and looked happy), and to the heteronormative values that his mom defined as his true desire: "a wife, home, children."

### *SUNSET BOULEVARD* (1950)

Like *Humoresque*, *Sunset Boulevard* begins near the end of the story but not with a question to be answered by the main character. As Joe Gillis (William Holden)—"just a movie writer with a couple of 'B' pictures to his credit" (0:02:28-0:02:30)—floats face down in a swimming pool (Fig. 4), we quickly realize that his

**Fig. 5** | Nancy's disappointment in Joe's lack of artistic integrity, and Joe's defensiveness, 0:07:17. Paramount, 1950.

**Fig. 6** | Joe as controlling gigolo..., 0:57:29. Paramount, 1950.

**Fig. 7** | ... or self-deluding object of desire? 0:57:57. Paramount, 1950.

fate is sealed. We know that he dies, so our attention immediately shifts to "How did this happen?"—a question our dead narrator, through voiceover (and some Hollywood magic), answers by describing "the facts, the whole truth" (0:02:11-0:02:12) about the events that lead to his death. His story thus becomes a warning, and his first theme Joe focuses on the high price of seeking material success in Hollywood: "Poor dope--he always wanted a pool. Well, in the end he got himself a pool. Only the price turned out to be a little high" (0:02:35-0:02:42). As Joe will outline, his desire for success will cost him not only his life, but also his artistic integrity, an "appropriate" romantic relationship, and his sense of masculinity.

Continuing to recount his story through voiceover narration, Joe describes a life of financial desperation and artistic failure. Having left a comfortable job as a reporter in Dayton, Ohio, Joe clearly had artistic aspirations, but unlike Paul Boray, whose artistic integrity was always supported by his mother, Joe feels increasingly isolated and desperate. Unable to sell a story or even borrow money to avoid losing his car, Joe quickly gives up his artistic ideals, and even considers admitting failure and returning to his job in Ohio. His cynicism is highlighted when he meets the first corner of his future love triangle—Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olson), a young, idealistic script reader—while he is pitching his story "Bases Loaded." Not knowing Joe is present, she insightfully criticizes the story as written "from hunger" (0:06:26) and thus without merit, and then tells Joe that she thinks he does have talent he should nurture (Fig. 5). His response—"That was last year. This year I am trying to earn a living" (0:07:15-0:07:17)—reveals his vulnerability; Trowbridge argues that Betty's criticisms "insinuate that Joe Gillis has prostituted his writing ability" and that Betty "shows foresight, as the opportunistic writer indentures himself to Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) soon thereafter…." Joe soon "does triple duty as the silent star's ghostwriter, gigolo and audience, in return for lavish gifts that overindulge his acquisitive appetite" (296).

Unlike Paul Boray, who maintains his emotional control as he pursues a relationship with a reluctant Helen, Joe does not recognize the artistic and personal cost of his relationship with Norma. Hiding his car in what he believes is an abandoned mansion, Joe believes Norma's house is a safe place where he can hide and regroup. Initially, Joe thinks that he controls the relationship with Norma—"I was pleased with the way I had handled the situation. I dropped the hook, and she snapped at it" (0:24:01-0:24:08)—and sees it as preferable to a humiliating return to Ohio. He does not recognize how, with Max's (Erich von Stroheim) help, Norma will manipulate him into a sexual relationship that will undermine a more legitimate relationship with Betty (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). As Joan F. Dean argues, "Joe makes the same erroneous assumption about his profession as does his colleague played by Richard Gere in Paul Schraeder's *American Gigolo*. Both mistakenly believe that they control their situation, that they have the freedom to walk away from their trade when they choose, that they can reclaim their integrity" (95).

As Joe is moved from his apartment to the room over Norma's garage to a room in her house to Norma's bed, he

**Fig. 8** | The salesman's words of advice and encouragement, 0:37:29. Paramount, 1950.

**Fig. 9** | Joe does not react well, 0:37:31. Paramount, 1950.

feels increasingly conflicted about the relationship: "I wanted the job, and I wanted the dough, and I wanted to get out of there as quickly as I could" (0:29:10-0:29:15). His inner voice recognizes the peril he is in, but unlike Paul Boray, who has Mama reminding him of his heteronormative aspirations, Joe remains isolated and self-deluding. In a scene that parallels Helen buying Paul a suit, Norma criticizes Joe's clothes and offers to buy him new ones. Joe is initially reluctant—**Joe**: "I don't need any clothes, and I certainly don't want you buying them for—." **Norma**: "Why begrudge me a little fun? I just want you to look nice" (0:36:34-0:36:39)—but acquiesces. Through words of support, rather than criticism, the salesman (Peter Drynan) articulates Joe's role as a kept man by quietly suggesting to Joe that he take advantage of Norma's money: "Well, as long as the lady's paying for it, why not take the Vicunan?" (0:37:28-0:37:31). The salesman has no doubt seen this older, rich woman/younger man dynamic before, but as shown by Joe's reaction to his words, having his secret relationship made public does not sit well with his sense of manhood (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9).

In the decade after World War Two, the most prominent artists in America worked hard to maintain an image of the artist as approachable and heterosexual, thus challenging the stereotype of the artist as elitist and unmasculine.

Like Gina with Paul, Betty is presented as a more socially acceptable choice for Joe, as she is younger, of the same social class, and a writer who wishes to support Joe's artistic aspirations: "[Janey] Place insightfully points out that in *Sunset Boulevard,* Norma 'insists [Joe] participate in her life rather than being interested in his' (57), and that Joe's ideal partner Betty dreams of *his* career rather than her own, that she is content to be behind the camera rather than in front of it" (Mazur). Joe begins to live a double life, meeting with Betty to write, but carefully keeping each relationship secret from the other woman. Some critics have argued that Joe is thus an unsympathetic character. While describing Norma as a vampire "feeding on the life-blood of the young," Cooke criticizes Joe for "feeding off Norma's wealth" and sees the film as doing "little to endear either Joe or Norma to the spectator looking for some kind of positive identification" (92). I would argue that unlike Paul Boray, Joe lacks the male artist's arrogance and self-centeredness, and he also lacks the focus on money needed to be an effective gigolo. Out to get cigarettes for Norma, Joe runs into Betty again at a New Year's Eve party, and there is a clear attraction. But Joe calls to check in with Norma, and Max informs her that Norma has tried to commit suicide. Rather than seeing this as an easy escape from his "kept man" relationship, Joe feels guilty and leaves Betty, so he can console Norma. And while not as sympathetic as Helen, Norma is also presented as a complex character, a victim of the Hollywood system. As Cecil DeMille tells a younger colleague after Norma drops off her script at the studio, "A dozen press agents working overtime can do terrible things to the human spirit" (1:07:14-1:07:19)). Driven by guilt, Max—her current servant, former husband, and the director who discovered her—continues to maintain her illusions of continued stardom and hopes of return, denying her the opportunity to face reality.

We know from the beginning of the film that Joe will die, but before this happens, he does recapture his sense of masculine agency with the help of Betty. Joe has been writing secretly with Betty, and while he fights his attraction to her—Betty is engaged to Joe's friend, Artie (Jack Webb)—Betty eventually visits Joe at Norma's house to solve the mystery of his private life. Joe admits out loud the taboo relationship he has worked so hard to keep secret: "Older woman who is well-to-do, younger man who is not doing too well. Can you figure it out yourself?" (1:36:07-1:36:18). His secret revealed, Joe demonstrates some humility and integrity when he chooses to return to Ohio, without Betty, believing that she will be happier with Artie: "Maybe it's [Joe's relationship with Norma] not very admirable, but you

and Artie can be admirable" (1:37:08-1:37:15). Joe also tries to be honest with Norma, an attempt undermined by Max, but Norma shoots Joe in the back as he tries to leave. So, while Joe does not survive, and also chooses to give up his artistic aspirations, he does finally show male agency and the willingness to choose the hard reality of artistic failure over the illusions he maintains during his relationship with Norma.

Whether buying him nice clothes, providing a place to live and work, or helping him connect with other wealthy patrons of the arts, the older woman places the artist in the position of a "kept man"—a position he reluctantly accepts in trade for the success and stability that his art alone does not provide.

### *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS* (1951)

Unlike the other two films I discuss, which are set in the USA, *An America in Paris* is set in a society that more willingly accepts the male artist and places less focus on material success as a measure of happiness. James Baldwin, an African America writer who lived most of his life in Europe, describes this different attitude in a 1959 essay:

> The American writer, in Europe, is released, first of all, from the necessity of apologizing for himself. It is not until he *is* released from flexing his muscles and proving that he is just a "regular guy" that he realizes how crippling this habit has been. It is not necessary for him, there, to pretend to be something he is not, for the artist does not encounter in Europe the same suspicion he encounters here. (6)

Through his opening voiceover, Jerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly) does establish himself as a "regular guy"—a veteran who decided, after the war, to stay in Paris to paint—but also as a man who has chosen the freedom to paint over trappings of material and financial success. Angela Dalle-Vache argues that "While Jerry Mulligan is a tame, good-hearted all-American guy, his geographical dislocation and eagerness for psychological fulfillment through artistic creativity suggest that he also might be out of touch with the conservative America of the fifties" (72). Jerry contrasts his choice to live and paint in Paris with those men who have given up on their art and chosen the comfort of middle-class conformity: "Brother, if you can't paint in Paris, you better give up and marry the boss's daughter" (0:02:21-0:02:25). Here, Jerry introduces another version of the "kept man": gaining wealth through marriage. And while Jerry is poor and lives in a tiny apartment, he does not have Joe Gillis' precarious financial and social situation, thanks to the GI Bill, which pays him a small monthly sum; Jerry also has "many dear friends in Paris" (0:04:44-0:04:46), giving him a social network for artistic and financial support.

Like Paul Boray, Jerry has a strong sense of artistic integrity, and of masculine independence, which is only mildly threatened by Milo (Nina Foch), a rich, American, female patron. Jerry's first temptation toward the role of kept man occurs after his first meeting with Milo, who offers to have her driver take Jerry home. Sitting in the backseat of her large car, Jerry is cheered by the children in his neighbourhood, a scene echoing the cheers he might have experienced as a soldier liberating Paris during the war (Fig. 10). Through most of the film, Jerry will claim that there is no romantic interest between Milo and him, but the song he sings after returning home in her car suggests something else. The chorus includes these lines—"I got my gal/ Who could ask for anything more?" (0:26:38-0:26:44)—which may be coincidence, or may suggest that Jerry's interest in Milo may not be so innocent. However, to assert his independence, when Jerry returns to her place that evening for a party, and discovers it is just her, he protests, but she tells him, "I'm not trying to rob you of your precious male initiative" (0:32:42-0:32:46). Like Helen, Milo assures Jerry that she is only interested in him as an artist—a claim quickly contradicted when we learn that Milo has a pattern of relationships with male artists. Jerry seems to take Milo at her word because he quickly and aggressively hits on Lise (Leslie Caron), a young woman sitting at the next table—even commenting on her attractiveness to Milo and her friend, Tommy (Hayden Rorke) (Fig. 11). Later, while driving home with Milo in her car, Jerry gets angry when Milo claims he treated her badly; the relationship is repaired only when she apologizes for her outburst. Milo is right when she tells Tommy that Jerry "is just not … housebroken yet" (0:36:22-0:36:24), clearly showing her plans to domesticate Jerry. In his disrespectful treatment of Milo, and his aggressive pursuit of Lise, Jerry epitomizes the same qualities as Paul Boray: the "narcissism, machismo, and misogyny" described by Gan as a common defense mechanism used by the struggling, unappreciated artist.

Lise is initially turned off by Jerry's aggressiveness, but eventually relents. On their first date, we quickly discover that Lise better fits the feminine ideal of the 1950s: unlike Milo, who is middle-aged, rich, assertive, and at times, demanding, Lise is nineteen, works in a perfume store, is modest, and tells Jerry, "I don't like to talk about myself. I prefer to listen to you" (0:54:39-0:54:43). While she dates Jerry, and they fall in love, we learn that Lise is also loyal: she eventually reveals to Jerry that she is engaged to Henri, a successful middle-aged singer who cared for Lisa while her parents fought, and died, for the French Resistance during the war. In reality, Milo is not much older than Jerry, but compared to Lise's youth, and given her pattern of failed relationships, Milo comes across as older. And as with Helen and Norma, Milo's money, and Jerry's poverty, put them in positions of power that undermine Jerry's sense

of masculinity. Without telling him, Milo rents Jerry a studio, and arranges a show of his work. Initially resistant, Jerry eventually agrees but insists that he will pay her back. When Milo asks Jerry, "Why do you always make such an issue of money?" he replies, "Because I ain't got any. And when you ain't got any, it takes on a curious significance" (1:11:17-1:11:25). Angela Dalle-Vache claims that Jerry's "heterosexual identity is further threatened by the traditionally 'male' initiative Milo appropriates. … By virtue of his artistic vocation and his dependency on Milo's money, Jerry himself risks turning into that 'extra girl'" she used to lure him to their meeting date (67).

More than the other two films I discuss, *An American in Paris* overtly reinscribes normative gender roles. Though he is not married, Jerry has a strong sense of heteronormative values: during their first "date," Jerry tells Milo, who was married for two years before her husband left her for another woman, "You know, you should get married again. You need it." "Why?" she replies. "Everybody does. Everybody needs somebody to account to" (0:33:42-0:33:50). When Jerry does become more financially dependent on Milo—but remains in denial of her feelings for him—he has his friend and fellow musician, Adam (Oscar Levant, who also plays Sid in *Humoresque*), to remind him of the risk to his masculinity:

> **Adam**: "This, eh, sponsor of yours. What does she want in return? Don't tell me. I shock easily."
> **Jerry**: "You're crazy. She's not interested in me. She's just a good-hearted kid who likes the way I paint."
> **Adam**: "Huh. That's real dreamy of her. Tell me, eh, when you get married, will you keep your maiden name?" (1:04:25-1:04:44)

Later, Adam tells Jerry, "I told you this sponsoring business was complicated. You see what happens today? Women act like men and want to be treated like women" (1:16:53-1:16:59). And even Milo says she desires to fulfill the traditional female gender role, telling Jerry when he finally acknowledges her feelings for him and kisses her: "I feel like a woman for a change." "You are," Jerry replies (1:26:08-1:26:11) (Fig. 12). Jerry insists on arranging their plans for the evening, and she gladly agrees.

Despite her seeming acceptance of her traditional gender role, as a rich, middle-aged woman, Milo cannot prevail against social, and genre, conventions: "What is at stake in this love triangle is whether art should be aligned with the docile femininity of Lisa [sic], with the creative masculinity of Jerry, or with the entrepreneurial aggressiveness of Milo. These alternatives narrow themselves down to form the happy ending, which suggests that an American male can be a painter in Paris as long as he marries a French girl" (Dalle-Vacche 71). While *Humoresque* ends melodramatically with Helen's suicide and Paul's self-awareness, and film noir *Sunset Boulevard* ends with Joe's death and Norma's complete detachment from reality, *An American in Paris* is a musical, and thus the audience expects the reuniting of socially-appropriate lovers. And this is what they get. Ironically, what briefly pushes Jerry into Milo's arms

**Fig. 10** | Jerry gets a taste of the good life in Milo's car, 0:24:47. Warner Bros., 1951.

**Fig. 11** | Jerry spots the other part of his love triangle—unconcerned about Milo's feelings, 0:35:22. Warner Bros., 1951.

**Fig. 12** | Jerry takes charge, and Milo "feel[s] like a woman," 1:25:55. Warner Bros., 1951.

The artist represents freedom from suburbanization and soul-numbing work and consumerism, but as a "kept man," he reflects the fear of poverty and loss of traditional masculinity through financial dependence.

is learning that Lise is engaged to a man she admires and feels indebted to, but does not really love. We know that Henri has overheard the lovers, but we do not know his reaction to their revelation. But after Jerry's lengthy dance number, we find that Henri has freed Lise from their engagement. Lise returns and she and Jerry kiss—the happy ending we want, but an ending with little practical resolution: "the happy ending with the French girl distracts us from the difficulty of being an American male and a painter in Paris at the same time. From the plot alone it is hard to tell whether Jerry will continue to paint after marrying Lisa [sic]." Furthermore, the ending "does not completely resolve the rivalry between Art and Love, unbound male creativity, and the routine to which marriage leads" (Dalle-Vacche 65). Will Milo continue to help Jerry? Will Jerry and Lise have children, and how will being a husband and father impact Jerry's artistic aspirations? These practicalities remain unaddressed as the two lovers embrace.

## CONCLUSION

Writing about the post-World War Two era, Michael Kimmel describes how men faced a dilemma regarding their definition of masculinity: "Men had to achieve identities that weren't too conforming to the march of the gray flannel suit lest they lose their souls; but they couldn't be too nonconforming lest they leave family and workplace responsibilities behind in a frantic restless search for some elusive moment of ecstasy" (236). The three films I have discussed each portray the male artist as reflecting that dilemma: the artist represents freedom from suburbanization and soul-numbing work and consumerism, but as a "kept man," he reflects the fear of poverty and loss of traditional masculinity through financial dependence. The films also use the upper class, middle-aged "patroness" to portray anxieties about the perceived growth in the social and financial influence of women in this time period. Juxtaposing this empowered woman with a younger, more traditionally feminine love interest allows each film to reinscribe traditional gender roles by showing and telling the dangers of assertive women and weak men.

But the films differ in degree of dependence each artist faces, and of sympathy we feel for the "patroness" character. *Humoresque* is the most critical of the artist, as Paul Boray best represents the "heroic artist": driven to escape his working-class roots, Paul is "married to his music," and has the arrogance and selfishness to succeed. Helen is the most sympathetic "patroness," and it is only after her suicide that Paul begins to question his singular focus on music and to value the family and community he has worked so hard to escape. Joe Gillis faces the greatest financial and social vulnerability of the artists I discuss, and unlike Paul and Jerry, he lacks both arrogance and people close to him who can remind him of the dangers of transgressing against traditional gender roles. Through Joe's voiceover, we follow his ambivalence and self-delusion regarding his role as an artist and a "kept man." Although he dies, Joe achieves self-awareness and masculine agency: his decision to leave Norma, and give up his dreams of being a Hollywood writer, and return to his job in Ohio, show that he no longer wants to live the sort of illusion that has defined most of Norma's adult life. Living on the GI Bill, Jerry Mulligan never really faces Joe's financial desperation, and Jerry's artistic arrogance, combined with constant reminders from Adam about gender roles, means that Milo never really had a chance to make Jerry a "kept man." And while the film gives the audience the happy (gender role affirming) ending it wants, the film sidesteps any serious questions about how Jerry will balance the roles of male artist, husband, and father. Thus, while not every love triangle resolves to a happy Hollywood ending, each film does show the male artist eventually finding his traditional masculine identity. ▪

## NOTES

1. While Jackson Pollock maintained the image of working-class, independent masculinity, in reality, he was the epitome of the artist as "kept man." According to the documentary film *Peggy Guggenheim: Art Addict* (2015), Guggenheim discovered Pollock and "rescued" him from a job as a carpenter by giving him a large commission and arranging his first show. She also gave him a monthly allowance and a loan to buy a place to work, and continued to give him money after he married. Guggenheim also claims they had only one sexual encounter, which she described as "unsuccessful" (0:53:50-0:58:18).
2. See Kimmel, chapter 7, and Cuordileone, chapter 3, for a discussion of post-World War Two critics blaming women for male anxiety, as well as juvenile delinquency, homosexuality, and many other social ills.

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