

# All About Eve

## Education Resource



*All About Eve*, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, USA, 1950, 138 Mins





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## *ALL ABOUT EVE*

### TEACHER RESOURCE

#### ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

As well as interpretations and prompts suggesting aspects of *All About Eve* that repay further thought and investigation, this resource gives teachers a taste of some of the critical discussion that surrounds this text. Accordingly, the resource contains ‘chunks’ of reference material drawn from a variety of sources to give teachers a taste of the multiple approaches and interpretations available to their students.

**This resource has been produced for ACMI Education by Education Programmer Dr Susan Bye.**

#### INTRODUCTION

Inspired by a story and radio play written by Mary Orr, *All About Eve* was written and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who said he wrote ‘essentially for audiences who come to listen to a film as well as to look at it.’ Mankiewicz allowed scenes of dialogue to play out at length and was prepared to pause the action for quite long speeches, most often delivered by Eve, but also by Bill, Addison and Margo.

*All About Eve* was a huge critical success when it was released in 1950 and revived the career and reputation of Bette Davis who plays the acerbic but authentic Margo Channing. Although the film was nominated for a record 14 Academy Awards, Davis did not win; reputedly because co-star Ann Baxter who played Eve, insisted on being nominated for best actress rather than best supporting actress and split the vote. That the veteran star should have been foiled like this by her onscreen rival was rather ironic – as fans of the film like to point out, it was a case of life imitating art.

The few occasions that are not filled with dialogue tend to work to ‘set the scene’, such as when we see Karen entering the restaurant for her lunch with Margo, or to mark an



'entrance' – particularly one made by Margo. This focus on 'the lines' spoken not only adds to the theatricality of the world of the film but also underlines the fact that the characters in the film spend their lives performing on and off the stage.

One of the reasons *All About Eve* is such a rich text is that, as a popular Hollywood film made in the 1950s, it does the 'work' expected of a popular text in engaging with the discourses of the period: the role of women and their relationship to the public sphere, the construction of gender and sexuality, the rise of celebrity and the decline of the star system.

### SOME BACKGROUND

**Bette Davis:** one of the most famous Hollywood stars to have ever appeared on screen.

When *All About Eve* came out, she had slipped in popularity. At the same time, she was the only 'star' cast in the film, although George Sanders and Celeste Holm also had high profiles. Up until the release of *All About Eve*, Bette Davis was much more popular with female viewers and many of her films had the genre classification of 'the woman's film'. *All About Eve* is the first of Davis's films to prove as popular with male cinema-goers as female.

**Hollywood star system:** female stars had a 'use-by' date unlike male stars who were able to keep playing the romantic lead alongside a much younger woman. The close-up was an important aspect of the way that female stars were shot and, as they aged, this became more problematic.

**The theatre:** gave female actors more leeway, but the commercial plays that Lloyd Richards writes are based around desirable young women – something that has begun to make Margo very uncomfortable, even if she is as young as her audience imagines her to be.

**Broadway versus Hollywood:** In cultural terms, the theatre was considered much more prestigious than Hollywood. Hollywood films had been developed to be as popular as possible, offering audiences escapism and happy endings. In contrast, the theatre had its roots in tradition, going all the way back to the ancient Greeks.

Ask students to count how many references to theatrical tradition are sprinkled through the film. While some of these references would have been recognised by the average American filmgoer in 1950, many of them would not have been. It doesn't matter that we don't 'get'



most of them. This adds to the sense that these theatrical folk not only inhabit a completely different world to the viewers of the film, but are not even aware that there is a world outside the theatre. Their only cultural references come from the theatre. Karen's interest in fashion and the furs worn by movie stars is about as wide-ranging as anyone's perspective gets. Think about Margo's attitude to her fans and her audience.

For a glossary to the theatre references used in *All About Eve*, refer to *All About All About Eve* by Sam Staggs. Students may also be interested in the in-joke about the film's producer Darryl Zanuck who is also the producer of Bill's film. When Bill tells Margo that Zanuck is impatiently waiting for him to begin shooting, she exclaims: 'Zanuck, Zanuck, Zanuck! What are you two -- lovers?'

### MANKIEWICZ AS AUTEUR

In Gary Carey's influential interview with Mankiewicz about *All About Eve*, Mankiewicz describes the way that he used character to explore the complexity of human relationships and identity. He considered that words were as important an element of filmmaking as the cinematography and, as a consequence, prided himself on his capacity to direct actors and left the cinematographer to focus on the shots. *All About Eve* is very much an example of the fact that Mankiewicz wrote 'essentially for audiences who come to listen to a film as well as to look at it'.<sup>1</sup> Because of this focus on directing actors and leaving the film language to somebody else, Mankiewicz's films have been criticised for being stagey – a description that suggests a failure to use the dramatic devices that are integral to the art of filmmaking. However, in the case of *All About Eve*, the staginess and theatricality of the action complement the themes explored and add to the enclosed nature of the world being explored. Moreover, particularly with the use of film noir lighting, on-location filming in the theatre scenes and the careful composition of the actors within the frame, *All About Eve* is much more filmic than it is conventionally credited as being.

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<sup>1</sup> Dauth, Brian, "Introduction", Dauth (ed.), *Joseph L. Mankiewicz: Interviews*, University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 2008, p. ix.



Jackson, Kevin, 'Fasten Your Seatbelts', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2007

If Mankiewicz's dialogue isn't much quoted nowadays, it's because he excelled at the kind of lines that may look a little flat out of context, but shoot up like emergency flares when well delivered. Probably the most famous line he ever typed and filmed - "Fasten your seat belts - it's going to be a bumpy night" - reads fairly blandly on the page, but is a real zinger as spat from Bette Davis's curling, defiant lips in *All About Eve*. It has entered the American language (an episode of *Frasier* had the radio shrink saying it to the family dog, Eddie), much like the endearment "My little chickadee", which Mankiewicz wrote for WC Fields.

Often, his films contain a mouthpiece character - a sardonic, bitterly intelligent onlooker who represents Mankiewicz himself or some aspect of his temperament: the rich, manipulative Cecil Fox (played by Rex Harrison) in *The Honey Pot*, for instance. The supreme example is in *All About Eve*. Here, the Mankiewicz substitute is the theatre critic Addison DeWitt - played with deliciously suave, misanthropic disdain by George Sanders - who watches the machinations of the ambitious and the vulnerable denizens of his professional milieu with the detachment of an entomologist watching a war between ants.

*All About Eve* is set in the world of the theatre, a world that always fascinated Mankiewicz, and which he often, with the conventional middlebrow taste of his period, seemed to regard as essentially superior to movies. His films tend to be theatrical in both enriching and impoverishing ways. Even highly polished dialogue becomes tiresome when carried on too long, and Mankiewicz's productions are among the talkiest of talkies....

His flair for intelligent dialogue is matched by a confident mastery of structure. *All About Eve* is so easy to follow that, on first viewing, you hardly notice how complex its unfolding can be. The tale is straightforward enough: a celebrated but ageing star (Bette Davis) is pursued by an ardent young fan (Anne Baxter) who gradually proves to be a hypocritical, mendacious monster of ambition and greed, and who rapidly becomes a star in her own right.

Conventional stuff, on the face of it, but the whole thing is elaborated in an extended flashback - book-ended by the quite radical device of a long-held frozen frame - and is told by several different narrators, each of whom hands the telling of the tale on to the next



voiceover like runners in a baton race.

The title of *All About Eve* is a mild pun - all about a female character called Eve Harrington, the lethally ambitious young actress, but also all about Everywoman. The nature of Adam, Mankiewicz observed on more than one occasion, was of far less interest to him as a dramatist than the nature of Eve. Adam was fairly simple, and his sons all have uncomplicated motivations; the daughters of Eve are varied and subtle, and so much more satisfying to write about. The only reason why Mankiewicz isn't classed as a director of woman's pictures is that the genre as generally understood inclines towards the soppy, and resolves either in happy endings or satisfyingly wrought misery. Mankiewicz wasn't much interested in warming hearts or jerking tears; his forte was detailed and precise observation, and though his female characters are not all strong, they are all complex and carefully drawn.

### Explore

- What does the term 'stagey' mean?
- Why is it sometimes used as a criticism?
- Watch a scene from *All About Eve* and focus on the use of filmic devices.
- Consider the following comment about Mankiewicz's visual style: 'the camera moves when it should and Mankiewicz cuts when he must'.<sup>2</sup> How does this relate to the scene you watched?

### 'THE AWARD'

While Mankiewicz drew on Mary Orr's story to structure the narrative around an ageing star who became the target of a younger woman's ambition, he was also interested in exploring the status and desirability of 'The Award' along with its failure to deliver the sense of completion and purpose that it promises. In framing the film with the Sarah Siddons Society awards ceremony, he wanted to consider:

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<sup>2</sup> Dick, Bernard, *Joseph L. Mankiewicz*, Twayne, Boston, 1983



*“The Award” as also a totem. Its implications as a sort of cockamaimy immortality. Together with the conniving and soliciting and maneuvering that goes on for the acquisition of it—and, in the end, the strangely unenduring gratification it provides. Award-winning can often be followed, almost reactively, by a period of depression...’<sup>3</sup>*

In using the awards ceremony to bookend the film, Mankiewicz emphasised the tightly knit world in which the story was set, while highlighting both the isolation and the emptiness that Eve was left with after getting what she had so desperately wanted. Her success is confirmed by the newspaper photographers rushing forward to take her photograph but, rather than proving that she is a woman of substance, she disappears in the flash of the cameras.<sup>4</sup>

**Beckman, Karen, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, pp. 171-2**

Eve is on good terms with time. But, although her past and future seem relatively certain, her presence is more elusive. We may know where she’s been and where she’s going, but it becomes hard to tell where she is in the “now” of the film (which is in fact the film’s future) as the camera struggles to present her to us. Proudly occupying center screen, flanked on either side by an admiring male spectator, Eve appears to offer exactly what the camera demands: a full frontal gaze, face reaching out to its fans, a centrality and symmetry complimented by her dress, with its neckline plunging into her cleavage rather than away from it.

But the rising star’s relationship with the camera and visibility itself suddenly becomes more complicated. As Eve reaches out to accept the award that will (supposedly) confirm both her star status and Margo’s fall, press cameras flash so brightly that even hyperspectacular Eve, who moments earlier seemed to be the ideal object of the gaze, disappears into the light.

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<sup>3</sup> Mankiewicz to Carey, Gary, ‘More About *All About Eve*’ in Dauth p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Beckman, Karen, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, pp. 171-2.



## Explore

- Focus on the visual representation of the Sarah Siddons awards ceremony.
- How are the awards arranged?
- What do these awards and the awards ceremony tell us about the world of the theatre and its values?
- What do Eve's public and private responses to the award reveal to us?
- Why does Mankiewicz use the awards ceremony as a "framing" device for the story he tells?
- Turn off the sound and consider what we learn about the characters and their relationships by what we see during the awards ceremony.
- Watch the opening and closing awards scenes consecutively and consider how differently we view the same space and occasion after having watched the rest of the narrative.

## THE STYLE

*All About Eve* is an example of a very different style of filmmaking from what students will be used to. The dialogue is made up of 'delivered' lines rather than natural conversation and the camera movement is driven by what the characters say, rather than by story and action. In constructing the film this way, Mankiewicz is asking viewers to observe this strange world from the outside, as if we are watching a wildlife documentary.

The theatricality of the way the characters speak and behave – as if they are always on stage -- highlights how separate they are from the rest of their fellow human beings. They could be considered to have their own language. Although Eve is the consummate performer, her outsider status is demonstrated by her incapacity to engage in repartee. For instance, when Margo snaps, "Remind me to tell you about when I looked into the heart of an artichoke." Eve blandly replies, "I'd like to hear it." Eve doesn't speak the same language as the other characters.



The introductory scene set at the Sarah Siddons Society highlights the exclusivity and separateness of the theatrical world. It is an alien society that viewers need to be introduced to, and Addison is the one who is given this task. His voiceover narration highlights that this strange world needs to be explained to the uninitiated:

*The Sarah Siddons Award for Distinguished Achievement is perhaps unknown to you. It has been spared the sensational and commercial publicity that attends such questionable "honors" as the Pulitzer Prize and those awards presented annually by the film society...*

By putting the sound down so that he can provide a commentary on the action, Addison gives the impression that the people who inhabit the world of the theatre are mysterious creatures to be scrutinised and explained. Within this society of theatre folk, the individual who needs the most explanation is the one who holds the place at the top: Eve. That she is to be central to this behavioural study is highlighted by the freeze frame that catches her in mid-movement, pausing the action so that Addison can tell us "all about Eve".

Addison's role is constructed around his occupation as critic, the person who mediates between the theatre and the public, but in this scene he also seems to be acting as director, putting the sound down and freezing the action in the present so that we, the audience, can catch up.

One of the jokes accompanying Addison's address to us, the film audience, is that we are just that -- film viewers. He assumes an attitude of superiority towards us because we are engaging with an inferior cultural form:

*To those of you who do not read, attend the Theater, listen to unsponsored radio programs [in other words, non-commercial like the ABC] or know anything of the world in which we live - it is perhaps necessary to introduce myself.*

## Explore

- Show the introduction to the class.
- Consider Addison's role in establishing the context of the story that is about to take place. How does what you hear from Addison and what you see:



- add to your understanding of the world you are introduced to?
- contribute to your understanding of who he is, his role in the narrative and his relationship to the viewing audience?
- connect you to the characters?
- Focus purely on what you *see* in this scene: the set design, how people are arranged in the room, their age and what they are wearing, their responses through gestures and facial expressions to what is going on and to each other.
- What does what you see tell you about the theatre world?
- The “reaction shot” is a shot that cuts away from the main focus of the scene (in this case the awards presentation) and shows the reaction of a character or, as in this case, a number of characters. Describe the reaction shots in this scene and identify
  - what they communicate to us.
  - the thoughts, emotions and responses that we will only be able to identify AFTER learning “all about Eve”.

## GENRE

*All About Eve* is primarily a drama aimed at a mainstream audience, but it is also very witty and could be described as black comedy. The comedy comes purely from the repartee and Margo’s biting oneliners. In this sense it draws from the theatrical genre of the comedy of manners (“comedy that satirically portrays the manners and fashions of a particular class or set”), something that further emphasises how closed the world of the film is. Sam Staggs suggests a connection with the wordy comedies of the 1930s as well as belonging to the Hollywood tradition of “backstage” dramas:

*Certainly Mankiewicz drew on a comic tradition that depended on deft handling of actors, on the wit and timing of dialogue, and which used a minimum of cinematic trickiness....All About Eve remains the definitive movie about backstage life,*



*'backstage' being defined as anything in show business that the audience isn't supposed to see.*<sup>5</sup>

## BLACK AND WHITE CINEMATOGRAPHY

*All About Eve* is filmed in black and white primarily because, in 1950, filmmakers needed a reason to film in colour (musical, epic etc). The story being told in *All About Eve* was not going to lose anything by being shot in black and white, and audiences of the time were completely accustomed to watching films in black and white. (Colour began to take over in the 1950s when cinema tried to compete with television.) Most importantly, however, the black and white cinematography adds to the sense of claustrophobia that runs through the film.

On occasion, the cinematography draws on film noir, a style typically associated with the detective and crime genres of the period. Film noir uses light, dark and shadow to create a sense of moral uncertainty within the *mise en scène*. In other words, what we see tells us that this is a world in which people can no longer trust each other.

The scene in which Eve first introduces herself to Karen draws on the stark contrast between dark and light associated with film noir. Eve's duplicity is signalled from the start through the use of film noir lighting in the scene of her introduction. She emerges from the shadows into the light. Doorways, alleys, stairs and fire escapes were often used in film noir production design as they emphasise the "hidden", backdoor world explored in these films.

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<sup>5</sup> Staggs, Sam, *All About All About Eve*, St Martins New York, 2000 and 2001, p. 240.



The film noir style is also used to heighten feelings of paranoia that arise when characters can no longer trust each other and become increasingly isolated.



The shadows associated with film noir cinematography highlight Margo's growing sense of paranoia on the night of the party. Note the scene where she rushes from her bedroom to find out what is going on between Eve and Bill. Remember this style is only used at certain moments to make a particular point!

The cinematography also emphasises the doubling of Eve and Margo. For instance, film blogger Jason Fraley (<http://thefilmspectrum.com/?p=3465>) has singled out an outstanding example of visual storytelling with these two images:





## Explore

- Use a range of stills to encourage students to think about the lighting, the camera angles and shots used, the focus etc.
- Students can refer to media educator Brett Lamb's website for help with the basic language: <http://lessonbucket.com/filmmaking/cinematography/>
- Mankiewicz considers himself to be an actors' director and relies on the cinematographer to prioritise the performance and the dialogue.
  - Students can choose a scene and consider how this is done.
- Introduce students to the terminology of camera movement. Show a range of clips and ask them to think about the interrelationship between dialogue and camera. Often when the camera moves, it is because it is following the person who is speaking.

## EDITING

Consider the following description of Mankiewicz's technique: "the camera moves when it should and Mankiewicz cuts when he must". Watch a scene and focus on the editing and how this works to support the dialogue and the acting.

Jason Fraley focuses on the scene in which Karen hatches her plan to point to the effective use of the single take in drawing us into Karen's plan:

*As Karen hatches her scheme to strand Margo on the side of the road, she sits down in front of a fireplace with her back turned to the camera. Voiceover narration reveals her inner thoughts. But instead of cutting around to a front close-up of Karen's face, Mankiewicz holds the shot from across the room behind her, showing her head in front of the crackling fireplace. The fire becomes a hint to her mischief in this scene, an anomaly to her otherwise kind character. In all, the "single take" lasts one minute and 27 seconds. (<http://thefilmspectrum.com/?p=3465>)*

## Explore

- Ask students to choose a scene and consider how the editing adds to the rhythm of the dialogue and the narrative that is unfolding.



## MARGO CHANNING AND BETTE DAVIS

The film may be called *All About Eve*, but it is Margo Channing who draws the viewer's attention. When, in the final third of the film, Eve has not only taken Margo's role in Lloyd Richards' play but also her place at the centre of the film narrative, it becomes clear that Eve will only ever be a poor imitation of the real thing.

Brabazon, Tara, "The Spectre of the Spinster: Bette Davis and the Epistemology of the Shelf", *Senses of Cinema*, April 2001, Issue 13, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/feature-articles/spinster/>

*All About Eve* revels in the difficulty of being an ageing woman. Margo Channing's corset is a metonym for Bette Davis's performance of femininity. She simply does not fit within the laced up confines of the 1950s.

In her biography of Bette Davis, Barbara Leaming focuses on the opening scene to describe the extraordinary star presence which Davis channels through her portrayal of Margo. Her excellent reading of this scene also offers an insight into the way that Mankiewicz's focus on acting and characterisation works to create its own complex visual narrative.

Leaming, Barbara, *Bette Davis*, Cooper Square Press, London, 1992, p.224

Mankiewicz introduces Margo Channing in a silent soliloquy that allows Davis to establish her character's pungent personality through the deftly choreographed movements of her eyes. Davis's opening shot derives from its satisfying rhythm from the interaction between drama critic Addison DeWitt's acerbic voice-over narration and the play of Bette's eyes as she listens to an old actor's long-winded speech (mostly unheard by us) before Margo's nemesis, Eve Harrington, receives the Sarah Siddons Award. The camera has been scanning the dining hall of the Sarah Siddons Society as DeWitt introduces us to a number of the film's principal characters; we are still watching producer Max Fabian when we hear Margo's name uttered for the first time – dramatically anticipating the cut to Davis.



For a moment her heavily lidded eyes remain downcast, tantalizingly inaccessible – until the critic recalls Margo’s first stage appearance. Thereupon Bette slowly, majestically looks up, a spare gesture of astonishing power and intimacy (and considerable irony: although Margo’s gestures seem to respond to the critic’s remarks, she cannot hear them – they are directed to us).

Henceforth, although there is a good deal of other byplay (the lighting of the cigarette, the pouring of a drink), the beats of the shot are subtly punctuated by Davis’s eyes, glancing modestly downward (when the critic alludes to her nudity onstage at the age of four); and up again, opening wide and holding in place for a long silent moment that italicizes DeWitt’s final remarks on Margo’s stardom.

When Davis made *All About Eve*, she was 42, so a similar age to the character she was playing. She was a star on the wane and had lost much of her allure with a string of mediocre or bad parts. Female actors today complain about how few substantial roles there are for middle-aged women in contrast to their male counterparts, and Davis similarly struggled to find suitable roles. She told columnist Hedda Hopper, “People get the idea that actresses my age are dying to play younger women. The fact is we die every time we play one.” For Davis, the part of Margo Channing was a godsend; it would not only allow her to play her age, but, much more importantly, to play a middle-aged woman who was strong, individual and sexually active.

**Shingler, Martin and Gledhill, Christine, “Bette Davis: Actor/Star”, *Screen* 49:1 Spring 2008.**

What Davis was revealing, bit by bit and from role to role, was not the secret of her own personality – which, according to De Cordova, was the convention for Hollywood stars – but rather the secret of personality itself: that it is a fabrication, designed, constructed and performed. Fans who sensed that their own identities were largely built on lies and performance – that social, familial and personal roles were dutifully performed – were likely to get the most satisfaction from a Bette Davis film.



Like Davis, Margo Channing is very much aware of the uneasy space that the middle-aged woman occupies in the world she inhabits. However, while she is made uncomfortable by the incongruity of being a middle-aged woman playing characters half her age, she is, when we are introduced to her, at the peak of her popularity. This is one of the important aspects of her relationship with Lloyd Richards; he needs her more than she needs him. It is her name up in lights at the front of the theatre that brings in the crowds. Nevertheless, Lloyd Richards keeps writing plays for a lead female character nearly half Margo's age. Having a middle-aged woman at the centre of the action seems unimaginable.

When Mankiewicz wrote the screenplay of *All About Eve*, he was focusing on and highlighting the double standard faced by female actors, pointing out that there were no starring roles for middle-aged women. The taboo in regards to women and ageing, not only pointed to the discrimination against actresses who were no longer fresh-faced girls but also to the lack of interest in older women in society in general.

**Mankiewicz to Carey, Gary, "More About *All About Eve*" in Dauth, p. 61**

"Fortyish. You know, there's an old cue that never fails to stimulate some bitchy theatrical wisecracks – just drop the name of the current fortyish actress who is having to decide for the first time whether to play the mother of a late teenager. The jokes may be funny, but don't laugh. It's a bitterly sad point of no return for an actress. It usually means that a wide range of stimulating and gratifying identity proxies – particularly those that reflect and sustain the metaphor of youth – would from, now on, be inexorably unavailable to her. That the personality-aliases left for her to assume would now become inevitably character roles and – if she was unlucky enough to have to go on and on and on – caricatures."

Margo refers to the dangerous terrain that a female actor enters when taking on a role associated with maturity. She jokes that she might even play the role that is the kiss of death for a female actor -- a mother – but a mother with a child no older than 8 years of age. Along with the dearth of roles available for middle-aged women, the unspoken assumption that a woman's career is on the downhill slope once she begins playing mothers also says a lot about the status of motherhood in the society at the time.



There is much critical discussion as to whether Margo's *All About Eve* is a film that is ultimately deeply conservative in its portrayal of the independent woman. Margo takes centre stage for the first two thirds of the film but, after deciding that to be a true woman she needs the love of a good man, she disappears from the story, only to re-emerge long enough to dismiss her rival as someone without a heart. A number of feminist accounts have suggested that Margo is set up as the woman who has it all but discovers she is worthless without a man.

**Barbara Leaming, *Bette Davis: A Biography*, Cooper Square Press, New York, 1992, p. 225.**

At one fell swoop, in admitting that, yes, a woman must choose between happiness and a career, Margo seemed to undo all that Bette's gutsier characters had proved about a woman's capacity to function bravely and effectively on her own. Successful in the world as she may have been until now, Margo finally – wisely, the film insists -- accepts that the time has come for this powerful independent woman to stop fighting, step back, and let her husband take care of her.

**Brooks, Jodi, "Performing Aging/Performance Crisis (for Norma Desmond, Baby Jane, Margo Channing, Sister George, and Myrtle)", *Screen*, Issue 16, September, 2001.**

There are three choices available to Margo Channing in *All About Eve*. To continue to work, she can perform the role of a young woman, a role she no longer seems that interested in. She can take up the position of the angry bitch, the drama queen who holds court (the intentional or deliberate camp that Sontag finds in this film). Or she can accept her culture's (and her profession's) gendered discourse of aging which figures her as in her moment of fading. Margo ultimately chooses the latter option, accepting her position as one of loss. She decides to leave the stage, to marry her younger lover and colleague, and to hand her next role over to Eve (who has in fact already moved into it, with the complicity of Margo's friends and lover). She decides to leave one profession and to learn the "profession" that, as she says, "all women have in common, being a woman."



Sam Staggs argues that this kind of commentary ignores the fact that Margo is not actually planning to retire after marrying Bill, but intending to tour with *Aged in Wood*. However, there is no doubt that Margo sees her marriage to Bill as a major shifting of priorities. As she anticipates a life of having a man to be at home for, she no longer has “to play parts [she’s] too old for – just because [she’s] got nothing to with [her] nights”.

At the same time, Margo describes married life as if it is another performance, a role she is taking on. She has already explained the scenario to Karen in the back of the car:

*Margo: I want him to want me. But me. Not Margo Channing. And if I can't tell them apart - how can he?*

*Karen: Why should he - and why should you?*

*Margo: Bill's in love with Margo Channing. He's fought with her, worked with her, loved her... but ten years from now - Margo Channing will have ceased to exist. And what's left will be... what?*

So, to fill the void, once she decides not to play Cora, Margo constructs a new role for herself: “Now wait a minute, you're always so touchy about his plays, it isn't the part - it's a great part. And a fine play. But not for me anymore -- not a foursquare, upright, downright, forthright married lady.”

**Brooks, Jodi, “Performing Aging/Performance Crisis (for Norma Desmond, Baby Jane, Margo Channing, Sister George, and Myrtle)”, *Screen*, Issue 16, September, 2001.**

This resolution (if it can be called that) is only possible because *we do not see* Margo on the stage (except once from the wings via Eve’s point of view as Margo is taking her bow at the end of a performance). If we know Margo as a performer and as someone who takes pleasure in performing, it is less in terms of her work and more in terms of her histrionic performances *offstage*, for which she is both loved and punished. And while it is these offstage performances that define her as a “true star” in the film, Margo is reminded that “what is attractive onstage is not necessarily attractive offstage.” The resolution the film offers is both precarious and acceptable precisely because it is this histrionic form of performance,



though muted, that we assume she will continue to produce, even if she leaves the stage. After the lengthy flashback that makes up the bulk of the film, we return to the scene of its opening sequence-the crowning of Eve as Margo's unworthy heir. We find Margo and her lover announcing their impending marriage to their "dearest and closest" friends in a double date at the "Cub Room." As she meets the toast of the film's male villain (Addison DeWitt) with the raising and munching of a celery stick, it is clear that Margo has not in fact relinquished performing, but rather her profession.

### Explore

- Even though *All About Eve* is very much about the enclosed world of the theatre, the fact that Bette Davis, one of the most famous stars in Hollywood, plays the part of Margo Channing highlights the 'problem' of the ageing Hollywood female star.
- Why is age considered a particular "problem" for female performers?
- Explore the idea of the "aura": what Walter Benjamin calls the "magic of presence". Benjamin argued that: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."<sup>6</sup> The on-screen performance of the film star does not have the "magic of presence" that defines the connection between the star and the audience in the theatre. How does this relate to Davis's portrayal of Margo Channing?
- Carl Jung developed the idea of the persona, describing it as "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual".<sup>7</sup> How might this add to our understanding of Margo's behaviour? How might it apply to other characters in the film?

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Modern Art and Modernism*, p.218  
[http://www.berk-edu.com/VisualStudies/readingList/06b\\_benjamin-work%20of%20art%20in%20the%20age%20of%20mechanical%20reproduction.pdf](http://www.berk-edu.com/VisualStudies/readingList/06b_benjamin-work%20of%20art%20in%20the%20age%20of%20mechanical%20reproduction.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (London 1953)



- How does *mise en scène* add to our understanding of Margo as a character? Consider costume, props, the set, lighting, the composition of the scene including the way that the actors occupy the space.
- The framing narrative at the Sarah Siddons Awards Ceremony ostensibly presents Eve as the newly fledged public star and Margo as the one who has stepped aside. However, Margo's allure and star presence eclipses Eve in the eyes of the viewer. How does Davis draw our eyes towards her and her performance?

## EVE

Eve is a character who creates her own role and directs her own performance. Her introductory performance is brilliantly staged as she waits patiently at the stage door night after night, finally choosing a miserable rainy night to introduce herself to Karen with maximum pathos. With perfect timing she increases the dramatic impact by not being in the usual place at the usual time and then emerges from the shadows as Karen wonders where she is.

After being introduced to Margo, she uses flattery and self-effacement to create a connection and soon has the people in the room hanging on every word of her tragic life story. Margo's tearful response anticipates Eve's tears at the last act of *Aged in Wood*. Only Birdie recognises it as the perfectly crafted melodrama that it is: "What a story. Everything but the bloodhounds snapping at her rear end." It should however be noted that Birdie doesn't initially find the perfection of this performance alienating. On the contrary, she has responded to it with the same depth of emotion as the other characters.

As the narrative progresses, we learn that Eve does not simply want to be near her idol, or even to be like her idol but in fact wants to *be* Margo. One of the reasons that Eve is so effective in achieving her ambitions is that there doesn't seem to be a competing "self" to remake. Instead, Eve is a blank canvas. This blankness is very much part of the way the character is played by Ann Baxter. Eve has perfected the resonant actress voice, but has very little that is interesting to say. Most obviously she has no sense of humour and is unable to engage in the simplest banter. She also has a very sparse repertoire of gestures and facial expressions. This is accentuated by the way she is lit and shot, with the camera resting for



long periods on her face, which glows with a still radiance. This form of lighting is part of the cinematic apparatus of classic Hollywood cinema whereby leading ladies are idealised and turned into beautiful objects to be gazed at. In the case of *All About Eve*, however, this way of filming Eve emphasises her emptiness and contrasts her with the expressive and passionate Margo.

**Mankiewicz to Carey, Gary, "More About *All About Eve*" in Dauth, pp. 64-5**

"That insatiable need and greed. You will remember that they have become even more intolerable to Eve in the end, than they have been to us all along. Because she is confronted in the end – as all Eves must be, and are – by an acute awareness that, in fact, ever since the beginning, she has been servicing a bottomless pit. A void. Her ego? That Self, without which nobody is anybody? The Eves – male and/or female – have none. Just an inner emptiness they can never fill – but must continue to feed, merely to exist. Such, exactly, was the human condition of our heroine when we first came upon her in my film...

I'm sure you understand by now...that it was Gertrude Sleszynski who blubbered those words at Addison, not Eve. Gertrude who had been nothing, justifying her creating of Eve—who could be everything. And now that the breakthrough had happened – it could not unhappen. Eve would never be altogether Eve again. And as her self-awareness increased, so the others being 'on' to her mattered less."



## Explore

- In what ways is Eve's "performance" communicated in the film?
- How does Birdie respond to Eve? What does this tell us?
- How does Eve use costume as part of her performance?
- Eve comes into the small group of people that have formed around the production of *Aged in Wood*. How does her "performance" change this group?
- What does Eve really want from Margo? Does she get it?
- Eve tells Addison: "I had to say something, be somebody." How does this statement relate to her performance of Eve Harrington?
- Eve is the only character in the film with absolutely no sense of humour. How does this contribute to her characterisation?



## ADDISON DEWITT

Addison's role is constructed around his occupation as critic, the person who mediates between the theatre and the public, but in terms of his narrative control, there is a sense that he is not so much mediator but director. He even puts the sound down so that he can provide us with the basic knowledge we need.

Addison is the smoothest and wittiest character in the film, someone who seems to have modelled himself on Oscar Wilde. Only once does he break out of character – when Eve laughs at him when he points out that she is committed to him. The slap he gives Eve suggests that, underneath the armour of witty comments and put-downs, Addison is much less secure than he seems.

In this scene, Addison's persona takes on a sinister dimension. Having presented himself as an acerbic but objective critical commentator, he now reveals he has been orchestrating events so Eve can give him an entrée to the inner circle of the theatrical world:

*Is it possible -- even conceivable -- that you've confused me with that gang of backward children you've been playing tricks on -- that you have the same contempt for me that you have for them?... Look closely, Eve, it's time you did. I am Addison DeWitt. I'm nobody's fool. Least of all yours.*

**Joseph L. Mankiewicz to Carey, Gary, "More About *All About Eve*" in Dauth p. 75.**

"Addison's essential motivations and instincts are those of a collector. True, an acceptable male objective, the acquisition of possessions. But the items he collects are the most subjective imaginable: the secret fears, the private peccadillos of other people. His ultimate goal, of course, is dominance over them – and their work."

### Explore

- Think about Addison's role in framing the narrative. What is his relationship to the events that take place and our understanding of them?



- How does the scene of sado-masochistic violence involving Addison and Eve change our response to and understanding of the persona he presents to the world?
- What does Eve “belonging” to Addison mean?

## KAREN

Only connected to the theatre by marriage, Karen has come from the exclusive environment of Radcliffe – an elite women’s college attached to Harvard. On separate occasions, Lloyd, Addison and Margo refer to her privileged background as something that separates her out and makes her different. Glimpses of Karen’s life highlight her difference. While everyone else fills their lives with the theatre, Karen doesn’t work, chooses to go to a concert rather than see *Aged in Wood* for the umpteenth time and paints to fill her time. It is also not entirely unexpected that she should be the one to decide to give the “all powerful” Margo the “boot in the rear that [according to Karen] she needs and deserves”. Karen is partly motivated to shift the balance of power between Margo and Lloyd but she is also clearly bored – her Radcliffe education having given way to painting eggplants. It is surely no accident that Karen is seen to hatch her plan while engaged in her genteel hobby and it is also significant that her betrayal should be at the expense of Margo’s professionalism – Karen knows that Margo prides herself on never missing a performance. From the beginning, Eve recognises Karen as the weak link, her way in, and astutely plots and stages their meeting.

While Eve’s attraction for Margo relates to Margo’s insecurities, Karen sees herself as graciously bestowing her patronage on Eve. Karen also has great faith in her capacity to read people and situations – at one removed from the performance space of the theatre, she believes she has the outsider’s insight and observation. Yet, time and time again, Eve demonstrates that Karen is always, always ready to believe, not so much what she sees, but what she is told. The scene in the ladies room is excruciating as Karen is so quick to resume her previous demeanour of gracious condescension towards Eve only to learn that the tables have been turned. The extraordinary gap between what Karen believes and what is actually the case is emphasised in her voice-over narration.



## Explore

- How does Karen play the role of “the happy little housewife”?
- What is her response to Lloyd’s ensnarement by Eve?
- Margo and Karen are “best friends”. How is this friendship played out in the film?
- In her commentary on the rehearsals for *Footsteps on the Ceiling*, what Karen doesn’t tell us is just as interesting as what she does. Explain how this works. What is the effect of her saying that it is “odd” that Bill didn’t want to direct the play?
- One of the most fascinating motifs in *All About Eve* is the “disappearing woman”. How does this relate to Karen and her relationship with Lloyd?

## LLOYD RICHARDS

Lloyd and Karen Richards are described by Margo as her best friends but each of them champions Eve at Margo’s expense. When we first meet Lloyd he is in Margo’s dressing room clearly enjoying the shared laughter and Margo’s charismatic presence. At the same time, it is clear that his role is to play audience to Margo’s ongoing performance. When Eve is introduced into the circle of friends, Lloyd is delighted to hear that she has been to every performance of *Aged in Wood*, and eagerly asks, “Am I safe in assuming you like it?”. He is quite put out when Eve replies “I’d like anything Miss Channing played...” No wonder Lloyd gets twitchy, when Margo criticises the roles he writes for her. He resents the fact that Margo knows how good she is and longs for her to get the kick in the pants she needs and deserves.

For Lloyd, Eve becomes the perfect solution: a Margo clone without the attitude. One of the things that recommend Eve as a leading lady, along with her youth, is that her presence – at least at first -- allows him to reclaim his work. Perhaps this renewed sense of ownership and authority is one of the reasons Lloyd locks swords with Bill during the rehearsals of *Footsteps on the Ceiling*.

Lloyd never acknowledges Eve’s duplicity or the damage she has wrought. He is determined to give Eve the benefit of the doubt – despite the weight of evidence to the contrary. When Karen hatches her plan to give Eve her chance to perform instead of Margo, it is in response



to Lloyd's frustrated sense of self-importance. That Lloyd and Karen are back together at the end of the film, with Lloyd sheepishly presenting her with his award, is more due to Addison asserting his rights over Eve than to Lloyd coming to his senses



### Explore.

- Why do you think Lloyd mutters “Easy now” when Karen gets impatient with Margo?
- In the argument on the day of the audition, Lloyd and Margo each air some of the resentment that has apparently been simmering under the surface. What are some of the reasons they resent each other?
- Costume and clothes are a key motif in the film but, for the most part, Lloyd is dressed fairly conservatively. However, on the day of Eve’s audition, Lloyd is dressed



much more flamboyantly than usual – velvet waistcoat, patterned tie (see above).

How does this costume add to the drama being played out at this point?

- What is the effect of Lloyd's pyjamas and bathrobe in the scene where he and Karen are having coffee?
- What are we led to believe is Eve's attraction for Lloyd? Why does he interfere so much in Bill's direction of her performance?
- Lloyd Richards is a successful playwright and his plays performed by Margo fill the theatre. How talented a playwright do you think he is? What information are you given on which to base your judgement?

## BILL

When Bill first enters Margo's dressing room he is overflowing with energy. The room barely seems to contain him and he only has eyes for Margo. She leaves the room and he seems to deflate. He revs up when Eve gets him started on what is clearly a favourite topic – that the theatre doesn't begin and end on Broadway.

Despite the fact that he will be leaving Margo, Bill is keen to be channelling his creative energy in the direction of Hollywood. Like Margo, Bill is a straight-talker and can't bear the "bushwa in this ivory greenroom they call the theatre".

When Bill decides to bring the curtain down on his and Margo's relationship, it seems to be because Margo keeps playing the same scene over and over again. As an energetic and successful director, he cannot bear being part of a drama that is not going anywhere – that has, as his body language indicates, become boring. He is also very much aware that the ending he feels Margo is forcing on him is dramatically inappropriate: "You know there isn't a playwright in the world who could make me believe this would happen between two adult people."

While passionate and often adoring, Bill's interactions with Margo are also often tinged with condescension – the idea that he knows best and that she is a flighty headstrong woman who needs to be kept in check. As the director both on and off stage, he enjoys Margo's performance of Margo Channing to a point, but soon lets her know if she is overplaying the



role. For instance, on the night of the party, he refuses to make any concessions to Margo's jealousy of Eve: "This is my cue to take you in my arms and reassure you - but I'm not going to. I'm too mad!" After Margo is destroyed by Addison's column, Bill comes back to pick up the pieces. There is, nevertheless, something unsettling about the way he infantilises her: "Bill's here, baby. Everything's all right, now."

Even so, when we see the two of them together at the Cub Room where they announce their marriage, their shared energy and mutual pleasure in each other work like a forcefield protecting them – at least for the moment -- from the machinations of people such as Eve and Addison DeWitt.

### Explore

- Focus on Bill's speech about the theatre and explain how it connects up with the narrative that follows.
- There is a hierarchy of modes of performance in *All About Eve* with television on the bottom. What are some of the presuppositions and prejudices that feed into assumptions about what makes a "legitimate" performance?
- Watch the audition scene and consider Bill's body language – particularly in relation to Margo. What is his physical language telling us?
- When we see Bill at the end of the film, it is as if he is trapped directing *Footsteps on the Ceiling*. Why does Bill agree to direct Eve in Lloyd's play?

### BIRDIE

The polar opposite to Eve, Birdie is a completely authentic character and in a narrative that is about failures of perception and misplaced trust, Birdie remains a clear-eyed observer. Once Margo is ready to listen, Birdie can tell her exactly what has been going on. And, in fact, once Margo has been alerted to Eve's act, Birdie's role as a kind of chorus figure, commenting on the events as they unfold, has become redundant and, after the cocktail party, she doesn't appear again.



While Birdie instinctively rejects pretension and artifice, she is also, like all of the characters, a performer. She has created a droll, straight-talking persona that allows her to fill her designated role in Margo's life. In talking about the popularity of this character with audiences, Thelma Ritter commented: "Birdie always says the thing people never can think of until it is too late."<sup>8</sup> In their years together, Birdie and Margo have developed a double act. While Margo feels that she needs to play Margo Channing for everyone else in her life, she can be completely comfortable with Birdie who knows everything about her including the size of her girdles. Eve's presence disrupts their relationship, including their repartee, but their exchange prior to the party marks a return of their intimacy.

The disruption that Eve is going to cause between Margo and Birdie is signalled from the very beginning. In a particularly vivid example of Margo changing her allegiances, she dismisses Birdie's past, by denigrating both vaudeville and Birdie's status as a performer. The irony is that Birdie is living the future Margo so dreads for herself. In Birdie's case, not only has she grown too old to "close the first half" but the entertainment industry in which she worked has all but disappeared. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that Margo switches her loyalties to the youthful Eve.

### Explore

- Why is Margo so ready to replace Birdie with Eve?
- What is Birdie's response to Eve?
- Although Eve comes between Birdie and Margo, there is plenty of evidence that the pair has formed a strong bond over the years and that the two women share many similarities. How is the connection between these two characters represented?
- Even when Birdie is at her most acerbic, she is looking out for Margo's best interests. How is this portrayed?
- What are some possible reasons within the text for Birdie's disappearance after the party?
- Explore Eve and Birdie's relationship in the context of the portrayal of female friendship in *All About Eve*.

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<sup>8</sup> Staggs, p. 133



## COSTUME

Margo's lack of interest in appearances can also be noted in the way that costume is used in the film. When Davis was preparing for the part, Mankiewicz gave her a hook to hang the character on – Margo “is the kind of dame who would treat her mink coat like a poncho”. And this informs the wonderful gesture she makes when leaving for the airport, as she grabs her mink coat from the floor. In the cocktail party scene, Margo wears the film's most memorable dress, a dress that famously slipped off Davis's shoulders due to a mistake in the tailoring process but which Davis was able to make work for her – with the off-shoulder effect being both sexy and ever so slightly dishevelled, especially as it slips slightly askew as the evening progresses.

It has been pointed out that Eve and Margo's attitude to what they wear lies at the heart of their characters and their characters' awareness of their place in the world. In the scene in the dressing room, with her lost diamond earring and crooked seams, we are made aware of Margo's casual attitude to the luxurious trappings of success. She is happy to appear to the world stripped of all adornment: makeup, hair, clothes and jewellery. At this point before Eve has begun to weave her evil magic, Margo is someone who is sure of her place in the world, possibly even a tad complacent -- with the exception of Bill. But despite her insecurity about her age and about the attraction she holds for Bill, she is not prepared to pretend to Bill that she is anything other than what and who she is – “a junkyard”.

In contrast, Eve is a manufactured character, and her clothes are very much a part of this process of self-fashioning – what she wears is orchestrated with care and attention to detail. Think about the absurdly dowdy raincoat and hat that she wears every night when waiting for Margo – carefully designed to generate the greatest pathos, to suggest complete self-effacement. This outfit is a disguise, designed to draw attention to the humble persona Eve has created for her initial introduction to Margo's world. It works, as Margo confesses to Bill, to make her feel protective towards Eve. Margo describes Eve as “a lamb loose in our big stone jungle” but, after discovering Eve's fangs, realises she has always been a wolf in sheep's clothing.



Eve's desire to be Margo rather than to be Margo's friend is gradually revealed through her wearing of Margo's clothes. In a moment brimming with significance, Margo catches her with her *Aged in Wood* costume, imagining the effect she would – or in fact will – have, wearing Margo's costume while playing Margo's part. As Eve remakes herself as Margo, she also remakes Margo's cast off clothes to fit her as if they were her own. When Eve comes into Margo's bedroom wearing a smart suit that Margo has passed on to her, she insists that Margo acknowledge the way she has transformed the suit – with “a little taking in here and letting out there” -- and also that she has transformed herself. She needs the success of this makeover confirmed by the woman whose life has become the prototype for her own.

Eve moves further into Margo's territory when she tries to seduce Bill after her triumphant debut. This scene is a curious echo of the first scene in the dressing room where Margo has stripped herself free of the character she has been playing. Now, it is Eve who has just come off stage but she is still wearing Margo's costume and her wig; it is as if she is hoping that Bill will accept her as a replacement Margo. It is only after Bill has rejected her as an inauthentic version of Margo that she strips off the wig and tries to destroy it in fury.

When Eve appears at the Cub Room and delivers her ultimatum to Karen, she is no longer trying to emulate Margo but, instead, wears a dress that emphasises the youth that will make her the perfect Cora. The funereal costume she wears on the day of the New Haven premiere is more difficult to decipher, but possibly refers to the fact that she has been playing the role of war widow, a pretence that Addison is about to uncover. The floaty gown she wears to accept the Sarah Siddons Award accentuates her youth and makes her stand out amongst the elderly gentlemen who surround her, but the cloak that she wears over her shoulders brings to mind the image of a prizefighter or, alternatively, royalty. This cloak is the last thing we see, worn by Phoebe, and endlessly reflected.



Wakefield, Thirza, "The same cloth – Edith Head and Alfred Hitchcock", London Film Festival Blog, *Sight and Sound*, BFI, 16 October 2012, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/lff-blog-same-cloth-edith-head-alfred-hitchcock>

*All About Eve* is a distillation of the eloquence of film costume design, and its transfigurative, material reality for the actors and actresses who wore it. Costume, after all – unlike voice, body and movement – is the only thing not shared by an actor and his part: it belongs to the part alone and is the sublimation of his identity.

Robert J. Corber, "Cold War Femme: Lesbian Visibility", in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All about Eve*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 11.1 (2005) 1-22

Margo's physical appearance in this scene is especially revealing, as it contrasts markedly with her appearance in the preceding one, where we have seen her onstage and in costume. Dressed in an old bathrobe and smeared with cold cream—in short, stripped of all of the accoutrements of femininity that underlie her glamour as a star—she looks dowdy and middle aged, the antithesis of Margo Channing the Broadway star. Here the film calls attention to the performative aspects of her femininity, which, like one of her roles, requires a wardrobe, makeup, and a glamorous hairstyle, as well as an enormous amount of concealed labor, both her own and others'. In this respect, her femininity is not much different from Eve's. After all, she shares Eve's penchant for performing offstage as well as on, and, like Eve, she tends to perform her femininity to excess. Yet there remain enormous differences between the types of femininity the two embody. As we have seen, Eve's is the conventional femininity that Cold War nationalism promoted as essential to the nation's security, whereas Margo's is the flamboyant femininity of the diva, which is by definition excessive and theatrical. But neither Margo's nor Eve's femininity appears to be authentic or natural. Rather, we are encouraged to see femininity as an act or a role that Margo and Eve perform like any other. Karen calls attention to the performative aspects of Margo's



femininity in the party scene. When Margo, in a particularly bitchy moment, calls Karen a "happy little housewife," Karen replies indignantly, "Stop being a star and stop treating your guests as your supporting cast. . . . It's about time [you] realized that what's attractive onstage isn't necessarily attractive off."

- What do we learn about the other characters through their costumes?
- How is costume used during the party scene to tell the story?
- When Addison meets Karen at Twenty-One, he comments that she must be lunching with a woman as she is looking so elegant. Why does he say this and how does this connect with the film's attitudes to female friendship?
- What is the purpose of all the fur worn by the characters in *All About Eve*? Why doesn't Eve ever wear fur?
- As well as providing insight into characters and the roles they play, costume also brings out connections and differences between characters. Choose a group scene and explore what costume tells us in the context of the group.

## PRODUCTION DESIGN

At the beginning of the film, Addison sets the scene by describing the world represented at the Sarah Siddons Club:

*it is important that you know where you are, and why you are here. This is the dining room of the Sarah Siddons Society. The occasion is its annual banquet and presentation of the highest honor our Theater knows - the Sarah Siddons Award for Distinguished Achievement.*

The importance of the theatre to the characters' lives is reinforced by the production design or art direction. *All About Eve* was primarily filmed at the Twentieth Century Fox studio with the exception of the scenes set inside and outside the theatre, which were filmed on location at the Curran Theatre in San Francisco. It is appropriate, considering the centrality of the theatre in the lives of all the characters in *All About Eve*, that the theatre setting should be the most substantial, authentic, glamorous and complex space in the film. And in scenes like



the one in which Margo enters the empty theatre after Eve's audition, the genuineness of this space is underlined by the diegetic soundscape (the sounds that emanate from the world of the story), as, for instance, Margo's furious footsteps can be heard making their way through the space and everything the actors say echoes as it fills the cavernous expanse of the empty theatre.



In contrast to the distinctiveness of the theatre, the characters' homes are conventional and forgettable spaces. Margo's house looks, according to Sam Staggs, "as if done up by an interior decorator with no particular flair". At the same time, Margo's house is distinguished by its size and the quantity of artworks and the furnishings. Because we know the portrait of Sarah Siddons is a copy, we are led to assume that most of the elaborately framed artwork is there to create an effect, rather than having any intrinsic worth. Margo's house is a bit like a stage set and the many stairs accentuate the possibilities of the house as a personal performance space for Margo – this is very much the purpose of the balcony. The spaces in Margo's house are used to great effect in the party scene. Margo conducts her private



business off-stage in the kitchen, as she does a deal with Max in order to get Eve out of her house and bares her soul to Lloyd. While Margo's self-pitying performance takes place in the large reception room, the staircase becomes an alternative, intimate space from which Margo is excluded.

Margo's house is in stark contrast to Lloyd and Karen's home which is small, and furnished much more quietly in a more modern style. In contrast to Margo's gilt-framed portraits, Karen and Lloyd have just a few pieces of art on display – including a mysterious sculpture over the fireplace. Perhaps their decor reveals Karen's superior education and good taste. Perhaps this is also why we don't get to see a kitchen or even a conventional dining area but instead are witness to Lloyd and Karen's rather strange meal in front of the fire – breakfast for Lloyd and possibly late lunch for Karen.

While the empty side of Margo's double bed attests to Bill's absence, we have no doubt where he sleeps when he is in town. In contrast, Karen and Bill's bedroom reached by a rather creepy spiral staircase does not indicate a loving relationship. With their twin beds at an angle, the scene is set for Lloyd to turn away from Margo and head off to see Eve.

**Staggs, Sam, *All About All About Eve*, St Martin's Press, New York, 2001, p.186**

Nowhere in the various dwellings – Margo's house, Karen and Lloyd's apartment, Eve's seedy boardinghouse and her subsequent Park Avenue apartment, or the Taft Hotel suite in New Haven where Eve and Addison enact the film's climax – nowhere do we observe personal items such as books, family photos, a childhood toy or memento, much less a live pet. Their homes are impersonal. Whatever domestic warmth these characters enjoy is in the theatre.

### Explore

- What does the production design of the scene set at the Sarah Siddons Society tell us about the world we are entering?
- What does the on-location space of the Curran Theatre add to the scenes set there?
- Consider how features such as the stairs in Margo's house add to the unfolding narrative.
- Why do we get to go inside the kitchen at Margo's house but not Karen's?



- What is the function of the scenes filmed outside?

## KEY THEMES

**Identity** – private and public; youth and ageing; performance of the self; gender

**Relationships** -- trust and betrayal of trust; insecurity; friendship

**Group dynamics** – group culture; outsiders; shifting loyalties

**Celebrity and stardom** – authenticity and inauthenticity; fandom; the public image

## IDENTITY

A key question explored in the film is what makes us who we are. How much are our identities carved out by other people's impressions of us or their responses and reactions to our public performance of ourselves? How much of ourselves do we present to other people? How do we cope with changes to our public identities, through ageing, the loss of status or a changed public role?

### 1. The performance of the self

The narrative is driven by Eve's performance of Eve Harrington; a performance that we come to realise bears no relation to any true sense of self or identity. Eve is all performance, an emptiness that is exposed in the scene between her and Addison where we discover that she is a completely manufactured character. Margo refers to this lack in her final comments to Eve: "You can always put that award where your heart ought to be."

Balancing Eve's empty performance of Eve Harrington is Margo's performance of Margo Channing. Margo feels that she has become stuck playing Margo Channing, even though she doesn't know who that is. Her fear is that once she is no longer Margo Channing, the celebrated actor, she won't be anything at all. This is at the heart of her relationship with Bill:

*Bill's in love with Margo Channing. He's fought with her, worked with her, loved her... but ten years from now -- Margo Channing will have ceased to exist. And what's left will be... what?*



Because of this anxiety, Margo is caught playing a part with him – something that involves constantly testing him by showing him the worst of herself and returning continually to her insecurities about her age. That their relationship has become an ongoing drama with each assigned a part is reinforced on the night of the party when Addison snidely comments that the third act is going to be played offstage.

### Explore

- How might this idea of performing the self be applied to the other characters in the film?
- When Margo tells Lloyd that she has turned forty, she sees it as a “confession”, as if to a crime: “That slipped out, I hadn't quite made up my mind to admit it. Now I feel as if I'd suddenly taken all my clothes off...”
- Why is Margo's age such a big issue?
- How and why is age considered to make more of an impact on the career of a female performer?
- Do you think attitudes to ageing and to women ageing have changed since *All About Eve* first screened? If so how? (Students might be interested in Meryl Streep's comment that in the world of Hollywood, women over forty are considered “grotesque”  
<http://www.examiner.com/article/meryl-streep-on-hollywood-ageism-older-women-are-seen-as-grotesque>)

## 2. Playing a role

One of the things that stand out about the different characters in *All About Eve* is that even though they are distinctive and individual, they are in some ways defined by the roles they play. So, we have the director, the writer, the wife, the star, the companion, the producer and the critic. Margo's challenge is to consider what she might be or become if she is no longer playing the lead role as the “star”, while Karen's role as wife, with “no talent to offer”, makes her replaceable.

Eve upsets this way of defining identity in the narrative, initially when she doubles up on the role of companion and makes Birdie redundant and, more significantly, when she



manufactures herself as a newer, younger version of Margo. To do this, she studies Margo as if she were “a play or a book or a set of blueprints”. Eve ends up taking Margo’s place and Margo becomes pushed to one side, as she contemplates taking on an alternative role as “married lady” (but never, it is worth noting, expresses the desire to be a “wife”).

The male characters in *All About Eve* seem to have more fixed identities than the female. Whether Bill is working in Hollywood or the theatre, he knows the purpose and meaning of what he does, something that is emphasised in the speech he delivers to Eve about the nature of the theatre. Lloyd never questions what he does, viewing his writing as the definitive element of the performance: “It’s about time the piano realised it has not written the concerto!” Similarly, Max Fabian remains the digestively-challenged producer and Addison the sardonic critic commenting on the action. Addison does however step out of character in the scene with Eve with his furious and uncharacteristically physical reaction to her laughter.

### Explore

- Why is someone’s career such an important part of their identity? Why is this connection between job and sense of self particularly significant in the case of the characters in *All About Eve*?
- Why do the roles of the female characters seem to be less certain than those of the male characters? Why can’t the women in the film feel as confident of their assigned places in the theatre world and within the group?

### 3. The public and private self

People behave differently within different contexts. It could even be suggested that they become different people depending upon the circumstances and who they are with. While the shared belief amongst her friends is that Margo is always “on”, always playing Margo, her character provides an insight into the differences between the public and the private persona. Margo’s fast-talking, theatrical public self, on show for the majority of the film, contrasts most vividly with the private Margo revealed in the scene in the car with Karen, but



also in a series of small moments when she is caught off guard – for instance when she first becomes suspicious of Eve and in her devastation after reading Addison’s column.

### Explore

- Consider the narrative purpose and function of the scene in the snow where Karen and Margo talk together.
- Margo “lets her hair down” in this scene and talks to Karen without any of the theatrics that are so much a part of her public persona, but Karen cannot reciprocate with the same honesty. How does this scene highlight the damage that Eve has already inflicted?
- What other characters reveal their private selves? When? What do we learn from these moments when the public performance is suspended?

## RELATIONSHIPS

Because of the enclosed nature of the world presented in *All About Eve*, the relationships are particularly intense. In situations where a small group of people spend a lot of time with each other, the best and worst of people may be revealed.

The narrative of *All About Eve* works as a series of triangular relationships where Eve becomes the third element in preexisting and completely functional relationships between two people. So, she comes between Birdie and Margo. Then, between Bill and Margo and, then, between Margo and Karen and, finally, between Lloyd and Karen. And in fact, as she moves into the middle of each of these preexisting couples, Eve displaces one half of the couple. This complex dance of shifting relationships and changing loyalties not only highlights Eve’s destructive duplicity, but also leads us to consider the fragility and unreliability of human relationships.

### 1. Marriage:

The “love” relationships in the film -- Karen and Lloyd’s marriage and Margo and Bill’s tempestuous love affair – highlight, in particular, the unequal status of the male and female partner in a heterosexual relationship. Karen as “the wife” has the role of loyally supporting



her husband but has no talent. We discover when Eve comes along that Karen has been expecting to be deposed by someone with more to offer than love:

*It seemed to me I had known always that it would happen - and here it was. I felt helpless, that helplessness you feel when you have no talent to offer -- outside of loving your husband. How could I compete? Everything Lloyd loved about me, he had gotten used to long ago.*

In the case of Margo and Bill, Margo is an extraordinary star with enormous talent at the peak of her popularity but she is in love with a man who is eight years younger than her. In the world of the theatre it seems that age is not as much of an issue for a man as it is for a woman: “Those years stretch as the years go on.” Margo is aware that, however long she may be able to maintain her career at its present level and sustain the belief that she is a “leading lady”, she has probably reached the peak of what she can achieve. In contrast, the youthful Bill is only at the beginning of his career. In deciding to remake herself as a “foursquare, upright, downright, forthright married lady”, Margo decides to approach marriage as another role to be played, and she intends going to play it with spirit and zest.

The fact that the extraordinary and talented Margo seems to feel she and her life are worthless without a male partner links up with the postwar context of the film: women were being encouraged to move back into the home after having been encouraged to take part in the workforce during the war years. At the same time, Margo’s independence, theatricality and lack of domesticity have been so much a part of her character development that it is hard to imagine that she will be contained or defined by the role of “married lady”.

### Explore

- Find out more about the postwar (and Cold War) context of the film and the emphasis on marriage and the traditional family structure.
- How might this pertain to Margo’s feeling that she is nothing without a man to share her life with?



- Consider Margo's belief that marriage will give her a substance she lacks in the context of Karen's comments that she has always expected to be replaced in Lloyd's affections because "Everything Lloyd loved about me, he had gotten used to long ago."
- Is *All About Eve* really as positive about heterosexual relationships as some of Margo's speeches might lead us to believe?

## 2. Friendship

The friendships in *All About Eve* are both intense – because of the enormous amount of time friends spend together as well as potentially quite destructive. In some ways the friendships are more like a marriage in terms of the time spent together, the secrets revealed, the emotions vented and the knowledge shared.

Birdie and Margo spend more time together than Margo and Bill and have a mutual understanding that sees them feed each other lines and chortle with delight at the response. At the same time, whereas other relationships are played out through the spoken word alone, Margo and Birdie can communicate with the exchange of looks. That Eve has interfered in their friendship is indicated by the fact that we are witness to Birdie's displeasure at Eve's intrusion but Margo is (perhaps willfully) oblivious.

Margo's friendship with Karen and Lloyd is viewed with ambivalence. When Karen and Margo are stranded in the snow, Margo lets her public persona slip, trusting Karen with her true feelings and telling her that she and Lloyd are her best friends. The fact that this scene takes place because Karen has drained the fuel from the car in order to sabotage Margo's performance emphasises Margo's vulnerability and isolation. The relationship Margo has with Karen is complicated because of Karen's insecurity about her lack of talent and her position as an outsider. Both Karen and Lloyd are also aware that Margo considers she is doing Lloyd a favour appearing in his plays.

It seems that one of the reasons Eve is welcomed so enthusiastically into the insular group is that she introduces some new blood. Karen warms to her because Eve's outsider status makes Karen feel like an insider. She enjoys being a mentor who can make things happen for someone, in contrast to her role as the audience to Margo's histrionic performances.



## Explore

- Track the way the relationships in *All About Eve* change as a result of Eve's interference.
- How does Eve play on existing – mostly hidden -- tensions to achieve her goal?

### 3. Trust

What is a relationship if it is not based on trust? Putting on a play is a collaborative process requiring participants to work together to ensure a successful performance. To operate effectively, the theatre needs to be a place of trust and mutual cooperation, but it becomes a “jungle” once Eve reveals her fangs.

When Eve first appears with Karen at Margo's dressing room door, we are introduced to a secure and comfortable group of people. The laughter that emanates from the room is both companionable and intimate. Once Eve is introduced into this charmed circle of friends, they will never again have quite the same level of trust and intimacy.

Eve is able to infiltrate the group with such ease is because they are so quick to trust her, to believe that she is what she says she is. (Note their rapt expressions as they listen to her hardluck story.) Addison, in fact, comments on the naivety of Eve's victims: “Is it possible -- even conceivable -- that you've confused me with that gang of backward children you've been playing tricks on?” Birdie is the only one who recognises Eve for the consummate actor that she is. The polar opposite to Eve, Birdie is a completely authentic character and in a narrative that is about failures of perception and misplaced trust, Birdie remains a clear-eyed observer. Once Margo is ready to listen, Birdie can tell her exactly what has been going on.

Margo is also completely secure in Birdie's loyalty but this makes Margo take her for granted, replacing her with a newer, younger model. (This is quite ironic considering she is afraid that is what Bill is going to do to her.) Margo hands all of the details of her life over to Eve, who uses this privileged insight into that life to take it over. Margo says to Bill at the airport that she feels protective towards Eve who seems like a lamb loose in the jungle of New York. Bill turns this idea around when he asks Eve to take care of Margo who is a “loose lamb in a jungle”. Of course, as it turns out, Eve turns out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing that Margo needs to be protected from.



The self-effacing and innocent-seeming Eve turns out to be ruthless in her ambition and quite prepared to do anything to get where and what she wants. Her ruthlessness is revealed most unnervingly in her capacity to form friendships with women where she uses their protective instincts towards her against them. For instance, Eve plays on Karen's soft heart to get to Margo but then astutely exploits Karen's vulnerability as an outsider and her latent jealousy of Margo.

The aftermath of the awards ceremony reveals Eve's emptiness and disillusionment with the dream she has fought so hard to realise. She is also acutely aware that the group she infiltrated and divided has reformed, leaving her back on the outside. She has however made her mark. Thanks to her behaviour, she has left behind an awareness of the vulnerability of the mutual trust these people were formerly able to take for granted. Lloyd's gift of the award to Karen highlights the rupture that has occurred, something that is emphasised by the reference to receiving a wartime honour: "For services rendered -- beyond the whatever-it-is-of-duty, darling." Perhaps the bitterest legacy Eve leaves is the guilt that Karen feels about her betrayal of Margo and the ongoing fear of discovery.

### Explore

- Because of the introductory scene set at the Sarah Siddons Awards, we are always aware that Margo is going to be displaced by Eve. How does this affect our response to the unfolding narrative, beginning with Eve's initial introduction?
- The term dramatic irony refers to moments when the audience knows something that at least one of the characters doesn't. How does dramatic irony affect our response to certain events in *All About Eve*? For instance, we know what Karen has done to prevent Margo from performing but Margo uses the time stuck with Karen in the snow to communicate with complete honesty.
- What are some of the ways that the loss of trust between the characters is communicated visually?



## GROUP DYNAMICS

### 1. Group Culture

In exploring relationships and friendships and the individual responses to Eve's machinations, *All About Eve* also highlights the complexity of group behaviour. It is in the nature of group dynamics that people can become stuck behaving a particular way and being a particular kind of person because of the role assigned by the group. The group in some ways confirms a person's identity but also places pressure on people to maintain a particular persona. Margo is the central figure in her group of friends and has been accustomed to people making allowances for her. Even Birdie, who is quick to pull Margo back to earth when she is playing the grand lady, is very protective of her. Birdie and Margo also offer a kind of double act that keeps the others entertained.

Karen's role in the group is in some ways very central: she is the wife of the playwright and Margo's best friend. At the same time, that is *all* she is – her identity is defined by her relationship to other members of the group. The one thing that is distinctive about her is her elite education at Radcliffe. All of her roles within the group point to her being part of the supporting cast rather than one of the main actors. At the same time, while Karen is aware of her lack of talent; the rest of the group is aware of what sets her apart: her good taste and superior education: "Please don't play governess, Karen. I haven't your unyielding good taste, I wish I'd gone to Radcliffe too but Father wouldn't hear of it -- he needed help at the notions counter."

The group generally makes allowances for Margo, partly because she is "just Margo" but there is an intimation that there are other reasons for this forbearance just under the surface – perhaps a shared awareness of her vulnerability and a mutual delight in her magnificent performance of herself. Perhaps too, they have learned to tread carefully as a result of other nights similar to the night of Bill's welcome home party. As Karen says, "We know you; we've seen you before like this. Is it over - or just beginning?"



## Explore

- Compare the impressions we shape about the group in the dressing room with those we form as we observe the Sarah Siddons Awards Ceremony.
- What is the effect of beginning the narrative in the present so that we are first introduced to the group of friends after the events with Eve have taken place?

### 2. The Changed Dynamic

A point that seems to be being made through the eagerness of the group to embrace Eve is that these people know each other a little too well. Even though we are made very aware of how comfortable and connected to each other they are, they are delighted that someone new has been added to the mix. We wonder too if their enthusiasm for Eve is partly linked to her youth, which is also a bit of a novelty.

Age is a significant factor in group dynamics, as is gender. Margo is initially drawn to Eve as a result of her youth and freshness – perhaps this is one of the reasons she allows Eve to usurp Birdie’s position in the household. Having a young person around can be invigorating, particularly one who seems to worship the ground that you walk on. However, once Margo sees herself as being in competition with this younger woman, her feelings undergo a dramatic reversal. The fact that this reversal is not understood by the rest of the group (except for Birdie) means that Margo finds herself treated like an outcast, removed from her central position and replaced by a younger version of herself.

Addison also plays an integral role in the changed dynamics of the group. Although he speaks of himself as a “theatre person”, he is an outsider, someone who critiques rather than creates. In promoting Eve’s career, he is able to use his position on the margins to poison the relationships between the members of the group. Think for instance about his contribution to Margo’s fury after she finds out about Eve’s participation in Miss Caswell’s audition. Described by Lloyd as a “venomous fishwife”, Addison is particularly effective in disrupting and destabilising because he is a really good critic, able to identify tensions and pinpoint vulnerabilities.



## Explore

- Ask students to consider the way that loyalties shift in their own friendship groups when a new member is added to the group, or something changes, perhaps a relationship between two members of the group comes to an end or changes in some way.
- An existing group dynamic depends on people fulfilling a particular role in the group and behaving in a way that is acceptable. This mutual understanding can be impacted by certain behaviours such as shifting loyalties, envy or jealousy, the struggle for status or increased competitiveness. Envy and jealousy are particularly powerful emotions and can eat away at group harmony.
- Describe how Eve's infiltration of Margo's group of friends and colleagues unleashes some of these disruptive behaviours.
- What are the consequences?
- Even after Eve has been exposed, she continues to cause disruption and disharmony, perhaps most obviously between Bill and Lloyd during the rehearsal of *Footsteps on the Ceiling*.
- What is happening between the two men and why?
- Why did Bill eventually allow himself to be talked into directing the play, even though Eve has behaved so poisonously towards Margo? Is it possibly because to refuse to direct his best friend's play would cause a further rift in the group dynamic?

## CELEBRITY AND STARDOM

Margo is a star: "a great Star; a true Star". Stars are not made; they are born. Rather than creating themselves on stage through the performance, the authentic star uses the performance to "reveal" their star qualities – and Margo literally reveals herself in her first performance as a four year old in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Eve is determined not merely to be a star like Margo, but in fact to *become* Margo and she works tirelessly to achieve her goal. However, this work suggests that no matter how good the performance Eve produces is, she will only ever be a copy, not the real thing.



When Addison meets Margo after Eve's performance with Miss Caswell, he does in fact describe Eve as a revelation, but this must be seen in relation to the metaphor he uses in the opening scene when he first introduced us to Eve. Her revelation of herself when she is onstage may be compared to the light of a lighthouse, rather than a star.

*Minor awards are for such as the writer and director - since their function is merely to construct a tower so that the world can applaud a light which flashes on top of it and no brighter light has ever dazzled the eye than Eve Harrington.*

Eve is dazzling rather than authentic, and because she is all surface, with an empty space where her heart should be, her performances are not enough -- her fans need to fill the emptiness she brings with her by feeding on her offstage life:

*Eve is Eve, the Golden Girl. The cover girl, the girl next door, the girl on the moon... Time has been good to Eve, Life goes where she goes - she's been profiled, covered, revealed, reported, what she eats and when and where, whom she knows and where she was and when and where she's going...*

As is intimated by the flashing camera bulbs recording Eve's success, her public identity has become part of her performance in contrast to Margo's shunning of public spaces and hatred of "autograph fiends". For Margo, what counts is what she reveals in the moment of performance, and she is not at all interested in giving any more of herself up to the public gaze. Her image is based on the distance that she maintains between herself and her audience, but she allows Eve to infiltrate her private space. Misled by Eve's apparent dedication to the performance (she has been to every single one) Margo allows her the kind of access that is the ultimate goal of celebrity culture - the desire to get close to the idol.

It is no accident that Eve's meteoric rise is driven by her connection to Addison, who uses his powerful position within the media, not only to publicise the newcomer's performance, but to create attention-grabbing controversy. Margo's response - once she has the reassurance that Bill is back - is to put in a particularly brilliant performance that evening: "I was good!" However, the scene that follows in the Ladies Lounge between Eve and Karen suggests that Margo's faith in the integrity of the great performance is out of date.



At the same time, from our perspective as the audience, it is difficult to believe Eve could ever be an acceptable substitute for Margo Channing. Margo's performance as the ageing star of the theatre is definitively underwritten by the glamour associated with Bette Davis the Hollywood movie star. Thanks to Davis's skill with the on-camera performance, Margo retains her allure no matter how cleverly Eve may have worked to usurp her. She actually needs to be removed from the film to give Eve any chance of playing her substitute. When Margo reappears at the end, supposedly displaced by Eve, it is Margo – or more accurately Davis – who fascinates and holds our attention.

Eve, in contrast, is replaceable. By the end of the film, as she packs to leave for Hollywood, her replacement has already appeared. Like Eve, Phoebe is a fan and, also like Eve, her love of her idol makes her want to get close enough to her, that she might dream of becoming the next in a long line of Eves. While Eve wants to be Margo, she never convinces us, the film audience, that she has the capacity, or the heart, to do this. The physical similarity between Eve and Phoebe and the endless repetition of Phoebe's mirror image forecast a future in which the star performance has been overtaken by the endlessly repeatable and reproducible celebrity entertainer.

**Brooks, Jodi, "Performing Aging/Performance Crisis (for Norma Desmond, Baby Jane, Margo Channing, Sister George, and Myrtle)", *Screen*, Issue 16, September, 2001.**

The conclusion of *All About Eve* heralds a new kind of 1950s star, one embodied in Eve (Anne Baxter) and Eve's soon-to-be successor Phoebe, but this new kind of star is figured as formulaic and bland. Against this vapidness the tempestuousness, rage, and sheer presence of Margo Channing/Davis can only stand as magnificent.

### Explore

- How does *All About Eve* deal with and represent celebrity culture, and fame and fandom?
- What is Phoebe's role in the film?
- Does the star image associated with Bette Davis and her alter-ego Margo Channing exist as a possibility in the present day or has celebrity culture completely taken over the relationship between the audience/fans and their idols?



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