Discussion Questions for Women in Film--Cleveland Gathering, June 4, 2013:

Focal Film: *Now, Voyager* (1942; U.S.; Screenplay by Casey Robinson, Based on the novel *Now, Voyager* by Olive Higgins Prouty (*Stella Dallas*); Directed by Irving Rapper)

*Now, Voyager* is a classic Warner Brothers studio film, with important contract stars and bit players, music by Max Steiner (with an occasional assist from Tchaikovsky), and fine black-and-white photography by studio cinematographer Sol Polito.

In *Now, Voyager*, the principal characters are:
* Charlotte Vale, a neurotic and repressed “spinster” from a wealthy Boston family (played by Bette Davis)
* Jeremiah (Jerry) Duvaux Durrance, an unhappily married man whom Charlotte meets on a cruise to South America (played by Paul Henreid)
* Dr. Jaquith, a psychiatrist who treats Charlotte and helps her gain confidence (played by Claude Rains)
* Mrs. Vale, Charlotte’s mother, a subtly sadistic matriarch (played by Gladys Cooper)

The cast of characters also includes Charlotte’s sympathetic sister-in-law Lisa Vale (Ilka Chase), her niece June Vale (Bonita Granville), and nurse Dora Pickford (Mary Wickes).

This film has been the focus of quite a bit of scholarly inquiry. It has been discussed and examined in a number of ways:

* As top-notch Studio Era genre output (Greven, 2011)
* For its groundbreaking take on women’s roles (Glancy, 2010)
* For its treatment of psychiatry and the emerging trend toward psychoanalysis (Zimmerman, 2003)
* As a showcase for the considerable talents of its stars, especially Bette Davis (Glancy, 2010)

The film *Now, Voyager*, as noted by scholar Patricia White (1999, p. 94), “enjoys popular enthusiasm as well as feminist and even mainstream critical acclaim as a high-water mark of the wartime woman’s film and one of Davis’ defining performances.” The film’s title comes from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*: “The Untold Want, By Life Nor Land Ne’er Granted, Now Voyager, Sail Thou Forth to Seek and Find.”

1. Although neither directed by nor screen-written by a woman, *Now, Voyager* is certainly a “female-focused film.” What are your observations in this regard?

2. This film presents variations on traditional *family roles*. How are the roles of mother, of daughter, and of father, constructed in the film? In particular, note Charlotte’s shifting roles from daughter to surrogate mother. What do you conclude from these role portrayals?

3. Who has *power* in this film? Is this power balanced by the efforts of other characters? Or, are some characters rendered helpless? And, who is “good” and who is “bad” in this film, and are these characteristics distributed as we might expect them to be? (p.s., Compare the power and ethics dynamics of this film with those shown in our last film, *After the Wedding*.)

4. More specifically, let’s consider how the roles of men in this film are “diminished”—Charlotte’s absent father and ineffectual older brothers are an “expulsion of men from the family” (Britton, 1992), the weak
lover of her youth confirms the superiority of her mother, and even Jerry’s inability to break free from his unhappy marriage confirms the centrality of women’s wants and needs. Is this or is this not a “feminist” view of the world, in your opinion?

5. A main thematic motif in the film is that of metamorphosis. The major narrative arc is that which follows Charlotte’s transformation from ugly duckling, under her mother’s thumb, to independent, mature woman navigating the adult world of love and relationships. What elements signify this metamorphosis?

6. A related motif is that of ocean travel. The opening credits are superimposed over a still, a painting, of an ocean liner. Charlotte’s transformative moments take place on ships—her first love (with crew member Leslie Trotter), and her metamorphosis into “beautiful butterfly” on her solo voyage to South America when she meets Jerry Durrance. What exactly do the motifs of “ship” and “ocean travel” signify?

7. Scholar Naomi Rosenthal (in her text, Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities, 2002, p. 131) has indicated that this travel brings the character of Charlotte away from home, family, and everyday contacts into what is called a “liminal” space, where inhibitions diminish as the distance from the everyday increases. What is Charlotte escaping with this travel, and what inhibitions are diminished?

8. The “reveal” shot of Charlotte’s new look, beginning at her feet and tilting up to a face still partially obscured by a wide-brimmed hat, is one of the most famous shots in old Hollywood history. It has been described as a very peculiar shot: “The radical shadow bisecting the face in white/dark/white strata creates a visual phenomenon quite distinct. . . This shot does not reveal what we commonly call acting. . . but the sense of face belongs to a plastique pertinent to the camera” (Affron, 1977). What exactly about this shot makes it so affecting and memorable, do you think?

9. The fashions featured in Now, Voyager are perhaps as much stars as are the actors. Charlotte’s ensemble during the “reveal” scene is a knock-out. Later, her dinner clothes, with butterfly applique, are stunning...but as noted, these are “borrowed wings.” Other stylish outfits follow. Such fashions are in stark contrast to Charlotte’s drab wardrobe at the outset of the film. Throughout the film, clothing serves as a barometer of Charlotte’s psychological status, from “fat maiden aunt” to sophisticated stunner. What are some of the lasting impressions of Charlotte’s character as communicated by her clothing?

10. Of course, this film is also noted for its introduction of the double-cigarette lighting habit, which became a popular custom after this popular film’s release and is seen by many as symbolic of sexual attraction. What is your interpretation of this cigarette lighting ritual?

11. Coming of age films are numerous, particularly coming of age films that focus on young male characters. But a comparable body of films about “the experiences of women seeking to be self-determining adults” does not exist (Allen, 1984)—this film is rather rare. Although Now, Voyager is “encased in a melodrama overshadowed by a theme of romantic but frustrated love,” this piece of “women’s initiation-ritual fiction” holds up admirably over time. What do you feel is the real source of its enduring popularity and perceived importance as a coming of age story?

12. Dismissed by some critics (mostly men) as an overwrought tearjerker, Now, Voyager is today embraced by some scholars as a prime example of the “woman’s film,” a particularly successful Hollywood
genre of the 1930s and 1940s (Smith, 1999). As defined by Jeanine Basinger (1993), “Whatever the plot, whatever the tone, whatever the outcome, the woman’s film accomplishes one important thing for its viewers: It puts the woman at the center of the universe. Thus, the woman’s film is a genre that generously empowers a sex that society has relegated to secondary status.” In what ways are women shown as empowered in *Now, Voyager*?

13. The famous ending of the film has enjoyed several different “readings” by scholars and critics. (To recall: Bette Davis delivers the lines, “Oh, Jerry, don’t let’s ask for the moon. We have the stars.”) To some, this ending is self-sacrificial, a finale to Charlotte’s maturation as an adult. To others, Charlotte’s decision is the manifestation of her dormant maternal instinct, matching the tropes of the maternal melodrama of the era. And to some, the ending denotes a lesbian sentiment, Walt Whitman’s “untold want” identified as Charlotte’s decision to live life unmarried and on her own terms (White, 1999). What is your own interpretation of the film’s ending?

14. The music, by Max Steiner (*King Kong, A Summer Place*), is award-winning and memorable. In a style similar to that of Wagner, he assigned a leitmotif (musical theme) to each of the seven main characters and situations in *Now, Voyager* (Leinberger, 2002): (1) Mother-and-Daughter, (2) The Syncopated Theme, (3) Dr. Jaquith, (4) Jerry, (5) Tina, (6) Charlotte, (7) Power-and-Wealth. Are these leitmotifs noticeable as you watch? And how about the “Mickey Mousing” that Steiner happily admitted to doing, matching mood and image with music moment-by-moment (Schreibman, 2004). What, do you think, is the impact of the score’s diversity?

15. In her analysis of the treatment of mental illness in the movies, Jacqueline Zimmerman describes *Now, Voyager* as a chronicle of Charlotte’s “voyage through romance and loss to self-knowledge and a healthy acceptance of herself and others.” And perhaps no psychiatric sanatorium has been more attractively portrayed than Dr. Jaquith’s Vermont retreat, Cascade. This almost wholly positive impression of psychiatry and psychoanalysis was unusual at the time of the film’s release, and may be even more unusual today. Your thoughts on this?

16. The mother character (as played by Gladys Cooper) has been much-analyzed, including via a piece by scholar E. Ann Kaplan (1992) that asserts that this overbearing mother is shown as full cause of Charlotte’s mental illness. Kaplan explores the possibility that the mother’s own behavior is motivated by a refusal to submit to patriarchal law, and that her treatment of Charlotte is perhaps a protective method to keep her daughter with her, unreleased into the social anxiety of a patriarchal world. (In this interpretation, Dr. Jaquith becomes a surrogate father, and Charlotte’s submission to his treatment might be an acceptance of the male-dominated norm.) Do you agree with any of these points?

17. In a study of the use of nonverbal behaviors in Bette Davis’ film performances, Ealy (1991) established that her signature “style” developed over time and peaked in the early 1940s—her trademark use of rising pitch and inflection, and her “violent” gestures are noteworthy. Is this “Davis style” evident in *Now, Voyager*? Does her “idiosyncratic” style articulate well with the “hysterical energy” (Cavell, 1990) of the Charlotte Vale character?

18. Bette Davis, queen of the Warner’s lot at the time she made *Now, Voyager*, drew praise from almost all critics for her performance in this film. One 1943 review noted “Bette has the extraordinary faculty of
making an unattractive part attractive. . . she is not a screen beauty, but she gives the impression of beauty,” and scholar Mark Glancy has said “even at the height of her stardom, Davis was regarded as working outside the norms of glamour.” How does Davis’ considerable acting talent contribute to the film’s reception?

19. Think also about the other actors in the film—Paul Henreid, Claude Rains, and Gladys Cooper, in particular. How does each player support and enhance this consummate “woman’s film” of 1940s Hollywood?

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Archive of Women in Film discussion questions AND location for viewing of current film:
http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/womeninfilm

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