

All About Careers in All About Eve

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The question to be answered in this essay is: ‘How are careers constructed and presented in the film *All About Eve*, and how far do these constructions correspond to scholarly representations in the career studies literature?’ I will focus particularly on theatre as a context for careers; and the influence of gender, career competencies, roles and cycles. I will use career studies as presented in my book *Understanding Careers*¹ as a template against which to consider the careers in the film.

Careers as Drama

Career studies is seldom used as a lens to study drama or film, careers perhaps being considered too workaday to illustrate great themes. Yet films such as *Citizen Kane* and the *Godfather* trilogy illustrate major career themes, and biopics are popular and often instructive about careers. A characteristic of careers is their evolution over time, and

¹Kerr Inkson, *Understanding Careers: The Metaphors of Working Lives* (Sage Publications, 2007).

it is the time-based development of character and circumstances of career actors² that provides the change and dynamism on which good films depend. Careers are therefore often conceptualized, not least by those who enact them, as ongoing *stories* involving central *heroes* and *heroines*. Narrative analysis is increasingly popular as a theory and method of career counseling.³

All About Eve (hereafter referred to as *AAE*) traces the early career of actress Eve Harrington, as she befriends star actress Margo Channing and the members of her elite theatrical clique, then uses these contacts to progress quickly to stardom, a process involving her not just in conventional career development but in dissembling, lying, seduction and blackmail. For each major career protagonist in *AAE*, Eve and Margo, there is a compelling career storyline about striving for high goals, forming alliances, overcoming obstacles and moving to new places.

What kinds of story and genre do such careers suggest? Is Eve a tragic heroine who pursues noble goals but is defeated by her transgression of cosmic laws or her own character flaws? Is she, like those who work for shady law firms, or secure contracts through bribery, making Faustian deals with the Devil? Or is her story a melodrama that bears little resemblance to the regular world of careers, yet documents fundamental truths? Career studies may offer insights.

A central dynamic in careers that is strongly represented in *AAE* is the tension between individual *agency* and societal *institutions*.⁴ Agency-driven views of career portray career actors as assertive controllers of their own destiny. Institutional views note the effects of wider forces such social class, gender, ethnicity, education, labor-market conditions and organization structure, which may provide opportunities for career actors' agency, or constrain them.⁵ But films are often romantic creations that emphasize individual triumph over institutional forces. Reality may be different. For every stage-struck wannabe like Eve who succeeds, how many thousands are there who fail? *AAE* is bound to be a biased story, and in any case it contains various implausibilities.⁶ However, feature films are not documentaries but dramas. So here,

²'Career actor' is a term commonly used in career studies to denote any person in their role of pursuing a career. The term is used in that sense here and is therefore not restricted to people whose profession is acting.

³Inkson, Chapters 10 and 12.

⁴See, for example, Maury A. Peiperl and Michel B. Arthur, Topics for conversation: career themes old and new. In *Career Frontiers: New Conceptions of Working Lives*, edited by Maury Peiperl, Michael B. Arthur, Rob Goffee and Tim Morris (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵Inkson, Chapter 2.

⁶For example: Untrained actors without experience are unlikely to be given lead roles in their first plays, let alone win national awards for acting on the basis of one part in one play for a few months. Playwrights generally do not select the casts for particular productions of their plays, let alone delegate that task to their untrained wives.

I largely suspend my disbelief and accept the story of Eve at face value. How far does it reflect the theories and realities of career studies?

Key Elements of All About Eve

In analyzing any film, six key elements to be aware of are script, direction, camera, acting, music and editing. *AAE* is largely the creation of Joseph Mankiewicz, who wrote the screenplay, directed the film and won Oscars for both elements. The symbiosis between them is excellent. These elements, more than the others, form the heart of the film.

AAE is essentially a story told through a series of conversations among pairs and groups of characters within a tight ensemble: the career dynamics of the film are therefore portrayed mainly in the script. In order not to distract from its strong plot/character base the cinematography in *AAE* is conventional – monochrome, visually unspectacular, providing unobtrusive flow and punctuation to the narrative. Innovative technique is restricted to the use of a beginning- and end-of-film freeze-frame of Eve Harrington being presented with the Sarah Siddons Award, and of mirrors, at the *real* conclusion, to create multiple images of a single, dream-like figure, Phoebe, the Queen of Theatre. *AAE*'s strength lies in its plot, its interweaving of personalities and stories, its sophisticated dialogue and its tight ensemble acting.

Theatre as a Context for Careers

Careers are not conducted in a vacuum, but in institutional locations such as particular societies, communities, industries and organizations. *AAE* is set in theatre. Much of the film is located in the theatre where *Aged in Wood*, the current production involving the characters, is being staged. Location is established and maintained by tracking shots that focus the complex, onstage-offstage, sometimes disorderly character and culture of theatre. In the first scene, the camera follows Karen and Eve out of an alley and through the stage door. Eve, fascinated, rushes ahead past the paraphernalia of the production, and gazes in awe at the stage before turning to Karen with a shy smile: 'You can breathe it, can't you? Like some magic perfume.' The camera follows them into Margo's dressing-room, the backstage heart of the theatre. Similarly, the 'audition' scene follows Margo through various conversations in the foyer, stalls and stage, and includes an altercation across a stage harp, and a conclusion in which Margo collapses, sobbing, on a four-poster stage-set bed.

In *AAE*, this theatrical context of careers inevitably spills over into personal lives. For example Eve's initial work takes place in Margo's home. The various couples 'talk shop' in their leisure time, and pursue personal relationships and disagreements at work. In the out-of-theatre scenes such as Margo's party, much conversation is about

the characters' world of work, or uses theatrical metaphors to symbolize their interpersonal dynamics. For example:

Margo: This is my house, not a theatre. In my house you're a guest, not a director.

Karen: Then stop being a star, and stop treating your guests as your supporting cast.

AAE thus emphasizes the centrality of work in people's day-to-day lives and relationships. Even Karen, the only character without a theatrical occupation, seems to spend much of her time in dressing rooms and watching rehearsals. Indeed, the characters seem constantly in each other's company, creating the sense of a closed, almost oppressive theatrical community. In a party scene, most of the main characters are seated together, all facing the same way, on a staircase, where they conduct a disjointed conversation driven mainly by competing egos.

So, the film is about careers in theatre. And the theatre industry is characterized by project organization and unstable labor markets – a setting for notoriously insecure, fickle and competitive careers, on a 'tournament' model in which many would-be actors strive for few positions.⁷ Theatre also attracts creative people, leading to an expectation of extreme behavior, stress and conflict, and much of the *AAE* screenplay focuses the uniqueness, competitiveness and over-the-top character of theatre. The character Addison, a theatre critic describes theatre people as 'concentrated gatherings of neurotics, egomaniacs, emotional misfits, and precocious children'. That is not a bad description of the female characters in *AAE*, whose competitive behavior provides much of *AAE*'s dynamic.

Gender, Institutions and Career Security in *All About Eve*

Notwithstanding its theatre setting, *AAE* is curiously two-sided as to the security or insecurity of careers.

The female characters – Eve, Margo, Miss Caswell and Phoebe – struggle desperately for success on the shaky ladders of the industry. Eve and Margo are constantly preoccupied with their career status. And Karen tells Eve that 'nothing is forever in the theatre. Whatever it is, it's here, flares up, burns hot, and then it's gone.'

At Margo's party a brief interaction of four characters encapsulates the career dynamics of the women, as Addison and Miss Caswell arrive and are greeted by Eve

⁷For academic support, see, for example, Charles Jackson, Managing and developing a boundaryless career: Lessons from dance and drama. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 1996, 5(4), 617–628; Candace Jones, Careers in project networks: The case of the film industry. In M.B. Arthur and D.M. Rousseau, *The Boundaryless Career*, pp. 58–75. (Oxford University Press, 2001). Alex Haunschild, Managing employment relationships in flexible labour markets: The case of German repertory theatres. *Human Relations*, 2003, 56(8) 899–929.

and Margo. As Staggs notes, 'Anne Baxter (Eve) and George Sanders (Addison), portraying two characters of ambiguous sexuality, form parenthesis around the two heterosexual goddesses (Bette Davis and Marilyn Monroe)'.⁸ Here, Miss Caswell, wearing a glittering gown and a white fur stole, stands looking elegant and makes vacuous talk in the breathy, child-like Monroe manner, epitomizing the 'dumb blonde' aspirant star. Addison, far ahead of everyone else in understanding the incipient undercurrents of the plot, first takes Miss Caswell's stole and pushes her gently in the direction of the producer Max, and then deposits the stole into Margo's arms to be put away, a task previously performed by her PA Eve. The never-will-be and the has-been thus dispatched, Addison then takes Eve's arm to escort her into the party.

In contrast to the striving, conflicted women, the men in *AAE*, Addison excepted, appear dull and complacent. (Addison is not dull, but he is the most complacent of all.) Lloyd the writer, Max the producer and Bill the director have moments of emotion and anger at the women: 'Listen, junior, and learn,' says Bill patronizingly to Eve before delivering an unsolicited seminar on the nature of theatre. But in the *AAE* story these men are nonentities. It is difficult to imagine that any theatrical production led by them could possibly have originality or sparkle. They do not have careers, so much as solid, secure *occupations*, in which they are all effortlessly successful. Even Addison tells Margo: 'As you know, I have lived in the theatre as a Trappist monk lives in his faith. I have no other world, no other life.' He too is utterly secure in his career.

The men are also privileged with *power*. They mount the productions, author the roles, audition, cast and direct the players, and write the newspaper columns that can make or break careers. Their attitude to the women is nicely summed up by Lloyd in a line to Margo: 'It's about time the piano realized it has not written the concerto'. In Lloyd's musical metaphor, actresses are not even musicians, they are mere instruments. In the figure-ground of *AAE* the men therefore provide little more than an institutional ground, of opportunity and constraint, upon which the figural women enact their careers.

Do the women, then, have any power of their own? Eve, Margo and Miss Caswell maneuver to use the men, and their relationships with the men, to reach their career goals. And *AAE* occasionally utilizes the familiar 'power-behind-the throne' stereotype of female activity. For example, Eve and Karen plot to get Eve taken on as Margo's understudy: 'But what about Mr. Richards? And Mr. Sampson?' asks Eve anxiously. 'They'll do as they're told,' replies Karen firmly. Elsewhere, *AAE* calls to mind the 'casting couch': but whereas the casting couch legend is usually taken as a symbol of powerful men's oppression of gullible women, in *AAE* the women take the initiative. Eve tries to seduce both Bill and Lloyd, and at the party Miss Caswell, prompted by Addison, glides off towards Max in a predatory manner and secures an audition. When Margo arrives late for the audition in which Eve has substituted for her, she finds Bill and Lloyd lauding Eve, and lets fly a series of patronizing put-downs: she knows

⁸Sam Staggs, *All About All About Eve* (St. Martin's Press, 2000), photo captions.

seduction when she sees it, and she knows it need not necessarily involve a bed (though, interestingly, there is one on-stage). Overall, though, the women's strategies only underline their desperation in the face of overwhelming male domination.

The film thus reprises the post-war *Rosie the Riveter* phenomenon⁹ in which returning male war heroes displaced the female workers who had learned to do their jobs equally well, for lower pay. The contrast of taken-for-granted male career success with angst-ridden female career striving could scarcely be more marked. Nevertheless, in the acting profession, there is at least a pinnacle of success (symbolized by the Sarah Siddons Award) for women, because they are not competing with men. Notwithstanding women's recent advances in occupations such as law and medicine, there seem precious few women playwrights, producers or directors, let alone CEOs.¹⁰ One analysis suggests that this is because, notwithstanding the competitive female behavior in *AAE*, women's characteristic career orientation is to 'communion' whereas men's is to 'agency', and that in the end women find the pressure and politics of the male world too aggressive for them and, like Margo, 'drop out'.¹¹

Career Competencies in *All About Eve*

In *AAE*, how do career dynamics play out in the women's careers? In one model, the Intelligent Career, career outcomes are based on the career competencies *knowing-why* (motivation and values); *knowing-how* (relevant experience, skills and expertise) and *knowing-whom* (personal relationships, networks and reputation).¹² The careers of the female characters in *AAE*, especially Eve, provide instructive examples.

Knowing-why

In the West, career motivation is often based on a concept of individual *success*. This is described in *AAE* using mystical imagery, with terms such as 'dream', 'girl on the moon', 'gods and goddesses' and 'rising in the East like the sun'. Also, *AAE* is framed, at its beginning and end, by the presentation ceremony for the Sarah Siddons Award, a prestigious symbol of success. In the closing scene of the film, Phoebe, her eyes shining, says she wants such an award 'more than anything else in the world'.

⁹Connie Field (producer, director), *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*. Documentary film, 1980. See IMDB.

¹⁰See Inkson, pp. 38–41 for a summary of the literature on women's careers.

¹¹Judi Marshall, *Women Managers Moving On* (Thomson, 1995).

¹²Polly Parker, Svetlana Khapova and Michael B. Arthur, The intelligent career framework as a basis for interdisciplinary inquiry. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 2009, 75, 291–302.

AAE's female characters focus on the success associated with being a 'star', but provide different interpretations. Phoebe poses happily with the Award, cradling it to her bosom and admiring her reflection in the mirrors: a narcissistic image. Miss Caswell appears mainly interested in extrinsic *status symbols*: she eyes a bundle of luxurious fur coats: 'now there's something a girl could make sacrifices for'. In contrast, Eve discusses with Addison the beginning of her new career path:

Addison: All paved with diamonds and gold?
Eve: You know me better than that.
Addison: Paved with what, then?
Eve: Stars!

Eve does not crave the baubles of theatrical success, but its *mystical dream*. She appears to *love* the theatre. When she watches Margo's acting, she looks tense, and breathes more heavily. Twice, when she contemplates the rewards of theatrical stardom, she is half-caught-out in her deceptions. She forgets herself, steps out of role and speaks from the heart:

If there's nothing else, there's applause. It's like waves of love coming over the footlights and wrapping you up. Imagine ... To know, every night, that different hundreds of people love you ... they smile, their eyes shine, you've pleased them, they want you, you belong. Just that alone is worth anything.

The audience, and its recognition, are at the heart of Eve's motivation. But by the end of the film she is already showing signs of being habituated to success. And, of course, *objective* career success, defined by measurable criteria such as money, awards, adulation and status, may be very different from *subjective* career success, the internal feeling of career satisfaction.¹³ Eve, in the final scene, is a sad figure. She has no friends left apart from the serpentine Addison, and even he prefers to go to another party. As her first response to stress she is already pouring a whisky. Then we see Phoebe in the next room, preening and posing with Eve's dress as Eve once did with Margo's, and we realize that success is all too transitory.

Knowing-how

In the knowing-how area, the career of Eve is again instructive. She is not just a motivated actress who networks effectively and gets lucky. Despite having no acting training or experience, she apparently has consummate acting talent, which she uses first to take in a set of sophisticated theatre people; later, in audition, to captivate Addison,

¹³See, for example, Hugh Gunz and Peter Heslin, Reconceptualizing career success. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2), 105–111.

Max, Bill and Lloyd; and even later, to perform Margo's role brilliantly and launch her own career. Here, we see a fundamental truth about careers: that knowing-why and knowing-whom cannot by themselves create career success; all they can do is provide opportunities. Eve needed real 'knowing-how' talent to take that opportunity.

But Eve's talents go far beyond acting. She personally alters an old suit of Margo's to fit her. She redecorates parts of the shabby dressing room. As Margo's PA she is efficiency and client service personified, even remembering her boss's partner's birthday which the boss herself had forgotten. Margo describes Eve as her 'sister, lawyer, mother, friend, psychiatrist and cook'. This is impressive: Eve is *multi*-talented. And at the end of the film, Phoebe mimics Eve's behavior, offering to clean up the carpet-stain where Eve dropped her drink, moving unasked to the bar to get Eve a fresh one, answering Eve's door for her and smiling attractively at the great theatre critic. The message for aspiring stars is: *high motivation and acting talent alone won't make you a star: you may have to turn your hand to many other tasks along the way. Be a generalist as well as a specialist.*

Knowing-whom

Knowing-whom can reside in the extension of natural friendships, or in the cynical cultivation of relationships for career opportunities.¹⁴ While much is made in *AAE* of Eve's imitation of Margo, this is only part of her motivation to gain Margo's patronage; the other part concerns her move into Margo's circle of powerful friends who can provide constant opportunities for career sponsorship and sexual and non-sexual seduction. Having attracted Karen's interest and gained entry to Margo's dressing room, Eve secures the confidence of all those present by telling a mendacious 'sob story'. The one person not taken in is Birdie, who does not matter because she has no power. Eve cements Margo's patronage of her at the airport. She then displaces Birdie as Margo's main helper, extracts a succession of favors from Karen, attempts to seduce Bill, persuades the influential Addison to promote her cause, gets her flatmate to engineer her seduction of Lloyd, and finally blackmails Karen. In every case except that of Addison the short-term gain and career boost is followed by the alienation of other parties, but because the career bridgehead Eve sought has been gained this does not matter to her.

Pop star Madonna by the age of 24 achieved the same, or an even greater, level of success as Eve Harrington, and did it in much the same way: by having a high level of belief in herself, showing huge energy, having talent, changing roles when necessary, 'showing off' in public and allying herself with people who she perceived to have the power to open doors.¹⁵ Eve and Madonna were willing to do whatever it took:

¹⁴Inkson, Chapter 8.

¹⁵Don Evans, *Blonde Bombshells: From Mae to Madonna* (Brittania Press, 1995).

exhibitionism and strategic sex in Madonna's case, blackmail and seduction in Eve's. Knowing-why involves values and ethics as well as motivation, and some aspiring stars might draw a line at Eve's less moral actions. Had Eve done so, the world would have been deprived of her major talent. And although Eve's friends were all upset by her treatment of them, none of them appeared to suffer any major long-term harm. *AAE* therefore poses a fundamental question which many careerists face: 'Does the end justify the means?'

Careers as Roles

Careers may also be understood as a series of roles. If one accepts Goffman's view that in one's presentation of self in everyday life, including work life, one is constantly acting a part,¹⁶ then where does role-playing end and genuine identity begin? To professional actors, whose job is the presentation of other selves, the problem is common. In everyday interaction with others, the great character actor Peter Sellers always adopted roles, and he said that he had 'no concrete image of myself'.¹⁷ In contrast, Christopher Reeve played many acting and non-acting roles in his life, morphing from Superman into a paraplegic champion of the disabled, but held on to his identity firmly, entitling his autobiography *Still Me*.¹⁸

Through much of *AAE*, Margo plays the role of a proud, loud, dominating *grande dame*. Only in a few scenes – for example at the airport – does the role crack, and one senses the real Margo: in the car with Karen she confides:

So many people know me. I wish I did. I wish someone would tell me about me. Who am I? More than anything else, I want Bill to love me – me, not Margo Channing, and if I can't tell them apart, how can he?

As we have seen, Margo resolves the issue by changing to a new role.

In contrast to Margo, Eve is a consummate multi-role player. She invents and re-invents herself as, successively, a star-struck waif, a caring, professional PA, an earnest, respectful understudy, a man-eating film vamp, a steely self-publicist and black-mailer, and a modest, generous award recipient. In the powder room scene, she manipulates Karen's emotions brilliantly, first winning an initially hostile Karen over by means of a 'poor me' routine: it was the malevolent Addison, Eve whines, who somehow *made* her say those awful things. Karen becomes genuinely sorry for her. Then, when Karen asks, innocently, 'if there's anything I can do ...', and extends a

¹⁶Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Allen Lane, 1969).

¹⁷Roger Lewis, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, p. xiii (Century, 1994).

¹⁸Christopher Reeve, *Still Me* (Ballantine Books, 1999).

comforting hand, Eve fastens the hand in a vice-like grip (focused on camera), and brings a new, hard edge into her breathy voice as she blackmails her friend. Thus, in an act of huge role plasticity, Eve changes instantaneously from little girl lost to Evil Catwoman. As she moves chameleon-like from role to role, her audience of celebrities is taken in, but one by one its members see her for what she is.

Eve's attempted seductions of Bill and Lloyd raise the interesting question: is Eve genuinely in love with these men, or is she playing lover merely as a role, in order to use them for her own career advancement? The speed with which she apparently recovers from the failure of the seductions strongly suggests the latter.

Career Cycles

Careers are cyclic. As people age, their lives are patterned chronologically – for example, through successive career stages of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement.¹⁹ Models based on the notion of seasons provide an element of predictability in careers.²⁰ *AAE* presents Eve and Miss Caswell as striving to move from the springtime to the summer of their careers, Margo as preoccupied with autumn and Phoebe as a neophyte springtime girl.

As the film proceeds, Margo mentions her age with increasing frequency. 'Ten years from now,' she tells Karen, 'Margo Channing will have ceased to exist.' In this, she sees what the men cannot, or will not: Lloyd says: 'Stars never die, and never change.' He and Bill are blinded by Margo's talent and character, and cannot see seasonality and change. Addison, in contrast, cattily recalls Margo's first appearance as a four-year-old fairy and suggests she reprise her performance in *Peter Pan*. Margo's mid-career crisis is triggered by remarks by Eve about actresses who 'continue playing roles requiring a youth and vigor of which they retain but a dim memory'. Wiser than the men, Margo resolves the issue not by defying the seasons, but by redirecting her career into a different occupation which she calls 'being a woman' and 'a foursquare, upright, down-right, forthright married lady'. Contemporary renditions of career cycles note how the seasonal cycle is overlaid and sometimes disrupted, especially for women, by another cycle, the courtship-and-family cycle,²¹ a truth that Margo has evidently taken on board.

More broadly, *AAE* embodies a powerful appreciation of the cyclic nature of career success. All of its actors except Marilyn Monroe, were to find, retrospectively, that *AAE*

¹⁹Donald E. Super, 'The life-span, life-stage approach to careers', in *Career Choice and Development*, edited by Duane Brown and Linda Brooks (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

²⁰Daniel J. Levinson and J.D. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman's Life* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

²¹Saroj Pararuraman and Jeffrey H. Greenhaus (eds), *Integrating Work and Family: Challenges and Choices for a Changing World* (Westport, CT: Quorum, 1997).

represented the apex of their careers. And the final scene of *AAE* demonstrates with frightening clarity the possibility of the success cycle being very short indeed.

Conclusion

Returning to our starting-point, agency versus institution, I have tried to portray *AAE* as a tournament of women acting in a masculine way in an arena, and according to rules, dictated by men but susceptible at the margins to female game-playing such as Eve's. I have shown how the nature of the theatre industry, the overlap of working and non-working lives, the deployment of career competencies and role plasticity, and the cyclic form of careers frame specific forms of career agency, both in general and in the careers of *AAE* characters. Despite its genesis 60 years ago, and its quirky theatre setting, *All About Eve* embodies many key themes about careers, particularly women's careers, and could plausibly be used as a multi-purpose case study in any careers textbook.