Both of tonight's films are strong melodramas from the pre-Production Code period. While in one sense, they are "tamer" than similar films on today's ultra-permissive screen - violence and sex are both very present, but implied rather than shown by explicit visuals - on the other hand they are closer to reality and have an uneasy nastiness which is still rather disturbing. With their blatant nudity and designed-to-shock brutality, today's films are more physically realistic, but somehow much less convincing. By 1933, the casual amorality (particularly in crime films and sex comedies) of so many movies - while basically realistic and usually quite tasteful - did seem a dangerous step downwards from the romanticist mood of the silent era that had just passed, with the absurd restrictions that were imposed, however resulted in a complete about face, and from 1934 through to the beginning of 1939 (when there was a welcome return to maturity) the cinema increasingly became a Never-Never-Land of unreality, avoiding controversial themes, and aiming its entertainment guns at a somewhat sterile and spineless so-called "family" trade.

"THE STORY OF TEMPLE DRAKE" (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Stephen Roberts; Screenplay by Oliver H.P. Garrett from "Sanctuary" by William Faulkner; Camera, Karl Struss; 7 reels With Miriam Hopkins; Jack La Rue, William Gargan, Sir Guy Standing, William Collier jr., Elizabeth Patterson, Florence Eldridge, James Eagles, Harlan Knight, James Mason, Jobyna Howland, Henry Hall, Osa Apfel, Kent Taylor, Harold Goodwin, Grady Sutton, Hattie McDaniel.

Together with Warner's "blue" comedy, "Convention City" (also 1933), "The Story of Temple Drake" has the dubious distinction of being the last-traw that almost single-handedly brought about the Code crackdown. Vitriolically attacked by the press even before its completion - trade papers even urged that it be abandoned, in view of the notoriety of the novel - the film emerged as a curious hybrid. The obvious depravities were removed, the stress on melodrama and horror somewhat expanded, it is still no easy compromise trying to cash in on a reputation without delivering the goods. Despite its gloss and style, it's still quite a gassy little work. Its major asset is the superbly atmospheric camerawork of Carl Struss, who at one point even manages the ultimate in suggesting everything while showing nothing by showing a rape scene solely by the pin-point glow of a cigarette in a pitch-black room! There is some bright and brittle dialogue, but the overall effect is decidedly downbeat and intrinsically faithful Faulkner. A brief chronology might be interesting. Later on James Hadley Chase wrote the lurid sex/gangster novel "No Orchids for Miss Blandish" which was fairly openly acknowledged to be a plagiarism of Faulkner's novel. "Orchids" was filmed in England in 1948, and compounded the "borrowing" by casting Jack LaRue in the parallel role. (For comparison purposes, we will be screening a few excerpts from "No Orchids for Miss Blandish" tonight.) "Sanctuary" was remade by Fox in '61, under that title - though with a script that was at least 50% taken from Faulkner's "Requiem for a Nun". Now, this year, Miss Blandish has been remade - by Robert Aldrich, under the title "The Grissom Mob".


One of five raw melodramas that William Wellman directed for Warners in '31 (the others: "The Public Enemy", "Other Men's Women", "Star Witness" and "Safe in Hell") is perhaps a rather sick thriller with Wellman (like the Michael Powell of "Peeping Tom") seeming to delight in its less attractive aspects. (Interestingly enough, like our other film this evening, it is scripted by Oliver H.P. Garrett). But it moves rapidly, and it's pre-Code with a vengeance; the villain is casually bumped off by the hero's gangland pals to make for a tidy and morally uncompensated climax, and the Misses Stanwyck and Blondell seem to spend an inordinate amount of time getting in and out of uniform with much displaying of brief lingerie. Gable's dynamic performance as the villain makes one wonder anew why Warners didn't recognise his values or his ability. (He and Stanwyck play so effectively together too that it's strange to realise that they were not teamed again until "To Please a Lady" in the 50's). Ben Lyon too is such a pleasing and assured player that it's hard to understand why his popularity wasn't much greater.

--- Wm. R. Everson ---