Introduction

In this experimental activity, a cinematic motion picture that involves some aspect of the business world is reviewed and critiqued in order to answer questions on how business is portrayed (whether it is seen as a positive entity or a negative one), ethical dilemmas involved in business and how those ethical dilemmas were resolved. The “business world” is a very large entity itself, consisting of many industries with many organizations. Most relate business to Wall Street, or big name companies such as IBM, Google, Microsoft, etc. However in the movie I chose to review, *North Country*, the only “business world” the people of Minnesota’s Iron Range are concerned with is the business of iron ore mining and those who do business with the mines.

*North Country* is a movie based on the true story of a single mother of two, played by Charlize Theron struggling to get by after leaving her abusive husband. Figuring the abuse would end with leaving her husband, the main character Josie Aimes had no idea of the abuse that was ahead of her when she tried to make a living in the iron ore mine of Eveleth, MN. At the beginning of the movie, a fact was given that would help frame the business environment that the movie would portray: “In 1975, the iron mines of Northern Minnesota hired their first female
miner. By 1989, male employees still outnumbered females thirty to one.” *North Country* tells Josie Aimes’ story as she fights her way through the male dominated business world of iron mining, many ethical dilemmas she and her co-workers deal with and how she helps change her business world and ultimately the nature of all business in the U.S. as it pertains to women in the work place. I chose to review this movie because I am from the Iron Range of Northern Minnesota. I have lived here all my life and know the importance of the mining industry to our region. However, neither myself nor any of my surviving immediate family have ever worked in this industry. I was shocked to see how things used to be and was interested to see how things have changed.

**Portrayal of “the Business World”**

“The business world” portrayed in this movie was that of the iron mining industry, in particular Pearson Taconite and Steel. Pearson Taconite and Steel owned a mining plant and a mine pit on “da Range” in this movie while their offices were in one of the tall skyscrapers seen in the Minneapolis, Minnesota skyline, far from what was going on in the mines. The mining industry was portrayed in a mixed light in this movie. I wouldn’t call it neutral, but it was shown and seen differently from the eyes of the movie writers and from the eyes of the characters in the movie. The makers of the movie presented the mine and the businessmen behind the mine in a very negative way. Every manager and businessman was shown as a bully, not caring for anyone or anything but making money and staying in business. When the main character started her career with the mine, she was having breakfast with her family one morning at a local restaurant, and ran into the owner of the company, Mr. Pearson. He welcomed her to the company, making sure to be very nice and kind, and told her if she ever had any problems to
come see her personally. When she finally did go to see him, not only did Mr. Pearson meet her, but she was also met and ganged up on by other members of management along with her supervisor (who she came to complain about). Not only was she never allowed to talk, but they offered to take her resignation, claiming she should improve her work performance when in fact she never did anything wrong. Other ways where the company was shown in a negative light was by the managers saying women had no right in the mines, and they were only there because the Supreme Court was making them hire a certain amount of women. Also, inequalities in treatment by management and fellow workers were given depending on gender. Women would be harassed and given the worst jobs possible, even if male employees existed with less experience.

The characters in the movie had a different view of the “business world”. While they knew what was happening, they viewed the mines as a good thing. These mines brought many jobs to the towns of the iron range and community members praised the mines because many of their family members were making a good living working for them. People would see the owner, Mr. Pearson, in the community talking nice and meeting the people (even though it was for show) and this made a good impression on them.

**Ethical issues addressed in the movie North Country**

When watching the movie *North Country*, the one ethical issue that would be easy for anyone to identify would be gender discrimination and poor treatment of female employees at the mine owned by Pearson Taconite and Steel. I say easy just because of the level of mental, verbal and physical abuse that women in the mine received. On Josie’s first day on the job, her supervisor made a comment about how the doctor that gave her a physical said she looked good
without clothes on and chalked up his comment to the need for a sense of humor on the job. As
the women walked out of the locker room on their first day, men were mumbling derogatory and
hateful words under their breath, but loud enough to be heard. When the women were on a tour
of the mine on the first day, the supervisor of the “powder room” makes the comment: “which
one of these girls is gonna be my bit*??” During a lunch break, a woman found a sex toy one of
the men hid in her lunch box and the woman screamed. A man then yelled out in the lunchroom
“Hey, no getting off in the lunchroom ladies!” All of this happened in the first day and this was
the least of what happened. Men wrote comments and drew explicit pictures on walls, threw
excrement on the walls of the women’s locker room, and even flipped a girl over while she was
in a portable toilet.

Not only were comments and pranks common, but also so were more serious offenses.
Rape was a common worry among the women at the mine. A man attacked the main character
Josie in an unoccupied portion of the mine. When Josie confronted the other men and her
manager, and since the offender lied, they sided with him over her. The jobs at the mine were
such that the women were given the dirtiest and hardest jobs, the ones the men didn’t want even
though there were men with less experience working there.

One thing I kept in mind while watching this movie was the class topic of Kohlberg’s
Stages of Moral Development, because I felt that this would play a major factor in the movie.
Through most of the movie, all of the men seemed to be in either in Stage 1 or Stage 3. Many
men at the mine would pull pranks on the women as long as they weren’t caught or reprimanded.
Since they never were punished, the pranks progressively got worse. The men that didn’t pull
pranks or hurt the women working at the mine were somewhere between a Stage 2 and a Stage 3.
The non-offenders would look the other way on what the other guys were doing so that maybe
the other guys would do the same if they ever did something wrong (Stage 2) or they just said nothing because they wanted to be apart of the crowd, their group (Stage 3). It came down to the fact the men didn’t want them there. Even Josie’s father Hank, who worked at the mine, didn’t want them there and did nothing to help here until the end.

There was a turning point towards the end of the movie where the issue began to be resolved. Josie had quit the mine after she had almost been raped, and went to a union meeting to speak. She was trying to help the women that were still at the mine get better treatment and hopefully get the other women on her side so she could file a class action lawsuit. Josie had the microphone to speak, but was getting yelled at by all the men. Her father, Hank, finally got up and made a statement. He spoke to those who should be his friends, the men he had worked with all his life. He spoke about how these men would bring their wives and daughters to the company picnics, and the men would never treat the women the way they were treating the women at work. He ended by saying “I’ve been a Ranger all my life and I’ve never been ashamed of it until now.” Never before had a man sided with a women employee and this was a turning point of getting more men to come out against the abuse of women. In the end, the issue was finally resolved because the other women at the mine, along with Josie and a few men decided to stand up and side together in a class action lawsuit. They won the suit with the mine and settled for an undisclosed amount of money, only calling it a “modest financial settlement”. The major victory was that the mine had to set up a sexual harassment policy and enforce it, protecting women from the abuse they received.

This issue should have never gone as far as it did. Middle management working at the mine should have stepped in and stopped the verbal before it got physical. The problem was that middle management didn’t want the women their either. If I were the owner of Pearson Taconite
and Steel, I would have put aside whether I wanted women their or not, and thought about the productivity that was lost due to the actions of these men. I would have made a policy right away when the first act of harassment was reported to me, and I would have hired a head mine manager from outside of the area to make sure these acts of abuse would not happen. If punishment would have been dished out at the beginning, many of these Kohlberg’s Stage 1 offenders might have just stopped and changed their ways.

I believe a reason the first ethical issue presented went on so long and got so severe is because of another ethical issue. That issue is the lack of management responsibility and honesty. Throughout this movie there was a three level chain of command. The bottom level consisted of the foremen in charge of certain activities at the mine. At this level, the greatest offender was the man in charge of the “powder room” named Bobby Sharp. The next level was the head on-site manager named Mr. Pavich and the final level was Mr. Pearson, the owner. The ethical issue here is that each of these managers, to an extent, knew what was going on regarding the abuse and harassment but either did nothing or lied about it. The extent of the knowledge of what was going on was greatest at the lower level and lessened as it went up to the higher levels.

At that first level, Bobby Sharp was in charge of the powder room, where most of the women worked. It was the dirtiest, least liked job at the mine and that is why the women had it. It was shown in the movie that he would draw sexually explicit pictures on the wall of the powder room involving the female workers, he would pull pranks on the women and at times he seemed to encourage others to do so as well. The one he picked on most was Josie, because he knew her in high school. He had her check for a clog in a downed conveyor, and when she got half way up, he turned it back on causing poor ventilation conditions and making Josie run for air. His last shown act was when he threw Josie into a pile of taconite and tried to rape her.
was also believed that he had done this to other women at the mine, but that was never established. Bobby was confronted many times by Mr. Pavich and others, asking him if allegations against him were true. Bobby always lied and said of course not, some times having other miners cover for him, saying Bobby was with them the whole time. 

This leads to the next level, Mr. Pavich. Mr. Pavich was less dishonest than Bobby Sharp, but did less to take responsibility for his position as on site manager, and stop what was happening. He was approached many times about different problems at the mine. He knew everything that was going on, but refused to take responsibility and do anything about it. In the more serious cases, he would ask someone like Bobby Sharp or another foreman, and if they said nothing wrong was happening, then Pavich refused to investigate any further. If it were something regarding a prank or verbal abuse, Pavich would brush it off, as being ridiculous and it wasn’t harming anyone. Pavich went even as far as saying that “your [women] taking jobs where there ain’t any to take. These boys aren’t your friends; I’m not your friend. You got no business being here and you damn well know it” and “work hard, keep your mouth shut, and take it like a man.” He claims the market is down and there are bigger problems, insinuating that women shouldn’t cause more problems for him.

Finally there was Mr. Pearson, the owner of Pearson Taconite and Steel. Mr. Pearson’s way of running his mines was that he was in charge of the business side, and his on-site managers were in charge of the mine side. As owner and CEO, he is ultimately responsible for what his managers do, yet he was seen only once in the mine the whole movie and seemed to take a ‘the less I know the better’ type attitude. When Josie had a problem with the on-site management, she decided to meet with Mr. Pearson about her issues. Instead of Mr. Pearson just sitting with her to find out her side, he brought in other management along with Mr. Pavich to
hear the issue. Well, he listened to Pavich’s side of things and then made a statement of his own but never let Josie talk. He offered to take her resignation, but offered no solution to her problems. This is very poor management. He may not be lying to anyone else about what is happening at his mines, but he is definitely lying to himself.

The management issue was never really resolved in the movie. It can be assumed that when the class action case against Pearson Taconite and Steel was ruled in favor of the workers and the Sexual Harassment Policy was put in place that management had to be more responsible and honest. In my opinion, the issue should have been resolved from the top level down. It is unclear how much the board of directors knew about what was going on in the mine, but after the court case a vote of no confidence should be brought up against Mr. Pearson. Also, Mr. Pavich should be fired due to his neglecting of his employees. He wanted the women to quit, and neglected all of their rights as workers to try and persuade them to do so. Finally, many of the foremen at the mine should be fired or demoted and a few women should be promoted to foremen to show equality in the workplace and to show the other men that the behavior that existed is a thing of the past.

The last ethical issue that will be discussed is the lack of regard for safety at the workplace. The previous two ethical issues discussed, abuse of female workers and lack of management honesty and responsibility, have created a work environment where both make and female workers are in danger. Pearson Mine in the movie seems to emphasize safety. A sign when you drive on to the property and a message in big while letters in the break room both say “Think Safety”. However, because of all the horseplay the male workers have engaged in to make fun of the female workers the environment had become unsafe. The men were smearing excrement and other bodily fluids on the walls of the women’s locker room, which could cause
many diseases. It was even stated at a union meeting at the begin of the movie that one woman had to go out sick because she had gotten a bladder infection from having to hold it so long because the women were not given bathroom breaks. Also, women that were using portable toilets were being tipped over, causing the possibility of broken bones, cuts and possible disease. Like I stated in another issue, Josie was working on a stopped conveyor and her supervisor had the conveyor started just to scare Josie, but it caused a breathing hazard at the same time. This is only a sample of the many safety hazards that were created at the mine. This was a place where safety was regarded as one of the highest values, yet management disregarded these actions. This was because they didn’t want the women there and didn’t want the hassle of dealing with these problems.

Once again, it was never specified how or if this was resolved. I’m pretty sure that the lawsuit and the Sexual Harassment Policy, causing more rules and less horseplay, would have also resolved this issue. If I were in charge of resolving this issue, I definitely would have been aware of the safety issues that were going on. Its one thing to allow employees to pull pranks on other employees, its wrong but it’s a different issue when those pranks cause danger to the employees. Even as a manager at the mine that didn’t want the women there, I would have spoke up to anyone doing something that could cause physical harm to one of the women or men. It is hard for me to say how I would resolve the issue because I couldn’t even believe how far the issue went. All I can say is it goes to poor management and apparently the company didn’t stress safety as much as it seemed to.

**Other business ethics issues**
Most of the business ethics issues could be lumped into the three issues above. A short list of other issues that stood out were:

- Hiring a lawyer to defend Pearson Taconite and Steel that is a women just to make the company look better
- Inappropriate female physical exams for new female workers that men do not need
- Worker talked about how he would find places to hide and smoke weed on the job
Conclusion

This movie was a real eye opener to what went on in the mines I grew up around. I know from reports of people who worked at this mine in real life that some of this movie wasn’t real, but most of it did happen in one form or another. What really interested me was how one ethical issue can cause many others. Because management was lacking in effectiveness and did not want to take responsibility, the harassment was able to happen. Then, because the harassment was able to happen, the safety issues arose. I think every issue at the mine was related to the Kohlberg stage each manager and worker was at. Even though the workers were mostly at a Stage 1, if the management would have been at a higher stage and done their job and issued punishment, those Stage 1 workers would have learned not to act the way they did. This exercise made me realize just how some workers can feel an act isn’t harming anyone, when it really does. The smallest of acts can progress into the largest of problems if nothing is done about them from the beginning. Small issues manifest into larger problems and if no one stands up as an example to show how things should be done, things will continue as is.