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## **Film Noir, Hard-boiled Fiction, and Working Women : Depression and Post-War America**

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

*Film Noir, Hard-boiled Fiction, and Working Women: Depression and Post-War America*

by

Andrew S. Wiecek

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2005

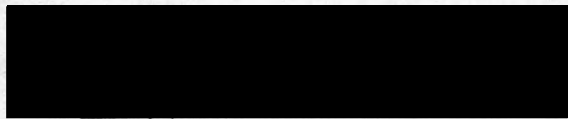
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## ABSTRACT

The writer examines the connections between the *femme fatale* in *film noir* and 1930s hard-boiled fiction, claiming that *noir* critics are misguided in their claim that the *femme fatale* has historical specificity to postwar America. The writer summarizes criticism on the *femme fatale* in *film noir* and proceeds to underscore the significant contributions to made by the hard-boiled tradition to *noir*. He believes that these contributions point to a pre-war male anxiety about female independence that he traces to the economic instability of the Depression. From this anxiety during the Depression, the author claims, came the *femme fatale* of hard-boiled fiction. He focuses on James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* to exemplify that the *femmes fatales* in these novels are identical to their *film noir* counterparts. Furthermore, he discusses the difference between popular fiction and hard-boiled fiction, contrasting Cain's novels with Sinclair Lewis' *Ann Vickers*. He concludes that critics who emphasize the historical specificity of the *femme fatale* in *film noir* have not adequately familiarized themselves with the history of American working women and have privileged the historical weight of film over literature.

*FILM NOIR*, HARD-BOILED FICTION, AND WORKING WOMEN:  
DEPRESSION AND POSTWAR AMERICA

by  
ANDREW S. WIECEK

A THESIS  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Arts in  
The Department of English in  
The Graduate Program of  
Montclair State University  
May 2005



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## Introduction

Feminist critics have claimed that the *femme fatale* in *film noir* reflects a specific historical moment when working women, who enjoyed financial independence during World War II, were encouraged to resume their traditional roles as mothers and wives in postwar American society. However, 30 percent of *film noirs* were either adapted from 1930s hard-boiled fiction or written by hard-boiled authors. *Film noir* critics recognize the influence of hard-boiled fiction concerning character archetypes, narrative structure, and context. However, they fail to acknowledge the ideological similarities between *film noir* and hard-boiled fiction. Hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* are concerned with the role of women in American society.

Like postwar American society, the 1930s witnessed a social debate regarding the roles of women. While women sought employment for the survival of their families, the public criticized their place in the workforce. Working women were accused of stealing jobs from men and neglecting their traditional roles as mothers and wives. Hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s engages these issues through the *femme fatale*. She is a strong, rebellious woman determined to obtain independence from oppressive patriarchal institutions such as marriage. However, the narratives ultimately punish these women and reestablish patriarchal order.

The *femme fatale* of *film noir* is a resurrection of the *femme fatale* of hard-boiled fiction. Hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* navigate similar social questions surrounding working women that emerged during these periods. Acknowledging the social history of 1930s working women and analyzing the *femme fatale* of 1930s hard-boiled fiction will



reveal that the historical specificity that *film noir* critics have placed on women in *film noir* is misguided.

The first chapter will review the literature on women in *film noir*, focusing upon characteristics of the *femme fatale*, her subversive value, and the postwar interpretation. The next chapter will review the criticism that acknowledges the hard-boiled influence on *film noir*, including narrative structure and representations of women. The following chapter will reconstruct the social debate surrounding working women during the 1930s that produced a "work and women are incompatible" ideology that chastised working women. The final chapter will analyze two hard-boiled novels by James M. Cain, contrasting Cain's rebellious women in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* with Sinclair Lewis's representation of a working woman in the 1930s best-seller *Ann Vickers*. At the same time, it will place Cain's *femme fatale* in cultural context and compare her with her *film noir* counterpart. The conclusion will reveal that *film noir* critics are misguided in their claim that the *femme fatale* of *film noir* is historically specific to postwar American society. They have failed to adequately research the social history of American working women and have neglected to give appropriate cultural weight to the hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s that influenced *film noir*.



## Chapter I: Literary Review of Feminist *Noir* Criticism

*Film noir* critics have characterized women in *film noir* as seductive, deceptive, and dangerous. *Film noir* criticism has focused upon the *femme fatale* who embodies these qualities. Often, critics marginalize women in *film noir* who contrast with the *femme fatale*. In "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of *Film Noir*," Sylvia Harvey acknowledges the contrasting women of *film noir*. She argues that women in *film noir* are either "exciting, childless whores" or "boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts."<sup>1</sup>

In "She Kisses Him So He'll Kill," Pierre Duvillars claims that the *femmes fatales* in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* are contemporary resurrections of the vamp archetype. He observes that *film noir* vamps are composed of "cynicism, sadism, and morbidity, the concoction agreeably spiced up by an eroticism."<sup>2</sup> Duvillars emphasizes two characteristics of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*: sexuality and violent tendencies. In "Violence and the Bitch Goddess," Stephen Farber observes that *femmes fatales* in *film noir* were "strong women... and were often presented as monsters and harpies, hardened by greed and lust, completely without feeling for the suffering they caused." Furthermore, the *femme fatale* had the "shocking ability to humiliate and emasculate her men."<sup>3</sup> Christine Gledhill points out that the *femme fatale* is an unstable character. She asserts that the *femme fatale* in *film noir* constantly changes her role through the narrative. For example, Gledhill argues that, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, "Cora exhibits a remarkable series of unmotivated

<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of *Film Noir*," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Ann Kaplan (London, England: British Film Institute, 2000), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Duvillars, "She Kisses Him So He'll Kill," in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York, NY: GK Hall, 1996), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Farber, "Violence and the Bitch Goddess," in *Film Noir Reader II*, ed. Alain Silver, et al. (New York, NY: Limelight Editions, 1999), 48-9.

character switches and roles... : (1) sex-bomb; (2) hardworking, ambitious woman; (3) loving playmate in an adulterous relationship; (4) fearful girl in need of protection; (5) victim of male power; (6) hard, ruthless murderess; (7) mother-to-be; (8) sacrifice to the law.”<sup>4</sup> In “Women in *Film Noir*,” Janey Place contends that the *femme fatale* in *film noir* is “intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness from their sexuality.”<sup>5</sup> Place argues that the *femme fatale* uses her sexuality to seduce the male protagonist for her own ends. The *femme fatale* uses her sexual appeal to obtain dominance over her male counterpart. Place writes, “Independence is her goal, but her nature is fundamentally and irredeemably sexual in *film noir*.”<sup>6</sup> In *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective*, John Tuska contends that the *femme fatale* of *film noir* differs from other women in American crime films. Tuska tells us that the *femme fatale* in *film noir* has another dimension: she wants money and power.<sup>7</sup> *Film noir* critics have been fascinated with the sexuality, violence, instability, and power of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*.

The contrast between the exciting *femme fatale* and the boring sweetheart contributes to the absence of family in *film noir*. Harvey emphasizes that the male protagonist is disinterested in the boring sweetheart who could provide stability and children. Harvey points out that the male protagonist is attracted to the exciting *femme fatale* who leads them into criminal activities. These criminal relationships deviate from social conventions. Therefore, the relationship between the male protagonist and the

<sup>4</sup> Christine Gledhill, “Klute I: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism,” in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Ann Kaplan (London, England: British Film Institute, 2000), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Janey Place, “Women in Film Noir,” in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Ann Kaplan (London, England: British Film Institute, 2000), 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>7</sup> John Tuska, *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 204.



*femme fatale* leads to dissatisfaction and death. As a result, *film noir* rarely represents a happy family.

Harvey correlates the absence of the family in *film noir* with the changing roles of women in postwar America. She reports that women worked in great numbers during World War II. After the war, these women were encouraged to return to their traditional familial roles. Harvey believes that the absence of families in *film noir* is subversive to the back-to-home ideology of postwar society.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, many *film noir* critics have indicated such a historical specificity regarding women in *film noir*. Farber argues that “these films undoubtedly reflected the fantasies and fears of a wartime society, in which women had taken control of many of the positions customarily held by men.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Place argues that the virgin/whore motif in *film noir* is the result of a postwar economy. She asserts that it was “necessary for women to work in factories during World War II and then necessary to channel them back into the home after the war.”<sup>10</sup> In *Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*, Foster Hirsch agrees. He writes, “Because men were needed in the armed services, women for the first time entered the job market in large numbers, and the place of women, both at home and on the job, changed radically. It is, in fact, in the way that it reflects the new status of women in American society that *film noir* is most closely connected to its period.”<sup>11</sup> In *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, and Masculinity*, Frank Krutnik believes that working women during the war created a confusion revolving around the

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Farber, 48-9.

<sup>10</sup> Place, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (San Diego, CA: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1981), 19-20.

traditional gender roles in American society. Krutnik contends that women were separated from the feminine domesticity by entering the masculine workplace. Krutnik contends that the *femme fatale* in *film noir* represents this confusion in American society.<sup>12</sup> In *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, Michael Rogin declares that World War II created a crisis in domestic ideology because the war necessitated women to abandon their domestic responsibilities to fill jobs vacated by men who left to fight in Europe. Rogin declares, "Postwar domestic ideology attacked mothers who abandoned their children to work."<sup>13</sup> Rogin believes this postwar domestic ideology is evident in *film noir*. In *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City*, Christopher Nicholas agrees with this postwar interpretation, reiterating Gledhill, Harvey, and Place's arguments.<sup>14</sup> The majority of *film noir* critics agree that the *femme fatale* in *film noir* has historical specificity to postwar American society.

However, these same critics have opposing opinions on the value of the *femme fatale*. Many feminist *film noir* critics claim that the *femme fatale* is a positive character in film history. Gledhill emphasizes that the instability of the *femme fatale* is a positive attribute. She argues that this "unstable and fractured characterization of women" transforms the male protagonist's world into an "ever-deceiving flux of appearance and reality" threatening patriarchal stability.<sup>15</sup> Place observes that the visual style of *film noir* places women in the center of the frame. She believes that composition in *film noir*

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, and Masculinity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 57.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 241.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Nicholas, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997), 196-7.

<sup>15</sup> Gledhill, 31.



emphasizes female empowerment and overwhelms the narrative that seeks to punish these rebellious women.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, there is resistance to this empowering perception of the *femme fatale* in subsequent criticism. Hirsch gives primary importance to the narrative that punishes the independent woman and reestablishes patriarchal order. Hirsch contends that “like everything else that *noir* touched, it transformed the new role of women into a negative image.”<sup>17</sup> Tuska asserts that the “*femme fatale* was a deliberate fantasy reflecting at once a fear and embodying a prescription and a warning. The prescription was that *femmes fatales* do not succeed: they are killed. The warning for men was to avoid them, for women never to be one.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, he believes that the content, narrative, and style of *film noir* work to represent the *femme fatale* as a rebellious female who needs punishment.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, there is contention among critics over the subversive value of representations of families in *film noir*. Harvey believes that the absence of families in *film noir* creates a void that capitalistic ideology despises. She believes this void threatens the stability of social order. Harvey asserts that the family has functioned as “the locus of women’s particular oppression” because women are subservient to men in the hierarchy of the family. Therefore, Harvey contends that *film noir* is a subversive movement because it undermines the submissive roles of women in the family by excluding families from the narrative.<sup>20</sup> In *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis*

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<sup>16</sup> Place, 47-68.

<sup>17</sup> Hirsch, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Tuska, 204.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, 45.

of *Masculinity*, Robert Corber contends that the American postwar economy thrived on the consumption and production of domestic goods in the American family. Therefore, it was necessary for women to return to their familial roles to support the economy by becoming consumers. Corber believes that *film noir* was subversive to this ideology because it did not incorporate the family.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Christopher believes that the complete absence of the American family in *film noir* represents the patriarchal institution as a “claustrophobic relic.”<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, many critics believe that *film noir* has a redomesticating function in postwar society because women in *film noir* who attempt to place themselves outside of the family are unsuccessful. In *Saints and Shrews*, Karen Stoddard argues that postwar American films assert the ideology of middle-class postwar society that valued women who accepted their familial responsibilities and abhorred women who sought independence.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Rogin believes that postwar films produce a “simultaneous glorification and fear of maternal influence within the family.”<sup>24</sup> Rogin reasons that domestic ideology was created to provide women with a social function in the domestic sphere. Women sacrificed social identities to be “guardians of public morality” in their familial roles.<sup>25</sup> Rogin argues that *film noir* has a contradictory message because it reinforces domestic ideology while warning men not to allow nurturing women to undermine their masculinities.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher, 196.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Stoddard, *Saints and Shrews* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 84-86.

<sup>24</sup> Rogin, 238.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-71.



Is Harvey wrong in her theory that *film noir* expresses an ideology that does not promote the structure of the family? Or is the absence of the family in *film noir* precisely why the landscape is filled with shadows, alienation, and despair? Is Gledhill wrong in her belief that the instability of the *femme fatale* undermines the male protagonist's control of the narrative? Does the punishing narrative conclusion completely negate the strong, rebellious *femme fatale* that Place believes *film noir* centralizes? How is it that all these contradictory interpretations coexist in the realm of *film noir* criticism?

First, the *femme fatale* and the absence of family in *film noir* were influenced by the shifting ideology of postwar society regarding female roles. The abrupt reversal of social roles in American society influenced the roles of women in *film noir*. *Film noir's* ambiguity with respect to women's roles and the family reflects the social debate of postwar society.

Simultaneously, Hollywood produced these films because there was an audience. These narratives gave male audiences ideological compensation by punishing rebellious females. These male viewers related the *femme fatale* with working women in postwar society. These women were rebellious from the male perspective because they abandoned traditional roles in the patriarchal institution of marriage for financial independence. However, the *femme fatale* sought financial independence through crime while working women in postwar society sought this independence through employment. This key difference provided male audiences of *film noir* with moral supremacy over the woman who seeks financial independence and abandons her traditional domestic roles. Thus, male audiences enjoyed this moral supremacy over the *femme fatale* who represented to them the working woman in postwar society.

Furthermore, *film noir* critics have different perspectives and goals in their criticism of *film noir*. Feminist critics such as Gledhill and Place seek to define the *film noir* as a subversive moment in film history that undermines American patriarchy by empowering women and negating the family. Meanwhile, cultural scholars such as Stoddard and Rogin seek only to relate the film in the context of postwar American society. Other film critics such as Hirsch focus on the aesthetic and narrative qualities of *film noir*. These different approaches contribute to contrasting perspectives of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*.

However, the historical specificity of the *femme fatale* in *film noir* has apparently become a theoretical truth; a small number of critics have proposed objections. For example, the existence of the *femme fatale* in neo-noirs challenges this historical specificity of classic *film noirs*. In *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Culture*, Yvonne Tasker takes up this claim. She writes:

How does the new *film noir* films present the opposition of good woman/*femme fatale* articulated in the earlier films to which they refer? In what sense might contemporary versions of this 'archetype' be said to have a historical specificity? Is this simply part of an empty reference to a critically venerated cinematic past on the part of status-hungry filmmakers? Or is the articulation of powerful female sexuality in the context of the 1970s, representation-conscious feminism (and of post-feminism) of a different order?<sup>27</sup>

Tasker challenges the historical specificity of *film noir* through her cultural interpretations of the *femme fatale* in neo-noirs. Indeed, Tasker's argument is an

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<sup>27</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 122.



intriguing and persuasive objection to the historical specificity of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*.

At the same time, the historical specificity that *film noir* critics have attributed to the *femme fatale* is challenged by the history of American working women. Stoddard notes that the presence of young, unmarried women in the American workforce was an aftereffect of World War I. In *The Women's Movement*, Barbara Deckard observes a similarity between the messages of postwar and Depression American society. She reports, "In the 1930s, women were told to stay home, that going to work was unnatural. Overnight, with the heavy demand for labor, all of the media, advertising, and government posters declared that it is both natural and patriotic for women to work."<sup>28</sup> *Film noir* critics who claim that the *femme fatale* has historical specificity to postwar American society overlook the debate of working women prior to this period. Indeed, the third chapter of this thesis will recapitulate the history of working women during the Depression.

Furthermore, *film noir* critics either have ignored or have inadequate knowledge of the *femme fatale* of hard-boiled fiction. In "(Not) The Last *Film Noir* Essay: *Film Noir* and the Crisis of Postwar Interpretation," Paul Young criticizes Krutnik for his refusal to see the ideological connections between *film noir* and hard-boiled fiction. Krutnik argues that *film noir* represents the crisis of masculinity in postwar America.<sup>29</sup> However, Young points out that Krutnik finds a source for this crisis of masculinity in 1930s hard-boiled fiction. Young writes, "The publication dates of these novels imply – using Krutnik's

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in Stoddard, 84-5.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Young, "(Not) The Last Noir Essay: *Film Noir* and the Crisis of Postwar Interpretation," *Minnesota Review* 55 (2002), 207.

own method of letting the text speak for the culture – a *prewar* crisis of masculinity every bit as debilitating as the one he locates once the war ended.”<sup>30</sup> Young contends:

Krutnik’s interest in periodizing misogyny and male aimlessness as postwar phenomena leads to a misrepresentation not only of history but of relative historical weight of cultural forms, for he implies that literature operates autonomously of cultural factors... while film is so massively over determined by these same factors that it seems simply to sprout from a diffuse spirit of the age.<sup>31</sup>

Young argues that *film noir* critics obsessed with periodizing *film noir* in postwar America do a disservice to American history and the relative historical weight of cultural forms. Moreover, Young proposes that a prewar crisis of masculinity is represented in 1930s hard-boiled fiction. Indeed, Young’s criticism is justified as hard-boiled fiction provided *film noir* with a source for gender issues such as the *femme fatale*. *Film noir* critics who marvel at the introduction of the *femme fatale* in *film noir* have ignored the presence of this archetype in 1930s hard-boiled fiction. The fourth chapter of this thesis will analyze the *femme fatale* represented in hard-boiled fiction, linking her with the *femme fatale* of *film noir*. The following chapter will establish the indisputable influence of hard-boiled fiction on *film noir*.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter II: The Hard-boiled Influence on *Film Noir*

In "Cain, Naturalism and *Noir*," Christopher Orr notes, "most commentators on *film noir* trace the literary antecedents of this cycle of films to the American 'hard-boiled' crime fiction of the 1930's and 1940's, mentioning such writers as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich, and James M. Cain."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, hard-boiled critics are quick to recognize the hard-boiled influence on *film noir*. Consequently, there is no doubt that hard-boiled fiction had a significant impact on the world of *film noir*.

*Film noir* criticism is abundant with comments acknowledging the influence of hard-boiled fiction. In "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the *Film Noir*," Raymond Durnat asserts, the "private eye" influence on *film noir* is intimately related with the hard-boiled tradition of the 1930s. However, Durnat contends that hard-boiled fiction was a "complacent, pre-war cycle."<sup>2</sup> In "Notes on *Film Noir*," Paul Schrader confirms that *film noir* follows in the footsteps of the hard-boiled tradition of Hammett, Chandler, James M. Cain, McCoy, and O'Hara. He argues that hard-boiled fiction gave *film noir* "preset conventions of heroes, minor characters, plots, dialogue, and themes."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Foster Hirsch writes that the "hard-boiled school of crime writing which flourished in the pages of pulp magazines in the twenties and thirties had a great impact on the *noir* tone."<sup>4</sup> In *More than Night: Film Noir and Its Contents*, James Naremore points out that "virtually all of the initial cycle of American *film noirs* was adapted from critically

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Orr, "Cain, Naturalism and *Noir*" *Film Criticism* 25 (2002): 47.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Durnat, "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the *Film Noir*," in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York, NY: Limelight, 1996), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York, NY: Limelight, 1996), 56.

<sup>4</sup> Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (San Diego, CA: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1981), 23.



admired novels.”<sup>5</sup> In *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*, Andrew Dickos writes that “hard-boiled fiction of the pulp magazines and booklets, published cheaply and selling briskly, attracted a readership all too familiar with the emotions, crimes, and violence that would find expression in the *film noir*.”<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Cowie claims that “studios had for some years sought to adapt the ‘hard-boiled’ thriller writer; MGM, for example, bought the rights to James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in 1935, but the constraints of the Production Code forced the studio to abandon plans to film it.”<sup>7</sup> *Film noir* critics have sufficiently acknowledged that *film noir* is deeply indebted to 1930s hard-boiled fiction.

Furthermore, *film noir* critics have recognized hard-boiled authors who were screenwriters on several *film noirs*. As Frank Krutnik reports:

In the majority of critical texts on *film noir*, the influence of the ‘hard-boiled’ forms of American crime fiction is given high priority: Borde and Chaumeton, for example, consider it the ‘immediate source’ of the *film noir*. Using the filmography provided by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, David Bordwell estimates that almost 20 percent of the *noir* thrillers produced between 1941 and 1948 were adaptations of ‘hard-boiled’ novels and short stories. And this figure does not include those films, like *The Dark Corner* (1946), which imitate or rework ‘hard-boiled’ sources, nor the many thrillers which were worked on by ‘hard-boiled’ writers who moved to Hollywood.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Krutnik notes that Hollywood recruited many of these hard-boiled writers for screenplays during World War II because “many of Hollywood’s male employees had

<sup>5</sup> James Naremore, *More than Night* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 40.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Dickos, *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, “*Film Noir* and Women,” In *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York, NY: Verso, 1993), 131.

<sup>8</sup> Krutnik, 33-34.



been drafted into the armed services, including directors, writers, and major stars.”<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Jon Tuska contends that hard-boiled writers who became screenwriters during the 1940s made significant contributions to *film noir*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, out of the 301 *film noirs* listed in Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward’s *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, hard-boiled authors provided source material or wrote the actual screenplays for over 30 percent of *film noirs*.<sup>11</sup>

This statistic includes Cornell Woolrich as a hard-boiled author. Tony Williams would disagree with Woolrich’s inclusion in the hard-boiled tradition. In “*Phantom Lady*, Cornell Woolrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic,” Williams claims that Cornell Woolrich was “an important force in the literary background of *film noir*.”<sup>12</sup> However, he insists that Woolrich was not part of the hard-boiled tradition. He believes Woolrich provides an alternative to this tradition.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, critics of hard-boiled fiction such as Geoffrey O’Brien and Woody Haut reject Williams’ claim. O’Brien and Haut include Woolrich in their lists of hard-boiled authors.<sup>14</sup> Although Williams disputes Woolrich’s inclusion, Woolrich was a significant author in the hard-boiled tradition because his crime fiction includes the same content, style, and narrative structures as Cain and Chandler’s hard-boiled fiction.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>10</sup> John Tuska, *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 65.

<sup>11</sup> Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Tony Williams, “*Phantom Lady*, Cornell Woolrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic,” ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York, NY: Limelight Editions, 1996), 130.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey O’Brien, *Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir* (Cambridge, NY: De Capo Press, 1997), 177-87; Woody Haut, *Pulp Culture: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War*, (New York, NY: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), 199-200.

Moreover, hard-boiled fiction critics agree with the *film noir* critics about the hard-boiled influence on *film noir*. Haut claims that “pulp culture fiction and *film noir* [are] inextricably linked.”<sup>15</sup> Haut provides an appendix of pulp writers that contributed to *film noir*.<sup>16</sup> In *Hard-boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, Erin Smith asserts that “much *film noir* was not only based on hard-boiled fiction but written by hard-boiled writers who turned to more lucrative screenwriting.”<sup>17</sup> Gene Phillips focuses on the connection between the hard-boiled fiction of Raymond Chandler and *film noir* in *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir*. He believes that “*film noir* provided the perfect pictorial complement for Chandler’s hard-boiled fiction.”<sup>18</sup> In “Crime Noir,” Charles L. P. Silet connects the hard-boiled fiction of James M. Cain and Cornell Woolrich with *film noir*.<sup>19</sup> Both hard-boiled literary critics and *film noir* critics recognize the intimate relationship between the two movements.

Hard-boiled fiction depicts a cynical view of American society after World War I. Tuska writes that hard-boiled fiction represents the “a semi-dark, hard-bitten world of ambition, greed, speakeasies, and violence” in urban settings.<sup>20</sup> Dickos writes that hard-boiled fiction “spoke in a language that alternately described a cold, cynical, and grimly ironic world and the obsessive, overripe passions consuming its characters. Often sordid, fatalistic, and quite punitive, it was just as often expressive of a failed romanticism,

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<sup>15</sup> Haut, 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-3.

<sup>17</sup> Erin Smith, *Hard-boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000), 94-5.

<sup>18</sup> Gene D. Phillips, *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Charles L.P. Silet, “Crime Noir,” In *Mystery and Suspense Writers: The Literature of Crime, Detection, and Espionage*, ed. Robin W. Winks (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s, 1998), 1009.

<sup>20</sup> Tuska, 62.



contemptuously accepted by those caught short in life.”<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, Dickos believes that hard-boiled fiction “fed a rebellious and often subversive literary vision to the mass consciousness.”<sup>22</sup>

However, Dickos’ belief that hard-boiled fiction was a subversive movement in American literary history contradicts Durnat’s assumption that hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s was a “complacent, pre-war cycle.”<sup>23</sup> It is impossible to judge whether hard-boiled fiction was subversive to mainstream ideologies without analyzing the social context and the novels. The following chapters will focus upon this analysis. After this analysis, it will be possible to understand the possibility of subversive qualities regarding women in hard-boiled fiction.

Indeed, there is a premise for studying the women in hard-boiled fiction, as *film noir* critics have commented on these women. Hirsch writes that women in Chandler’s work conceal “a festering evil beneath seductive masks, women are typically the villains in Chandler’s work, their sexuality being a trap for the tempted male.”<sup>24</sup> Hirsch points out that Cain’s novels reveal a deep connection between sex, greed, and crime.<sup>25</sup> Williams tells us that Woolrich’s crime novels provide us with a “fertile territory” as his heroines were “powerful threats to patriarchal ideology.”<sup>26</sup> These comments regarding the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction resembles the commentary on the *femme fatale* in *film noir* discussed in the previous chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> Dickos, 96.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>23</sup> Durnat, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Hirsch, 33.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, 130.



Likewise, hard-boiled literary critics declare that women in hard-boiled literature are significant to the understanding of the genre. Haut observes that women in hard-boiled fiction are either “dangerous *femmes fatales* or sugar-coated housewives; sexually promiscuous or frigid; murderous or boring.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, Haut believes that “*femmes fatales* [in hard-boiled literature] can be viewed either as products of the hard-boiled imagination, or as popular images derived from paranoid fantasies of independent and, therefore, threatening women.”<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Smith dedicates an entire chapter to representations of secretaries in hard-boiled fiction. She claims that secretaries in hard-boiled fiction represent the “feminization” of occupations such as typing, stenography, and clerical work in the early twentieth century. She points out that the majority of secretaries were women in 1930.<sup>29</sup>

Smith writes,

Hard-boiled fiction is concerned with (among other things) negotiating an uneasy rapprochement between an artisanal model of identity based on production work and patriarchal family values, and an emergent model based on the purchase and display of commodities, in which women played a major part. The restoration of patriarchal power arrangements at the close of these novels coexists uneasily with hard-boiled fiction’s fascination with womanly men (sometimes overt homosexuals) and manly women (always predatory heterosexuals).<sup>30</sup>

Smith’s observations suggest that hard-boiled fiction provides an abundant forum for the discussion of gender roles.

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<sup>27</sup> Haut, 106.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, 153.

Likewise, in *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction*, Cynthia Hamilton points out that women during the early twentieth century participated in the suffrage movement and trade-union movement while finding personal and sexual freedom in society. She argues,

The hard-boiled detective novel reflects the changing status of women as well as this reservoir of resentment, often portraying them as competitive, devious, wily, and morally degenerate. This changed image conveys the impression of a society fragmented and embattled, and invites pornography of violence, which was not exploited until after the Second World War. .... Women not only compete, but prove to be dangerous contenders, able to use their sexuality to trap and weaken men.... Women become adversaries, and are often among the criminals the detective seeks.<sup>31</sup>

Hard-boiled literary critics such as Haut, Smith, and Hamilton suggest that there is much research to be done on women in hard-boiled fiction. Gender is a significant component in hard-boiled fiction. They relate these representations to the cultural redefinition of a woman's social roles, their increasing independence, and their introduction to the American workforce during the early twentieth century.

Accordingly, *film noir* critics and hard-boiled critics undermine the historical specificity that *film noir* critics attribute to the *femme fatale* in *film noir*. This discussion of the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction echoes the discussion of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*. The rebellious, deceptive, seductive, murderous women of hard-boiled fiction precede the *femme fatale* in *film noir*. Despite this evidence, *film noir* critics continue to ignore that hard-boiled fiction expressed the changing social roles of women during the 1930s. Indeed, postwar and Depression periods in American history witnessed abrupt

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<sup>31</sup> Cynthia Hamilton, *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction: From High Noon to Midnight* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 33.

changes in the roles of women that influenced hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*. In postwar America, a back-to-home movement pressured women out of the workplace where they had found independence and prosperity in the wartime economy. In Depression America, women found more opportunities to enter the work force than their male counterparts did. Women sought work to support their families. Meanwhile, society debated whether women had the right to work. The *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction reflects social concerns over the changing gender roles in Depression America. The following chapter will discuss the historical context of these hard-boiled fictions.

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### Chapter III: Work, Women and the Depression

Although the question of women's work was debated before the 1930s, the economic difficulties of the Depression brought the debate to the forefront. Women workers found new opportunities in the changing workplace of the Depression. They faced discrimination and public sentiment that believed they were stealing jobs from men. However, segregation of the workplace dispels this accusation. Many men refused feminized jobs and the lower wages that these jobs offered. Male and female roles dramatically changed in the workplace and the household as women became a primary source of income, undermining the patriarchal hierarchy of the family. Women were faced with a double message. The economic pressures forced them into the workplace to support their families. Meanwhile, public campaigns accused them of stealing men's jobs and neglecting their domestic duties. In the end, women workers of the 1930s faced contradicting ideologies but continued to increase their numbers in the workforce. Feminist historians provide us with a detailed discussion of the issues surrounding working women during the Depression.

The debate over women's work began with their introduction to the workforce during the late nineteenth century. Erin Smith notes that "between 1880 and 1930, the female wage-labor force increased twice as fast as the adult female population."<sup>1</sup> In *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930's*, Laura Hapke confirms that "by 1930 women's labor force participation had more than doubled since their first mass entry in the 1890s."<sup>2</sup> In *Out to Work: A History of Wage-*

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Smith, *Hard-boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930's* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xvi.

*Earning Women in the United States*, Alice Kessler-Harris reports that women constituted 24.3 percent of the total workforce by 1930.<sup>3</sup> This introduction promoted a public debate over the appropriateness of women in the workplace. Hapke points out that “working women were carrying the baggage of a lingering Victorianism concerning their physical and moral fitness for work. For well over three decades, defenders had argued with detractors, who impugned the woman wage earner’s fitness for wifedom and motherhood, her unsavory companions, promiscuous ways, and desire to take men’s jobs.”<sup>4</sup>

However, these arguments began to dwindle during World War I and the 1920s.

Kessler-Harris claims:

Even before the 1920s, convictions that women’s place was in the home had become harder to maintain next to the increasing reality of their work lives. World War I and the 1920s had laid bare the pulls on women to enter the work force. But friction was contained by relatively plentiful work opportunities, stringent sex segmentation, and panoply of laws and social customs designed to prevent all but the most daring from transcending their place.<sup>5</sup>

The economic pressures of the Depression resurrected the debates regarding women’s work. Hapke reports, “Americans had engaged in a lengthy and impassioned debate on women in the workplace well before the anxieties of the Great Depression rekindled the nation’s interest in the subject and gave it a new urgency.”<sup>6</sup> The economic tensions of the Depression brought these debates to the foreground.

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 258.

<sup>4</sup> Hapke, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Kessler-Harris, 271-2.

<sup>6</sup> Hapke, 4.



During the Depression, there was massive economic pressure from the extraordinary unemployment. In *Women and the American Labor Movement: From World War I to the Present*, Philip S. Fower reports, “the number of unemployed rose, from 3 million in 1930 to approximately 15 million (some placed it as high as 17 million) in 1933. Wages dropped 45 percent, and the percentage of the population living at or below the substance level rose from 40 percent in 1929 (the year of greatest prosperity to 75 percent in 1932).”<sup>7</sup> In *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression*, Lois Scharf notes, “the Depression decade is one clearly defined period, and, in broad terms, many working men and women shared economic disruption, deprivation, and even despair.”<sup>8</sup> For the women, Kessler-Harris writes, “the depression turned what had been the previous decade’s joyous discovery of freedom to work into a bitter defense of the right to a job; it buried the options and choices for which women had struggled beneath the relentless pressure of family need.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, hard-boiled fiction represents these economic struggles as the *femme fatale* seeks financial independence. However, the *femme fatale* does not seek independence through work; she uses sex and violence.

During the Depression, women faced public criticism for seeking employment.

Furthermore, Kessler writes:

The tensions surrounding these choices coalesced into three interrelated issues. The clearest was whether married women with employed husbands should ever work – a question of salving male egos as well as of acceptable social roles. A spinoff of this was the issue of whether the

<sup>7</sup> Philip S. Fower, *Women and the American Labor Movement: from World War I to the Present* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1980), 256.

<sup>8</sup> Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), xi.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 250-1.



competition of women for men's jobs would destroy male economic opportunity – a question of security. And both of these were subsumed into the more abstract but equally painful question of whether wage work was a gender-based privilege or a human right.<sup>10</sup>

Although these issues surrounding women's work predate the Depression, their importance increased because more women entered the workforce while more men found themselves unemployed.

Certainly, statistics became of great importance to the discussion of women's work during the Depression. Smith observes that "by 1930, half of all single women and a quarter of all female adults were in the paid workforce."<sup>11</sup> Kessler Harris points out that "despite private and public policy, and notwithstanding depression and unemployment, women's proportion of the work force inched up slightly. They had been 24.3 percent of all workers in 1930. By 1940, they were 25.1 percent."<sup>12</sup> In *America's Working Women*, Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby find similar statistics: since World War I, the number of women entering the labor force had been steadily increasing. In 1920, women were 20 percent of all workers, by 1930 they were 22 percent and by 1940, 25 percent.<sup>13</sup>

The American public perceived these working women as job-stealers, taking jobs from men and creating unnecessary competition. Fower asserts that "the consequent competition for employment served to intensify male enmity toward workingwomen. In Woonsocket, Rhode Island, men in the spinning mills struck against the employment of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 30-1.

<sup>12</sup> Kessler-Harris, 258.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby, *America's Working Women* (New York, NY: Random House, 1976), 245.

women....”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Hapke writes that “the Depression was a time when wage-earning women were charged with stealing jobs from men.”<sup>15</sup> Scharf notes that “at a time when the predominant public attitude toward working women – especially working wives-was that they had usurped the jobs that rightfully belonged to men, Grace Nies Fletcher titled an article in *Independent Women* that described economic pressure on women ‘He Wants My Job!’”<sup>16</sup> Kessler-Harris reports that “the campaign of legislative harassment, newspaper vilification, and social work pressure revealed the extent to which women’s failure to respond to the crisis by giving up jobs to men threatened the society as a whole.”<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the working woman did challenge society by undermining the patriarchy upon which is the foundation of American society. Kessler-Harris further explains:

To explain why a slowly rejuvenating economy could not provide jobs for men required a scapegoat. Who better than the women who seemed simultaneously to be taking jobs away from the male breadwinners and destroying the family? For the ability of women to retain and even expand their job potential played havoc with the cherished set of ideas about home, hearth, and women’s place in it. It produced crisis and confusion, locking men and women into rigid attitudes, stifling a generation of feminist thought, and intensifying hostility to women wage earners.<sup>18</sup>

Kessler-Harris explains that patriarchy has a “cherished set of ideas about home, hearth, and women’s place in it.”<sup>19</sup> When the values that uphold patriarchal hierarchy are challenged by women who refuse to be confined to the limited possibilities offered to them, male hostility surfaces to reestablish and reaffirm these values. This male hostility

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<sup>14</sup> Fower, 257.

<sup>15</sup> Hapke, xv.

<sup>16</sup> Scharf, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Kessler-Harris, 271.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



is reflected physically between the male protagonist and the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction. Their romantic relationships are interwoven with acts of violence and brutality.

Likewise, the working women in society are reflected in the *femme fatale* of hard-boiled fiction. The *femme fatale* plays to the male paranoia of the independent women who threaten the family, men and patriarchy in hard-boiled fiction. Men deemed working women "rebellious" as their employment challenged the hierarchy of patriarchy by displacing the male as the breadwinner of the family. Hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* give male audiences ideological compensation by depicting the working woman as the *femme fatale*. However, the *femme fatale* uses sex and crime instead of work to obtain her financial independence. The male authors and male readers demonized the working woman by representing her as the murderous *femme fatale*. The narrative conclusion provided ideological compensation for the male workers as it reaffirmed patriarchy by eliminating the threat posed by the *femme fatale*.

In a patriarchal society, men are placed in positions of power over females in a gender hierarchy. In "Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism," Zillah Eisenstein provides a useful definition of patriarchy:

...patriarchy is defined as a sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege. Patriarchy is the male hierarchical ordering of society. Although the legal-institutional base of patriarchy was more explicit in the past, the basic relations of power remain intact today. The patriarchal system is preserved, via marriage and the family, through the sexual division of labor and society. Patriarchy is rooted in biology rather than in economics or history. Manifested through male force and control, the roots of patriarchy are located in women's reproductive selves. Woman's position in this power hierarchy is defined not in terms of the economic



class structure but in terms of the patriarchal organization of society.<sup>20</sup>

The economic situations of the Depression challenged patriarchal American society because women became the breadwinners of the family, displacing the male as the head of the family. Hard-boiled fiction compensates for this displacement of power in the patriarchy by demonizing working women.

As Eisenstein points out, patriarchy is upheld through institutions such as the family. In fact, the institution of the family faced a crisis in the 1930s. Kessler-Harris claims, "the heart of the matter was what the depression did to the family: .... Broad outlines of these changes hint at the dimensions of what contemporaries eventually called a 'crisis' in the family."<sup>21</sup> Scharf reports that there was "heightened anxiety over the stability of the family."<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Gordon notes, "unemployment and the depression deeply affected family structure."<sup>23</sup> During the 1930s, Kessler-Harris observes that the cherished ideas of family were reaffirmed by popular culture such as magazines and movies to reestablish the hierarchy of patriarchy.<sup>24</sup>

However, hard-boiled fiction does not necessarily reaffirm the patriarchal institution of marriage. There is an absence of the family in hard-boiled fiction just as in *film noir*. However, the question as in *film noir* is whether or not the absence of the family is responsible for the dark, bleak tone of hard-boiled fiction. Ultimately, the *femme fatale* who seeks freedom from marriage cannot find happiness because her means

<sup>20</sup> Zillah Eisenstein, "Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah Eisenstein (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Kessler-Harris, 252.

<sup>22</sup> Scharf, xi.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, 241.

<sup>24</sup> Kessler-Harris, 256.

are criminal.

During the Depression, rampant unemployment made men incapable of fulfilling their roles as breadwinners. Kessler-Harris observes, "Popular culture portrayed husbands who endlessly hunted for jobs, while wives sat by poignantly wringing their hands in despair."<sup>25</sup> However, the hard-boiled *femme fatale* diverges from these representations of passive women. They are active in their pursuit of financial independence. However, this pursuit of wealth is for their independence and not for the survival of their families. Indeed, the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction is not married nor has children. However, working women during the Depression sought financial independence for survival of their families rather than their own selfishness.

Furthermore, Gordon and Reverby write that during the Depression, "some men... found their authority challenged in the home. They sometimes left their families when they were unable to adjust to newly defined roles. Others made the transition to working in the home in spite of pressures from neighbors not to assume 'women's work.'"<sup>26</sup> Kessler-Harris refers to a non-fiction account from *Harper's Monthly Magazine* from 1933 to exemplify the crisis of the family:

An anonymous author...described what the depression had done to her. She had, she wrote, worked in the early years of her marriage; her husband's income, with hers, reached a very comfortable \$7,000 a year. There were savings, stocks. Then came the crash, unemployment for her mate, and psychological readjustment. She continued in her job, and for more than two years the pair subsisted on her income alone. The husband assumed household tasks,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 253

<sup>26</sup> Gordon, 241.



cooking, mending, and shopping. The marriage, blessed with a sense of humor, survived.<sup>27</sup>

As men became unable to provide for their families, they lost authority in the hierarchy of the family. Kessler-Harris relates the anxieties concerning male unemployment and the family:

What happened to a man's self-image when he could no longer support his family? What of male/female relationships, or the dependence of parents on half-grown off spring, or the respect of young children for nonproviding parents? What of the quintessentially American presumption that 'if a man cannot find work... he is a rather worthless individual'? Would this go by the board? Would families look down upon men who could no longer support them?<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, man's self-image was boosted through hard-boiled fiction that provides him with moral supremacy over the rebellious females in society. Through the criminal acts of the *femme fatale*, the male reader obtained a moral supremacy over the ambiguous female. Through the narrative conclusion, patriarchy is reestablished as the independent woman is punished.

The debates about women's work produced a "double message" for women workers during the Depression. Kessler-Harris asserts:

The immediate readjustment required by the Depression resulted from its curious double message. While it imposed on the family pressures that pushed women into wage work, it fostered a public stance that encouraged family unity and urged women, in the interest of jobs for men, to avoid paid work themselves. The discordance intensified when the economy began to restore itself in ways that made room for an army of brand-new workers, heavily female, while it left experienced soldiers, often male, standing in the breadlines.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Kessler-Harris, 250.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>29</sup> Kessler-Harris, 251.



Women were plagued with contradictory ideologies: stay at home to nurture the family and work to support the family. Hapke believes that “fiction reflected the era’s conflict between traditional expectations and the realities of feminine economic desperation, between the still-potent ideology of woman’s separate sphere and her new roles as self-supporting or family breadwinner, whether by inclination or default.”<sup>30</sup> The following chapter will look at the how these contrasting ideologies were represented in best-selling fiction and hard-boiled fiction of the period. Both represent women who are torn between their desire to be financially independent and their desire to fulfill traditional familial roles. While best-selling fiction narratives allow women to accomplish both, hard-boiled fiction prevents the *femme fatale* from successfully becoming a loving mother or wife.

Kessler-Harris believes that the pre-Depression segregation of men and women’s work began to be eliminated as women entered the male workplace.<sup>31</sup> New technologies eliminated skilled jobs in male-dominated manufacturing industries, opening new doors to unskilled, female laborers. Accordingly, Smith emphasizes that male-dominated workplaces were increasingly invaded by the women workers during the Depression.

Smith writes:

The loss of formerly all-male sites for work and leisure required a variety of material and ideological compensations. Hard-boiled writing culture functioned as a homosocial imagined community that addressed some of the needs once met on the shop floor, in the voting booth, or in the saloon.... The imagined worlds of hard-boiled fiction are filled with men’s spaces – the mean streets (where women, as in turning-of-the-century saloons, do not go unescorted), boxing matches, tobacco shops, bars.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hapke, xx.

<sup>31</sup> Kessler-Harris, 261.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, 31.

Hard-boiled fiction provided ideological compensation for men who felt threatened by the narrowing all-male environments. The landscape of dirty city streets and smoke-filled bars in hard-boiled fiction provided the male reader with masculine atmospheres that marginalized femininity. Women in these environments were passive except for the *femme fatale*.

The number of women working in the professional arena in the United States decreased through the Depression, pressuring women to turn to their sexuality to secure employment. In professional areas of employment, women were encouraged to use sex appeal to retain their jobs. Scharf notes:

Women with some degree of education and training were bombarded with advice on job opportunities in the midst of hard times. The information dispensed by vocational guidance counselors, employment placement personnel, and authors of advice literature displayed two principal features. Writers stressed specific, noncompetitive, feminized occupations and encouraged the display of sex-type behavior on the job.<sup>33</sup>

Sexuality became a means for women in the Depression to find employment. Smith supports this claim. She contends that women employed in offices “had to spend a great deal of money on clothes and makeup that made them appear feminine and desirable to men.”<sup>34</sup> Smith believes that sexuality was “deeply enmeshed with the structure of work” of female office workers.<sup>35</sup> Job counselors believed that there was a correlation between professional work for women and a woman’s attractiveness. This assumption negates the actual work that the women performed. Value was placed on their physical appearance. The power of female sexuality during the Depression is reflected in the empowering

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, 154.



sexuality of the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction. The *femme fatale* uses her sexual appeal to seduce the male protagonist. Once the male protagonist is seduced, the *femme fatale* pulls him into a world of crime for her profit. The *femme fatale* attempts to obtain her independence from patriarchy through her sexuality just as professional female workers were empowered by their sexuality during the Depression.

Despite discrimination from the public, women workers found new opportunities during the Depression. They refuted public sentiment that criticized their employment and that threatened to confine women's social roles to the family. New technologies in male-dominated manufacturing industries created simplified jobs that men refused. Female workers took these jobs, invading the formerly male workplace. The public chastised these women, claiming they were stealing jobs from men and neglecting their familial responsibilities. Working women faced contradictory ideologies that encouraged them to support their families and abandon their positions in the workplace. However, women workers *were* invested in preserving their families. They understood the financial needs of their families. They worked to support their families. They were both worker and mother/wife. The competition in professional employment led women to utilize their sexuality to keep office jobs. The question of women's work was brought to the forefront by the economic stresses of the Depression.



#### Chapter IV: Representations of Women in 1930s Fiction

The changing female roles in American society during the 1930s are reflected in the fiction of the period in different ways, producing different ideological effects. Best-selling fiction such as Sinclair Lewis's *Ann Vickers* (1933) represents an ambitious woman who sacrifices her career and independence to reclaim traditional feminine roles in the American family. *Ann Vickers* focuses on a woman who finds social mobility in society through education and connections with influential individuals. *Ann Vickers* is about a middle-class woman who obtains professional employment. Her ambitions and participation in the workforce conflict with her ability to establish a family. As a result, she is unsatisfied. Ultimately, she sacrifices her career to take up the traditional feminine roles as mother and wife in a family. It is only in fulfilling these roles that she feels fulfilled. She also has the means to find financial independence.

However, the hard-boiled fiction of James M. Cain represents the gender issues of 1930s differently. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (1936) represent women who struggle for financial independence. These women use their sexuality and crime to find their independence. The *femme fatale* in Cain's hard-boiled fiction is greedy, seductive, and dangerous. Consequently, these characteristics exclude them from traditional feminine roles in the American family.

The women in Cain's hard-boiled fiction are nearly identical to their *film noir* counterparts. Director Tay Garnett adapted *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to film in 1946; Billy Wilder adapted *Double Indemnity* to film in 1944. The women in these films are not new archetypes that reflect the issue of women and work in postwar America. Instead, they are resurrections of the *femme fatale* of Cain's fiction. The appearance of

the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* correlates with the social questions of women and work that were foregrounded during Depression and postwar America. The *femme fatale* appears in twentieth-century America when the social debate about women's work was in the foreground. Through the analysis of Cain's hard-boiled fiction, it will become clear that the *femme fatale* of hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* are indistinguishable from one another. At the same time, the *femme fatale* challenges patriarchal ideology by revealing marriage as an unfulfilling, patriarchal institution. Consequentially, the *femme fatale* is outcasted from society by her desire for independence from marriage. She is incapable of finding satisfaction in traditional domestic roles because of her greed and criminal behavior.

The central women of *Ann Vickers*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *Double Indemnity* desire financial independence. Lewis shows that Ann is ambitious in childhood. A childhood acquaintance comments, "jiminy, Ann Vickers is funny.... She's crazy! She says she don't want to get married. She wants to be a doctor or a lawyer or somethin', I dunno. She's crazy!"<sup>1</sup> Later, a college classmate asks if Ann is planning a career. Ann replies, "you bet your life I am! .... I expect to work! I want all the cheers and money I can get, but I expect to work for them. .... I want to do something that will have some effect on the human race. ... I want to get my hands on the world."<sup>2</sup> Ann desires financial independence through work. At the same time, she has humanitarian interests. This double ambition leads her to social work in settlement houses and prisons to obtain her independence.

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Ann Vickers* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



Although the *femme fatale* in Cain's hard-boiled novels has a similar desire for wealth, she does not display Ann's humanitarian motives. Moreover, the *femme fatale* cannot find her financial independence through work. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Cora tells Frank, "I want to work and be something, that's all."<sup>3</sup> Cora works in the food industry. She develops her restaurant enterprise during the course of the novel. She enjoys the increased profits from her business. Frank tells us, "she got all excited about... our chance to make some more money."<sup>4</sup> Frank wishes to leave the business, but Cora desires to increase her clientele through a beer license. Cora attempts to convince Frank about the benefits of business ownership. She tells him:

We've got it good. Why wouldn't we stay here? Listen, Frank. You've been trying to make a bum out of me ever since you've known me, but you're not going to do it. I told you, I'm not a bum. I want to be something. We stay here. We're not going away. We take out the beer license. We amount to something.<sup>5</sup>

Cora is an ambitious woman who desires to procure her independence through work.

In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis wants to obtain her financial independence, as well. She is in the medical field. Lola tells Huff, "In the first place, she's a nurse. She's one of the best nurses in the city of Los Angeles.... She's a nurse, and she specialized in pulmonary diseases. She would know the time of crisis, almost to a minute.... And she would know how to bring on pneumonia, too."<sup>6</sup> Phyllis abandons work as a means to obtain her independence. She utilizes her knowledge to bring on pneumonia in her patients. Her chain of murders gives her access to Nirdlinger's wealth and the return on

<sup>3</sup> James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1948), 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>6</sup> James M. Cain, *Double Indemnity*, (New York, NY: Random House, 1989), 74.



his insurance policy. Keyes tells us that she killed Nirdlinger's child, the first Mrs. Nirdlinger, and Mr. Nirdlinger to obtain her independence.<sup>7</sup> Phyllis's murderous ambition contrasts with Ann's humanitarian ambitions. Cain's *femme fatale* is selfish and greedy. Cora attempts to obtain independence through her work. Phyllis abandons her career earlier, reverting to murder to obtain her independence. However, Lewis's Ann desires to obtain her financial independence through social work that benefits not only herself but her society as well.

Phyllis's occupation as a nurse is not an issue in the *film noir* version of *Double Indemnity*. Although the change separates the *film noir* Phyllis from the working woman in American society, this is inconsequential. The *femme fatale* is produced by male fears of the independent and, therefore, threatening woman. The connection does not need to be explicit; the *femme fatale* does not need to be a working woman in order to reflect the social concerns of working women. The important characteristic that the *femme fatale* shares with the working woman is the desire for financial independence from men. The *femme fatale* seeks financial independence through sex and violence. Seducing and murdering are amoral behavior, thus, giving the male audience moral supremacy over the *femme fatale*.

The ambitious women in these 1930s novels reflect social concerns about working women during the Depression. Their desire for independence is a negative characteristic in each novel. Ann must struggle to overcome her desire to work before she can adopt traditional feminine roles. In contrast, Cora and Phyllis cannot escape their desires for financial independence. Their struggles to obtain this independence leads them

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 114.

to crime. Their criminal mentality excludes them from establishing a family. These representations reflect the public criticism that work and women are incompatible. The male authors can only reaffirm the patriarchy that gives them power over the females. Likewise, the male readership obtains ideological compensation by reading narratives that show that women cannot be workers and mothers at the same time.

Despite their desire for financial independence, Ann and Cora still have desires for traditional feminine roles of mother and wife. While Ann is in prison for her participation in a suffrage protest, she longs for a husband and children. She thinks about “the security of a man, a house, children, land, and the serene commonplace.”<sup>8</sup> Later, Ann tells us, “I wish I had a husband, who came home nights-no, no, not every night, but sometimes, for a surprise. I wish I had Pride. My daughter! I would be proud of her. I’m afraid I’d send her horrible smart friends, like any other Waubaukee mother.”<sup>9</sup> Despite her career, Ann longs for the tranquility and security associated with traditional female roles.

Similarly, Cora has motherly and wifely moments. While lying in bed with Frank, Cora plays with his hair. She asks him:

‘You like blueberry pie?’  
 ‘I don’t know. Yeah. I guess so.’  
 ‘I’ll make you some’<sup>10</sup>

Later, Cora becomes pregnant. She is extremely excited at the opportunity to become a mother. She says, “it’s not only knowing you’re going to make another life. It’s what it does to you. My breasts feel so big, and I want you to kiss them. Pretty soon my belly is

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, 152.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>10</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 11.



going to get big, and I'll love that, and want everybody to see it. It's life. I can feel it in me. It's a new life for us both, Frank."<sup>11</sup> Ann and Cora find pleasure in filling the roles of mother and wife alongside their desire for financial independence.

However, Phyllis demonstrates no desire to fulfill these traditional roles. She puts on the disguise of a loving sweetheart to Huff to manipulate him for her goal. Lola tells Huff, "you think she's just the dear, sweet, gentle thing that she looks like? That's what my father thought. He thought it was wonderful, the way she trudged all that distance to save a life, and less than a year after he married her. But I don't think so. You see-I know her."<sup>12</sup> Phyllis's wife-like moments are a facade. Cain suggests that women who desire financial independence are incapable of having the proper characteristics for traditional feminine roles in the family.

These contrasting desires in Cora and Ann reflect the social question about working women. As discussed in the previous chapter, women were subjected to a double message during the 1930s. The public told women to take up traditional familial roles. Because the job market provided more opportunities to women, women sought work to become financially independent and support their families. However, the public criticized them for entering the workforce. The women of 1930s fiction reflect these contradictory ideologies. Ann and Cora are caught in the confusion caused by these contrasting ideologies. They desire to be financially independent and to establish a family. They apparently are not sure which roles will bring them the most satisfaction.

However, Phyllis is a different case. She has no desire to establish a family. While Cora and Ann are capable of expressing an independent side and a traditional side,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>12</sup> Cain, *Double*, 74.



Phyllis has only one desire: financial independence. Phyllis becomes the epitome of the male audience's paranoia about the woman who seeks independence. Her ambition has destroyed her traditional, feminine characteristics of a mother or wife: love, affection, and compassion. These qualities would be considered favorable to the male audience in the 1930s. Phyllis has none of these traits. Cain has demonized the independent woman. Her murderous ambitions have left Phyllis cold-hearted and unaffectionate.

Furthermore, *film noir* and hard-boiled fiction both use the *femme fatale* to reflect these contradictory ideas of new opportunities for female financial independence and traditional female roles in the family. As mentioned before, Christine Gledhill points out that the *femme fatale* constantly changes her roles through out the narrative. Gledhill argues that in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, "Cora exhibits a remarkable series of unmotivated character switches and roles... : (1) sex-bomb; (2) hardworking, ambitious woman; (3) loving playmate in an adulterous relationship; (4) fearful girl in need of protection; (5) victim of male power; (6) hard, ruthless murderess; (7) mother-to-be; (8) sacrifice to the law."<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Cora in Cain's hard-boiled fiction exhibits this exact sequence of transformations. She is a sexual object to Frank when he first meets her, an ambitious woman who wants to make her business successful, oppressed wife, cold-blooded murderess, and pregnant wife. Whether in hard-boiled fiction or *film noir*, the *femme fatale* changes her identity through the narrative to achieve her goals.

In 1930s fiction, women find great difficulty attempting to fulfill their traditional familial roles. Ann finds conflict between her first pregnancy and her career.

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<sup>13</sup> Christine Gledhill, "Klute I: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Ann Kaplan (London, England: British Film Institute, 2000), 31.

She aborts the child to save her position. However, she experiences maternal guilt after the abortion. Lewis writes, "Now, unreasoningly, her baby became a reality to her, and she longed for it, wistfully, then savagely, accusing herself of its murder. It became an individual; she missed it as though she had actually nursed it and felt its warmth. She began to want it more than she wanted any career."<sup>14</sup> Ann cannot have her child and her career. Later, Ann relates to Josephine Filson, a female prisoner who murdered her child. Ann says, "that's why I'm here. That's why I must stay here. I killed my baby, too."<sup>15</sup> Ann cannot become a mother while she is pursuing her financial independence.

Similarly, Cora has an unsuccessful pregnancy. Cora gives Frank an opportunity to escape the entrapment of family. She tells him, "You can kill me swimming. We'll go way out, the way we did last time, and if you don't want me to come back, you don't have to let me."<sup>16</sup> Although Frank does not accept her proposal, Cora strains herself when she is out in the water. She tells Frank, "I've heard of women that had a miscarriage. From straining herself."<sup>17</sup> Cora is worried about having a miscarriage. On the way to the hospital, she dies in a car accident. The narrative forbids the murderous Cora from becoming a mother. Her unsuccessful pregnancy is not a direct result of her financial independence. Instead, her death is the result of a murderous, adulterous relationship.

Although Phyllis has no desire to be a mother, dead children surround her. Keyes tells us that Phyllis killed three children at the sanatorium in Verdugo Hills. One child was the Nirdlinger child who had an inheritance that interested Phyllis. Keyes tells Huff

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<sup>14</sup> Lewis, 218.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, 324.

<sup>16</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 115.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.



that the other two “died just to cover the trail a little. Think of that Huff. This woman would even kill two extra children, just to get the one child that she wanted, and mix things up so it would look like one of those cases of negligence they sometimes have in those hospitals.”<sup>18</sup> Phyllis murders children in the hospital with disregard. Phyllis is the opposite of Ann. Ann feels guilty for aborting her first child. Cora's death prevents her from entering motherhood. Phyllis is never in a position to become a mother but ends motherhood for other women. Regardless of their feelings about motherhood, these women find difficulty in fulfilling motherly roles. These novels establish a binary between motherhood and independence. The narratives suggest that independent women are rebellious and incapable of becoming mothers.

However, *Ann Vickers* suggests a remedy for this incompatibility of motherhood and financial independence. Subsequently, Ann sacrifices her career to establish a family. Ann does not erase but transcends the barrier between motherhood and employment in *Ann Vickers*. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Cora's attempt to transcend the barrier of motherhood and independence is fatal. In *Double Indemnity*, the opposition between motherhood and ambition is insurmountable. Ann navigates through the barriers between motherhood and financial independence while the *femme fatale* of Cain's hard-boiled fiction cannot.

The idea that motherhood and work are in opposition reflects the contemporaneous social criticism of 1930s working women. As discussed in the previous chapter, critics of working women argued that women who entered the workforce neglected their responsibilities to their families. The 1930s novel reflects these concepts by establishing a binary between motherhood and ambition that is not easily crossed. *Ann*

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<sup>18</sup> Cain, *Double*, 106.



*Vickers* provides a hopeful conclusion that bridges the roles of motherhood and employment. However, Cain's hard-boiled fiction reinforces the binary established in public debate because his *femme fatale* is incapable of becoming a mother. The male perspective of the author and his audience would agree with this ideology that work and motherhood are incompatible. This belief would reinforce the father as the breadwinner of the family, giving compensation to the husbands who struggled to support their families during the Depression.

Furthermore, Ann, Cora, and Phyllis enter oppressive, unsatisfactory marriages. The reasons for their marriages differ from Lewis's Ann *Vickers* to Cain's *femme fatale*. Ann marries because she wants to be a wife. Cora and Phyllis marry for financial security. Ann rationalizes that marriage and her ambition may come into conflict. She tells us, "maybe I couldn't have *Pride* and my ranchman and still have ambition."<sup>19</sup> However, her desire to become a wife overwhelms her. She marries Russell Spaulding. She tells her friend Lindsay that she married Russell simply because he asked her.<sup>20</sup> Their marriage is not happy. They live separately and see each other only occasionally. Ann's desire to be a wife commits her to enter a loveless marriage with Russell Spaulding.

On the contrary, Cora and Phyllis marry for money. Frank asks Cora why she married Papadakis. She tells him, "I was working in a hash house. You spend two years in a Los Angeles hash house and you'll take the first guy that's got a gold watch."<sup>21</sup> Phyllis married Nirdlinger to obtain his money.<sup>22</sup> Cora and Phyllis marry for economic

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis, 409.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>21</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Cain, *Double*, 108.

reasons. They have not obtained the financial independence that Ann has. Nonetheless, all three women become entrapped in loveless marriages for different reasons.

Likewise, the *femme fatale* in *film noir* also finds herself in a troubled marriage that provides her financial security. The *film noir* adaptations of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* duplicate the marriages of their sources. Likewise, *femmes fatales* in other *noirs* follows suit. In Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), Elsa is trapped in her marriage to wealthy lawyer Arthur Bannister. In Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), Kathy tries to escape her marriage to rich gangster Whit Sterling. The marital issues represented in *film noir* are not specific to the postwar period as hard-boiled fiction represents identical marital relationships in 1930s America.

These unsatisfactory marriages in 1930s hard-boiled fiction and popular fiction lead to adultery. While Ann has the privilege of having a relatively quiet affair with Barney Dolphin, the *femme fatale* does not. Ann and Barry have the luxury of taking a trip to Captain's Forge where they begin their affair in privacy.<sup>23</sup> It is not until she is pregnant with Barney's child that Malvina Wormser tells Ann that the affair has become public knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Cain's *femme fatale* does not have the luxury of quiet adultery. Her adultery is committed in her home. Her adultery is claustrophobic and paranoid. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank writes, "It was just the kitchen table, he at one end, she at the other, and me in the middle."<sup>25</sup> Cora's lover is present in front of her husband. Furthermore, the affair between Phyllis and Huff in *Double Indemnity* is under constant scrutiny. The insurance company has put Phyllis under surveillance after her husband's

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis, 466.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 480-1.

<sup>25</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 5.



death.<sup>26</sup> Phyllis has to go to the drugstore just to call Huff.<sup>27</sup> While Ann Vickers meets Barney in secluded locations, the adulterous affairs in Cain's hard-boiled fiction are constantly on the brink of discovery.

Cain's hard-boiled fiction focuses on the sexuality of the *femme fatale* because the narratives are in first-person from the perspective of the male protagonist. This sexuality is absent in *Ann Vickers* because of the third-person omniscient narrator. Dr. Hargis attempts to seduce Ann, but she resists. Frustrated, he says, "Biological monstrosity, that's what the so-called well-bred American woman is! Not one atom of healthy, splendid passion!"<sup>28</sup> In fact, Ann does not understand her sexuality nor utilizes it to empower herself. She thinks, "Someday, some man that I want to kiss... is going to kiss me, ... and then I'm going to forget all the statistics on the underpayment of woman workers, and kiss him back so hard the world will go up in smoke. Or am I just an icicle?"<sup>29</sup> Ann represses her sexuality. She does not understand if she is capable of being passionate with a man. The novel rarely describes Ann and especially never ventures to describe her as a sexual object to be desired.

On the other hand, the descriptions of Cain's women focus on their sexual allure. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank says, "Except for the shape, she really wasn't any raving beauty, but she had a sulky look to her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her."<sup>30</sup> Later, Frank notices the dress that Cora is wearing. He says, "I could see her dress. It was one of these white nurse uniforms, like they all wear, whether they work in a dentist's office or a barbershop. It had been clean in the morning,

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<sup>26</sup> Cain, *Double*, 87-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, 114.



but it was a little bit ruffled now, and messy. I could smell her.”<sup>31</sup> In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis is aware of her sexuality and utilizes it to manipulate Huff. On their first meeting, Huff thinks, “Under those blue pajamas was a shape to set a man nuts.”<sup>32</sup> Later, he tells us, “She had on a white sailor suit, with a blouse that pulled tight over her hips, and white shoes and stockings. I wasn’t the only one that knew about that shape. She knew about it herself, plenty.”<sup>33</sup> While Ann Vickers represses her sexuality, the *femme fatale* in Cain's hard-boiled fiction uses her sexuality to seduce the male protagonist.

The focus on sexuality symbolized the women who were encouraged to use their sex appeal to their advantage in the job market during the 1930s. As discussed previously, sexuality became a means for women to secure their employment. Similarly, sex is the means for the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled fiction to seduce the male protagonist and gain her financial independence. The sexuality of the *femme fatale* allows her to manipulate the male protagonist into murdering her husband and acquiring freedom from her oppressive marriage. The *femme fatale* in 1930s hard-boiled fiction alluded to contemporaneous working women who used sex to maintain their jobs in the 1930s American workforce. The *femme fatale* in 1930s hard-boiled fiction uses sex as a means of obtaining her independence.

In *film noir*, the sexuality of the *femme fatale* gains an added focus as the medium is based on visual appearance. Janey Place writes, “Independence is her goal, but her

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<sup>30</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Cain, *Double*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Cain, *Double*, 10.

nature is fundamentally and irredeemably sexual in *film noir*.”<sup>34</sup> Although the sexuality of the *film noir femme fatale* is presented through a different medium, she adopts the art of empowerment through seduction from her 1930s hard-boiled fiction antecedents. Indeed, the visual medium of film emphasizes this aspect of the *femme fatale*. She not only becomes a sexual object to the male protagonist, but, also to the male audience viewing the film. The sexuality of the *film noir femme fatale* becomes intertwined with violence through her iconography. Place writes that “the iconography is explicitly sexual and often explicitly violent as well... and the iconography of violence (primarily guns) is a specific symbol (as is perhaps the cigarette) of her ‘unnatural’ phallic power.”<sup>35</sup>

This collision of sex and violence in the *film noir femme fatale* is inherited from 1930s hard-boiled fiction. In the previously quoted passage from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank does not say that he wants to kiss Cora’s lips. He wants to “mash” them in.<sup>36</sup> Sex is associated with violence in Cain’s hard-boiled fiction. This association is not present in *Ann Vickers*. The descriptions of kissing in these novels exemplify this difference between Lewis’s and Cain’s women.

Ann romanticizes her kiss with a lover. Lewis writes, “He kissed her at the door, and as she stood in the corridor, she was dizzy and astonished with the fire of that kiss, in which all her individuality had been burnt away, so that for a second she had not been a separate person, but one flesh with him, fused in an electric flare.”<sup>37</sup> The kiss becomes a unifying moment in Ann’s relationship with her lover. It is passionate and devoid of violence.

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<sup>34</sup> Janey Place, “Women in Film Noir,” in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Ann Kaplan (London, England: British Film Institute, 2000), 57.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 2.



On the contrary, Cain's descriptions of kisses are often rough and violent. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank describes a kiss with Cora:

I took her in my arms and mashed my mouth up against hers... 'Bite me! Bite me!'  
I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth. It was running down her neck when I carried her upstairs.<sup>38</sup>

There is no distinction between the sensuality of kissing and the violence of the biting in this description. Similarly, *Double Indemnity* contains a description of a kiss after Phyllis and Huff have planned the murder of Mr. Nirdlinger:

She looked at me, a little surprised, and her face was about six inches away. What I did do was put my arm around her, pull her face up against mine, and kiss her on the mouth, hard. I was trembling like a leaf. She gave it a cold stare, and then she closed her eyes, pulled me to her, and kissed back.<sup>39</sup>

The discussion of the murder culminates in this kiss. Phyllis does not ignite with passion but stares coldly at Huff. The kissing exemplifies the association of sex and violence in Cain's hard-boiled fiction.

Moreover, this association of sex and violence continues in Cain's hard-boiled fiction. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank's idea of flirtation is punching Cora's leg.<sup>40</sup> Later, Frank rips Cora's blouse and punches her in the face to make it look like she was in the car accident. This show during the murder strangely becomes sexual as the blouse reveals Cora's body from neck to waist.<sup>41</sup> After their court case, they have sex. Frank describes the encounter:

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<sup>37</sup> Lewis, 172.

<sup>38</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Cain, *Double*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



I began slipping off her blouse. 'Rip me, Frank. Rip me like you did that night.'

I ripped all her clothes off. .... Her hair was falling over her shoulders in snaky curls. Her eye was all black, and her breasts weren't drawn up and pointing up at me, but soft, and spread out in two big pink splotches. She looked like the great grandmother of every whore in the world.<sup>42</sup>

Their sexual encounter resembles a rape as Frank rips off Cora's clothes. There is an extreme amount of violence in the sexual moments of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The violence is often directed to Cora who appears to receive sexual excitement from the violence that Frank inflicts upon her.

In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis is infatuated with death. She tells Huff, "there's something in me that loves Death. I think of myself as Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night. I'm so beautiful, then."<sup>43</sup> Later, Lola reveals Phyllis's strange behavior to Huff. She tells him, "I came in on her, in her bedroom, with some kind of foolish red silk thing on her, that looked like a shroud or something, with her face all smeared up with white powder and red lipstick, with a dagger in her hand."<sup>44</sup> At the end of the novel, Phyllis dresses as Death. She confesses that Death has been the only true love in her life.<sup>45</sup> Phyllis's perverse infatuation with Death continues the association of sex and violence in Cain's hard-boiled fiction.

Furthermore, the violence in Cain's hard-boiled fiction crystallizes in the murder of the husband. Cora is determined to kill Papadakis when he attempts to domesticate her by proposing that they have children.<sup>46</sup> Frank finds her in the kitchen: "She was standing

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>43</sup> Cain, *Double*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>45</sup> Cain, *Double*, 114.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 36.

there, in a red kimono, as pale as milk, staring at me, with a long thin knife in her hand. .... When she spoke, it was in a whisper that sounded like a snake licking its tongue in and out.”<sup>47</sup> She is ready to kill herself rather than have Papadakis’ child. Instead, her suicidal thoughts transform into murderous thoughts directed at her husband. After one failed attempt to kill Papadakis in the bathroom, they successfully do it by fracturing his skull with a bottle and covering it up with a car accident.<sup>48</sup> Cora’s only escape from the oppressive patriarchal institution of marriage is murder.

Likewise, Phyllis murders her husband with Huff’s assistance. Phyllis and Huff carefully plan the murder to look like an accident.<sup>49</sup> During the murder, Phyllis is calm and focused as she takes the cigar that Mr. Nirdlinger was smoking.<sup>50</sup> Later, Phyllis drags the heavy body of her husband onto the train tracks by herself.<sup>51</sup> Phyllis hopes that her husband’s murder will provide her with financial independence and freedom from marriage.

On the contrary, Ann Vickers does not have to murder to gain independence because she is financially independent. Ann can afford other means of escaping her oppressive marriage. Instead of murder, Ann moves out of their apartment.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, she is free to pursue her love interest by having a quiet affair with Barney. While Phyllis and Cora must murder to obtain freedom, Ann can afford to escape by other means because of her middle class status.

However, Ann’s social mobility does not reflect the decline of women in

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 37-43

<sup>49</sup> Cain, *Double*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 50-1.

<sup>52</sup> Lewis, 447.

professional occupations during the 1930s. *Ann Vickers* reinforces the myth of social mobility in American society. It represents a woman who obtains social advancement through her education and work. The statistics of the 1930s that were discussed in the previous chapter show that women did not have the opportunity that Ann had. The majority of women workers were employed in unskilled factory or clerical work.

In fact, class is one of the greatest differences between Cain's *femme fatale* and Lewis's Ann. Cora is a waitress; Phyllis is a nurse. These are working class occupations. However, Ann is the superintendent of the Stuyvesant Industrial Home for Women. Ann is in the middle class. Cora and Phyllis do not have the financial independence of Ann. Sex and violence are the only means available to Cora and Phyllis to obtain freedom from their marriages.

Accordingly, Cain's *femme fatale* and Lewis's Ann find themselves in different places in the conclusions of their narratives. Ann finds happiness with her new family. She is ready to sacrifice her career to take up her motherly and wifely roles. At the same time, she has finally found love in Barney and has had his child, Mat. She says to Barney, "You, you and Mat, have brought me out of... the prison of ambition, the prison of desire for praise, the prison of myself. We're out of prison."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Ann finds happiness not in the workforce, but in her family life. Her ambition to be financially independent becomes a negative characteristic. Lewis's narrative suggests that work and family conflict with one another.

However, Cain's women die. Cora dies in an automobile accident. Frank describes the scene: "It was her blood, pouring down on the hood, where she went

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<sup>53</sup> Lewis, 562.



through the windshield. .... I got her up, and tried to stop the blood and in between, I was talking to her, and crying, and kissing her. Those kisses never reached her. She was dead.”<sup>54</sup> Phyllis prepares to commit suicide by jumping off the ship that has a shark following it. She dresses up as Death one last time. Huff writes:

She’s in her stateroom getting ready. She’s made her face chalk white, with black circles under her eyes and red on her lips and cheeks. She’s got that red thing on. It’s awful-looking. It’s just one big square of red silk that she wraps around her, but it’s got no armholes, and her hands look like stumps underneath it when she moves them around.<sup>55</sup>

Cain’s hard-boiled fiction suggests that women who are financially dependant upon their husbands cannot escape the patriarchal institution of marriage successfully. Their desire to be financially independent leads them to murder their husbands. They have no other means to obtain freedom from their marriages. However, this freedom is short-lived. The *femme fatale*’s destiny is death. This fate is provided by the male author. Enclosed in the realm of patriarchy, Cain can provide no other end than to punish the woman who seeks financial independence, simultaneously reinforcing patriarchy. Likewise, Cain’s male working class audience would find no other acceptable end for women who attempt to achieve financial independence.

However, hard-boiled fiction provides a critique of the patriarchal institution of marriage. Although Cain’s *femme fatale* does not succeed in her quest for independence, there is no acceptable alternative in hard-boiled fiction. The family provides no hope for the male or female characters of hard-boiled fiction. Simultaneously, marriage imprisons

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<sup>54</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Cain, *Double*, 114-5.

the *femme fatale* and bores the male protagonist. Hard-boiled fiction struck a cord with an audience that witnessed this crisis of the family during the Depression.

*The Postman Always Rings Twice* exposes marriage as a patriarchal institution that entraps women who do not have the financial means to escape. Cora is dependant upon Papadakis. If she leaves him for Frank, it will reduce her quality of life. She refuses this.<sup>56</sup> She is determined to free herself from marriage without losing the social advancement that her marriage provided. Cora turns to crime to achieve her independence. Cain's narrative and male perspective provides for no other way for Cora to escape her marriage and find financial independence. Ultimately, this criminal behavior must lead to her death.

Cora is masochistic, deriving sexual pleasure through physical punishment. From the male perspective of the author and audience, this punishment is justified through Cora's adulterous, murderous behavior. The male audience identifies with the male protagonist as the protagonist physically punishes Cora. The *femme fatale* symbolizes working women during the Depression for the male audience. *The Postman Rings Twice* resonated with male working-class audiences who feared the working women during the Depression. Cain represents male animosity towards working women through Cora's sado-masochistic relationship with Frank. It is through physical hostility that the male protagonist must exert his dominance over the ambitious woman. The unemployed men during the 1930s receive ideological compensation through punishing Cora through Frank's first-person perspective.

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<sup>56</sup> Cain, *Postman*, 27.

However, Cora accepts and finds sexual pleasure through this punishment. This suggests several ideas. First, it suggests to the male audience that rebellious women subconsciously understand their defiance and not only need to be punished but *want* to be punished. However, the idea that her physical punishment reaffirms patriarchal order and male dominance is undermined by the sexual pleasure that she obtains from her beatings. Cora enjoys the beatings. The violence intended to oppress her excites her. She finds pleasure instead of pain in the violence. The male audience must ignore this complexity to find ideological compensation in Frank's physical dominance over Cora during their sex acts.

Ultimately, Cora's pregnancy begins her domestication. This journey ends abruptly with her death. Cain suggests that greedy women cannot enter the family sphere successfully because their greed will only lead to crime. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* represents marriage as an economic relationship that entraps women, making them subservient in the patriarchal hierarchy. Crime is the only means for financial independence and inevitably excludes them from participation in the institution of the family.

On the other hand, Cora does symbolize a strong, ambitious woman in comparison with the poor, vagabond Frank who has no determination to work. While Frank can physically dominate Cora, he cannot dominate her in the business world. Ultimately, she entraps him by blackmailing him. The novel suggests that women have the potential to be just as successful in the business world as their male counterparts. The fulfillment of this potential would entrap the male, resonating with fears of a female empowerment present in the minds of the male working-class audience of the 1930s.



*Double Indemnity* resonates the same fears of the male working-class audience during the 1930s. Phyllis is a cold-hearted, manipulating murderer who deceives men by portraying herself as their fantasies. It is through her duplicity that she is able to entrap the men throughout the novel. Phyllis sexually excites Huff. She uses this attraction to manipulate him. She hides her ruthlessness behind the facade of the sweet, innocent woman. She continues her performance until it is unnecessary, when her husband is murdered.<sup>57</sup> Phyllis allows men to objectify her. She plays with patriarchal hierarchy, allowing men to believe that they are in control of the relationship. However, she never allows herself to be controlled by the men in *Double Indemnity*. She has deceived Mr. Nirdlinger into marriage to inherit his fortune. She deceives Huff into murdering her husband to inherit his insurance policy. *Double Indemnity* represents a woman who understands the patriarchal order and manipulates this order, allowing men to feel empowered only to betray them for her own financial goals.

On the other hand, *Ann Vickers* ultimately reaffirms the “work and women are incompatible” ideology of the 1930s. While Ann is an ambitious businesswoman who succeeds, she is unsatisfied with her sacrifice of family for her ambition. Ann’s growth in the novel is a coming to awareness of the value and happiness of traditional female roles in the family. Her financial success is simply a means for her to establish her new family. She sacrifices her morality as she falls in love with a convicted criminal. Although Ann challenges patriarchal society through her career, she ultimately finds happiness through the patriarchal institution of marriage. When her family is complete, she abandons all her ambitions and dedicates herself to her family.

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<sup>57</sup> Cain, *Double*, 50-3.

The hard-boiled fiction of James M. Cain resonated with male fears of women who struggled for financial independence during the Depression. Public sentiment during the 1930s produced a "work and women are incompatible" movement, chastising women for abandoning their traditional feminine roles in the family for the workplace. The *femme fatale* in Cain's hard-boiled fiction attempts to find financial independence like the working women of the Depression. However, Cain provides these women with no other means but crime to obtain this independence. This criminal behavior of Cain's *femme fatale* allows the male working-class reader moral supremacy over these characters. The *femme fatale* symbolized for the male reader women who sought financial independence during the 1930s. For the female reader, the struggle of the *femme fatale* represented the limited roles provided for women in patriarchy and the inability to escape patriarchal institutions such as marriage.

Moreover, Cain's hard-boiled fiction reflects the crisis of the family during the Depression. The families in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* are dysfunctional at best. The strong, powerful *femme fatale* is incapable of locating a place within the family. Cain's hard-boiled fiction exposes the family as a troubled institution that does not satisfy either the male protagonist or the *femme fatale*. The *femme fatale*'s desire for financial independence comes into direct contrast with the patriarchal institution of marriage that reserves the subservient place of wife for the woman.

The popularity of Cain's hard-boiled fiction stems from the fact that it plays on male fears of female empowerment. Through the male protagonist's perspective, the male reader engages in the punishment of the *femme fatale* who symbolizes the working women of the 1930s for them. Furthermore, the narrative is concluded only when the

*femme fatale* is killed, suggesting female empowerment is impossible in the hard-boiled world. Female empowerment is directly connected with greed and crime in hard-boiled fiction. This connection allows the male reader to demonize working women in society as it suggests that their freedom is connected with selfishness and criminal behavior, erasing the labor that working women provided during the Depression.



### Conclusion

Male anxiety of female empowerment in prewar American hard-boiled fiction shares striking similarities with the male anxiety that *film noir* critics have indicated in postwar society. *Film noir* critics have claimed that the *femme fatale* is a product of postwar American culture. They have focused on the drastic changes facing female workers during the economic shift following World War II. Women who found financial opportunity during the war were encouraged to return to their familial roles as mothers and wives to support the consumption of goods. The influence of 1930s hard-boiled fiction on *film noir* suggests that there was a similar crisis in prewar American history. Indeed the public debate about working women and the crisis of the family did not originate in postwar American culture.

It is not coincidental that many *film noirs* were adapted from hard-boiled fiction from the 1930s. Both periods in American history witnessed shifting roles for working women, producing male anxiety over female empowerment. The majority of *film noir* critics cite hard-boiled fiction as a critical influence. However, *film noir* historians fail to make the ideological connections between the hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s and *film noirs* from the post-war period. Instead, they observe only the influence of narrative structure, characters archetypes, and mood.

Cain's hard-boiled novels, *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, resonate with male anxiety of the 1930s as do their 1940s cinematic adaptations. Furthermore, 1930s hard-boiled fiction differentiates itself from the bestsellers of the 1930s such as Lewis's *Ann Vickers* in the representation of these prewar male anxieties. Cain's *femme fatale* struggles against the patriarchal hierarchy by seeking financial

independence. However, the *femme fatale* is destined to die as patriarchal society limits her access to independence to criminal activity. This activity places her outside the realm of the American family. Lewis's Ann Vickers contrasts with the *femme fatale* by gaining financial independence through professional labor, not through crime. Furthermore, Lewis reinforces the patriarchal institution of marriage as Ann refutes her ambitions to establish a family where she finds satisfaction and happiness.

The male anxiety at the heart of hard-boiled fiction's *femme fatale* is present in the *femme fatale* in *film noir* in postwar America. Hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* found male audiences who feared female empowerment through financial independence. Hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* allowed these male audiences to demonize the woman who sought financial independence by replacing labor with crime. The criminal activity of the *femme fatale* allows the male audience moral superiority over the *femme fatale* who symbolized American working women. Furthermore, hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* presented a patriarchal world where these women can not survive. Despite overwhelming similarities in hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*, feminist critics have consistently claimed the *femme fatale* of postwar American *film noir* reflects a specific moment in the history of American working women. They fail to acknowledge the striking similarities of the *femme fatale* of 1930s hard-boiled fiction who provided male audiences with ideological compensation during the Depression.



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