FROM RIVETER TO RIVETING:
THE REBIRTH OF THE FEMME FATALE IN POST-WAR AMERICA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES..............................................................................................................................vi-vii

PREFACE OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT..............................................................................................viii-x

CHAPTER

I. RISE OF THE ROSIE THE RIVETER FIGURE.................................................................1-19

II. FEMME FATALE VILLIAN OR VICTIM.................................................................20-26

III. THE MALTESE FALCON......................................................................................27-42

IV. DOUBLE INDEMNITY.........................................................................................43-65

V. LAURA.................................................................................................................66-83

VI. THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE.........................................................84-105

VII. THE BIG SLEEP.........................................................................................106-126

VIII. CONCLUSION..............................................................................................127-130

WORKS CITED
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Pennsylvania Railroad Ad: Molly Pitcher, 1944.................................................................8
Figure 2. Norman Rockwell’s Labor Day Cover for *The Post*, 1943..............................................10
Figure 3. Norman Rockwell’s *Rosie the Riveter*, 1943.................................................................12
Figure 4. J. Howard Miller’s “We Can Do It!” Poster for Westinghouse Electric Co.....12
Figure 5. J. Howard Miller’s “We Can Do It!” Poster for Westinghouse Electric Co.....21
Figure 6. Lauren Bacall *To Have and Have Not*, 1944.................................................................21
Figure 7. Sam Spade, Miles Archer, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*.28
Figure 8. Sam Spade and Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*.........................34
Figure 9. Lola, Phyllis, Mr. Dietrichson, and Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*...........52
Figure 10. Phyllis Dietrichson and Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*.................................55
Figure 11. Walter Neff and Mr. and Mrs. Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*...............58
Figure 12. Detective McPherson staring at Laura Hunt’s portrait in *Laura*.......................71
Figure 13. Laura Hunt, her portrait, and Detective McPherson in *Laura*.........................77
Figure 14. Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*..................................................86
Figure 15. Frank Chambers, Nick Smith, and Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

Figure 16. Cora Smith, Nick Smith, and Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

Figure 17. Philip Marlowe and General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*

Figure 18. Philip Marlowe and Carmen Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*

Figure 19. Vivian Sternwood Rutledge and Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*
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Chapter 1: Rise of the Rosie the Riveter Figure
World War II gave rise and rebirth to two of the most iconic characters in American history; Rosie the Riveter and the *femme fatale* of *film noir*. Neither of these female figures would have been given a national spotlight without the social, economic, and military action caused by the United States entering into the most devastating war the world had ever seen.

Both Rosie the Riveter and the *femme fatale* were born out of the cultural cacophony during and following World War II. Rosie the Riveter is traditionally viewed as an uplifting form of pro-war propaganda. She was a figure of strength in a time of great anxiety and sacrifice. The success of this form of pro-woman, pro-war propaganda cannot be disputed, given the longevity and current relevance the image has. However, the true motivation behind the purpose and power of the figure almost conflicts with the present day interpretation of Rosie. As the history of Rosie’s creation is examined, it becomes clear that she became a greater symbol of female capability than her creators intended, and ultimately led to a powerful backlash in the form of her dark sister: the *femme fatale*.

Many *film noir* scholars agree that without the male anxiety inducing figure of Rosie the Riveter, the theme of fatal woman would not have been reborn in the form of the iconic *femme fatale*. In the broadest sense, the *femme fatale* is generally viewed as a misogynistic interpretation of women as emasculating “man slayers,” or, alternatively, as a powerful symbol of female sexuality and style. Aside from these two prominent views,
a compelling tension exists between the perceived sins of the *femme fatale* in relation to her desires and ambitions. The *femme fatale* was a product of male anxiety in response to the newly autonomous American woman; it is plausible that she was also a form of reactionary propaganda. Whether creating this anti-Rosie-the-Riveter propaganda character was intentional cannot be definitively stated; however, when the timeline of pro-war propaganda of film, advertisement, and pulp fiction is compared to the rise and peak of the *femme fatale* of *film noir* it is not difficult to see a correlation between the virtuous and the vice riddled American cultural icons. Whether intentional or an implicit response to the subtle propaganda regarding women that permeated most forms of entertainment and advertisement during the war, the *femme fatale* stands as a major marker of the *film noir* genre and of a socially unstable America.

On September 3, 1939, the Second World War began. A cultural consequence of joining the fight was the radical upheaval of the American work force, and more specifically, the integration of women into predominantly male positions within the American workplace. The desperate need for women to fill the void in the American workforce came at a time when only 18 percent of all Americans felt that women should be allowed to maintain a job outside of the home while married (Colman 24). With such a small portion of the population in favor of married women working at all, the integration of women into a male sphere resulted in tremendous opposition.

In 1941, in an effort to alter the prejudices held against women workers, the United States government launched a nationwide propaganda campaign. The campaign
began with a short film written by Eleanor Roosevelt entitled *Women in Defense*. The film encouraged women to take on the role of “modern pioneers” by entering the workforce. The argument of the film hinged upon a folksy view on America’s history of bold wilderness braving women standing behind their men and keeping the burgeoning colonies alive (Colman 25). This harkening back to American beginnings, of women acting with strength only as a necessity in times of danger in order to survive became a touchstone of the campaign. While the Office of War Information, also known as the OWI, in cooperation with the War Advertising Council, also known as the WAC, was determined to get women into the workplace and to boost home front morale, they were careful to maintain the temporary nature of the shift, and to remind women of their ultimate place in the home. In her book *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II*, Maureen Honey examines the relationship between the OWI and the emergence of the Rosie the Riveter figure. Honey cites a study conducted by the National Industrial Conference Board that states that “no consideration [was] given to the long-range social or economic desirability or implications of the increased employment of women” (26). The OWI and the WAC worked in conjunction to encourage women to enter the labor force and a few years later, to join in military service as well.

The success of the OWI and WAC was contingent on the cooperation of popular media, advertising agencies, and corporations. The OWI and WAC encouraged advertisers to devote a percentage of their ads to women at work. These ads were meant to represent women war workers as “paragon[s] of virtue, capable of shouldering any
burden and meeting any challenge” (Honey 5-6). Propagandists balanced these newly granted characteristics of capability and strength with a sense of national duty and sacrifice. The female war worker was ultimately to be viewed as a martyr for the men overseas, the true heroes of the war. In doing so, the message of a powerful woman with ambition and a desire to contribute to the wider world would be undercut by her duty to protect and serve men—a traditional female value. The major goal of pro-war propaganda was to create a mentality of a self-sacrificing collective on the home front. A national narrative was developed where self-interest was discarded for the welfare of all Americans and for the support of the men fighting for their nation overseas. Honey claims, “War work became a vehicle for women to shoulder their civic and moral responsibilities as good citizens rather than a way to become more dominant and independent” (5-6). This fictional version of women, while capable and contributing members of society were only acting with authority under the threat of war.

Fiction is a powerful tool to shape opinions and change perspectives. By presenting propaganda under the guise of fiction, the government was able to more subtly sway a nation to change its core beliefs about women in the workplace. Honey argues that the “implicit, value-laden message of popular culture [was] especially effective because [it is] not consciously analyzed” (9). She calls the use of fiction to sway the public a kind of “social engineering” that has “proven appeal” (9). The 1943 “Women in the War” movement has been called the most successful recruitment campaign in American history. It mobilized a nation to fill an economic void the likes of which the nation had never before seen. It encouraged women to take over roles they were
previously barred from. The result was that women not only took on these roles, but also they often excelled in them. While the campaign did lead to a temporary shift in the public perception of women as capable workers, it also led to a powerful social backlash at the end of and following the war.

A prime example of the powerful ability these agencies had to permeate all aspects of the media and entertainment industries can be seen in their response to the 1943 call from the Army-Navy Personnel Board requesting that the Office of War Information attempt to convince women to join the armed forces. The News, Motion Pictures, Graphics, and Radio Bureaus were contacted and adapted their material to fit the theme of females as part of the armed forces. The News Bureau did its part by creating human interest pieces and creating specific stories ranging from local news to syndicated press. Federal films were sent to churches, schools, corporations, factories, and local citizen groups. Hollywood films were made and released in theaters across the nation featuring themes in support of recruitment. Boy Scouts delivered army posters twice a month to stores and post offices. Advertisements were displayed on public transportation vehicles in every community that had a population of twenty-five thousand plus. Radio broadcasters sent recruitment messages over the airwaves for seventy-five of their programs every week for two straight months (Honey 34-5). There wasn’t a facet of everyday life that wasn’t plastered with propaganda.

The above forms of propaganda, while prolific and successful, were not as immensely effective as the subtle manipulation of opinion through pulp fiction.
Propaganda, disguised as fiction, could permeate the public mind in a way that direct communication of governmental suggestion could not. The Office of War Information’s Magazine Advisory Committee was composed of representatives from ten of the top publications of the time. One of their primary goals was to dampen the prejudice against women in the workplace and to act as a force to sway the population, particularly women, to sacrifice for the greater good of the nation. Dorthy Ducas, a reporter and collaborator with the OWI, lobbied to increase her staff because “magazines were ideal vehicles for shaping public opinion because they published fiction, which could subtly generate desirable attitudes.” Ducas even contacted individual fiction writers imploring them to write stories with the intention of recruiting women for war work (Honey 41-2).

What was particularly effective about the use of magazine pulp fiction as a source of propaganda was its massive target audience. The majority of pulp fiction readers were a part of the blue-collar class, the same group on which industry, and the fate of the war, depended. The deputy director of the Office of War Information, Leo Rosten, made clear the importance of pulp fiction in determining the outcome of the war when speaking with a group of editors: “Pulp magazines reach one of the largest and most important audiences in America. Propaganda is aimed to hit the readers of pulp magazines more than any other group” (Honey 43). This sentiment was affirmed by Dorthy Ducas when she said that through pulp fiction, “15 million readers get their war messages disguised in fiction” (Honey 43). Through mass media and subtle manipulation via fiction and advertisements, the figure of Rosie the Riveter and similar images like Molly Pitcher
grew to become national icons urging women to enter a field they had been previously conditioned to avoid.
Figure 1. Pennsylvania Railroad Ad: Molly Pitcher, 1944

Women are doing a big job on the Pennsylvania Railroad

More than 48,000 experienced Pennsylvania Railroad men have entered our armed forces. Yet, wartime’s unusual needs for railroad service are being met... thanks in great part to more than 25,000 women who have rallied to the emergency. From colleges, high schools and homes, these women—after intensive training—are winning the wholehearted applause of the traveling public.

You see them working as trainmen, in ticket and station masters’ offices and information bureaus, as platform ushers and train passenger representatives, in dining car service. Yes, even in baggage rooms, train dispatchers’ offices, in shops and yards and as section hands. The Pennsylvania Railroad proudly salutes these “Molly Pitchers” who so gallantly fill the breach left by their fighting brothers-in-arms.
In the fall of 1943, the OWI asked The Saturday Evening Post to promote the “Women in Necessary Services” campaign. They enlisted Norman Rockwell to create the cover image for their Labor Day issue. The illustration he created was one of a purposeful woman dressed similarly to Uncle Sam, wearing men’s shoes and bobby socks, lugging tools representing all of the service industries women were now keeping alive: a service hat, operator earphones, a nurse’s cap, milkman jars, air-raid equipment, a compass, farming tools, an oil can, a railroad lantern, etc. Six of the eight stories in that month’s issue of The Post dealt with women in defense work. Five additional lead stories focusing on women in defense work appeared between then and December of that same year (Honey 63). World War II gave women an opportunity to be recognized as capable and multitalented in a way that was less common before the war. This sense of capability granted to these “Rosies,” however, was greatly contingent on their efforts being, not for their own betterment, but for the betterment of the national agenda.
The term Rosie the Riveter has become synonymous with J. Howard Miller’s 1943 image of a feminine woman flexing her bicep and rolling up her sleeve with pink nail polished fingers. The term came into popularity through Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb’s 1942 song “Rosie the Riveter.” In it, Rosie is heralded for working all day long despite harsh conditions. She shames the selfish “girls,” who in lieu of serving their country sip Martinis at cocktail bars. Rosie, ever the good citizen, is always on guard for

Figure 2. Norman Rockwell’s Labor Day Cover for The Post, 1943
“sabotage.” Her virtues extend to her relationship with her boyfriend Charlie. While he fights overseas, she protects him by working even harder to produce the materials that will help her man win the war. A true martyr for the cause, she spends the money she earns on war bonds. The singer praises her for having good “sense” for “putting all her cash into national defense” (Colman 13). The virtues of the good American Rosie are clear; she is hardworking, capable, intelligent, autonomous, tough, but above, all self-sacrificing. As the war winds down, many of these same virtues will be portrayed as vices in the form of noir’s femme fatale.

In 1943, seemingly inspired by Evans and Loeb’s tune, Norman Rockwell creates his own “Rosie” for The Post. Rockwell transformed his 110 pound model, Mary Doyle Keefe, into the masculine, muscular icon of American lore. While this was the far more popular image at the time, it does not quite have the lasting significance of J. Howard Miller’s “We Can Do It!” propaganda poster. Miller’s image, while not officially a “Rosie” has become the figure most American’s identify with Rosie the Riveter. The iconic image was created for Westinghouse Electric Co in an effort to increase morale of the workers. At the time of the war, the “We Can Do It” poster was seen by few outside of the Westinghouse Electric Company. Its popularity was a result of it being reclaimed by the feminist movement in the early 1980s.
Figure 3. Norman Rockwell’s Rosie the Riveter, 1943
Figure 4. J. Howard Miller’s “We Can Do It!” Poster for Westinghouse Electric Co

These two images are vital representations of the ideals for women that the OWI was trying to propagate. Like Rockwell’s 110 pound model, women across the nation were being transformed from meek to strong, from incompetent to capable, from unsuited for the workforce to necessary parts of a national whole. While Rockwell had the intention of empowering women by presenting them as masculine—large, imposing, and able, the national narrative was stressing the point that women are merely filling in for men while they were away. Rockwell may not have intended it, but his pasting of a female face on an otherwise masculine body seems symbolic of the way that the OWI intended women temporarily to fill in for the male bodies overseas. Rockwell did not create a powerful female body, in his depiction of Rosie the Riveter. Instead he presented a male body being temporarily controlled by a female head. If everything went according
to the OWI’s plan, women would not develop a taste for higher wages, better positions, and a liberating feeling of autonomy. At the war’s end, the OWI hoped that women, not adjusted to the workplace, would vacate their new roles as autonomous working women to be replaced by the men returning from overseas. Wartime women were expected to engage in more masculine and fulfilling professions, professions that paid more handsomely than domestic work, and not be resistant to returning to the kitchen following the war’s end. In the same way that the OWI did not want women to permanently adapt to their new role as war workers, Rockwell’s image doesn’t so much show a woman adapting to mans work as much as women temporarily keeping a man’s role warm.

Miller’s image presents women as simultaneously feminine and powerful. This balance was something that the OWI was also trying to maintain. Many corporations required women to maintain an “FQ” or Femininity Quotient, meaning that they must have proper attire, hair, makeup, cleanliness, and presentation. If they were to fail in these categories, they were urged, or required to take courses to help rectify their lapses in femininity. Boeing Aircraft’s Women’s Recreation Activity Council even presented women workers with courses in dress, poise, personality, and makeup (Colman 67).

Getting women into the workforce wasn’t the only battle. The men still working in factories were incredibly threatened by this new female presence. In her book, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale of Film Noir: Ready for Her Closeup*, Julie Grossman touches on the animosity towards working women during the war commenting on the shift in power dynamics and the difficulty men had accepting women into the workplace.
Grossman cites *Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America*, and points to the instances where men found working women “distractions” and as such male management banned women workers from wearing “form fitting” clothing (29-30). Trying to maintain the balance between masking femininity and not appearing too masculine was a tightrope walk not many wartime women could realistically maintain.

In Constance Bowman Reid and Clara Marie Allen’s memoir *Slacks and Calluses: Our Summer in a Bomber Factory*, the women relish the freedom and lament the shame of wearing slacks to work. When walking down local streets people who knew Reid and Allen “acted as if they didn’t,” and people who didn’t know them “whistled as if they did” (67). By donning traditionally male attire they were inviting scorn from women and inspiring sexual advances from men. Reid and Allen emphasized the division even further to say, “In war-time San Diego there are just two kinds of women: the ones who go to work in skirts and the ones who go in slacks” (67). From Reid and Allen’s perspectives, men dropped the respect and consideration they give them while they are wearing skirts and replaced it with open sexual advances and publicly groped them on their commute to work. This hyper-sexuality that these newly autonomous, “masculinized” women inspire in men will be later mirrored in the treatment of the powerful and threatening *femme fatale* of *film noir*. Reid and Allen end their reflection with the unfortunate realization that clothes “make the woman-and some clothes make the man think that he can make the woman” (69). Again, this sentiment will be indisputably demonstrated in the attire of the *femme fatale* and in the occasional *Angel of the House* figure of *noir*. 
In 1944, as the war seemed to be coming to an end, the pro-war, pro-women propaganda took a dramatic turn. Stories of women working steadily to support their country became tales of women longing for the peace of a simple life at home. Editorials directed at mothers ensuring them that their children understood their sacrifice, and appreciated them for it became warning tales of delinquent children running wild without a mother’s guidance. Photographs and pulp fiction serials set in factories and on munitions lines changed backdrops to office jobs and domestic life. Honey cites to several pulp fiction stories of the time. Among them, “Diapers for Flight Six” in which a former military pilot has been demoted to the position of stewardess in post-war America. The story centers on her caring for an abandoned baby aboard the flight. The male pilot describes her as “dim-eyed and sweet,” and he follows that thought with a statement blanketing all postwar women, “Ladies should be having babies, not flying all around the country” (Honey 98). The story ends with the stewardess realizing that home life was for her, not a career.

Stories like this “Diapers for Flight Six,” laden with the message that women must return home led Sherna Berger Gluck, in her book *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change*, to conclude that “women production workers were being phased out— if not in actuality, then certainly in the public consciousness. Preparations were being made for the postwar world” (15). Wartime women that dominated the glossy pages of magazines were being replaced with housewives and mothers eager to return to their rightful place; the home. Near the end of the war, propaganda didn’t just put emphasis on the honor of homemaking; it also demonized women who resisted the
transition back to the kitchen. Pulp fiction magazines ran stories about children running wild because their self-centered mothers were maintaining a career or frequenting cocktail bars, and presented the two as equally sinful. Unfaithful wives were censured for ruining the marriage they had with a good man while he fought for her freedom. Honey claims that alongside stories glorifying the happy homemaker, “fiction thrust women into the spotlight as guardians of morality by chronicling the horrendous consequences of female irresponsibility” (95). The consequences of female irresponsibility will be thrust further into the public consciousness with the creation of the *femme fatale* of film noir.

Unfortunately for both women workers and the powers that be alike, the “Women at Work” campaign was too effective. A 1944 survey revealed that 75-80 percent of women working in war production jobs were planning on keeping their positions even after the war had been won (Honey 22-4). Following their termination, a 1945 survey discovered that women were unhappy with the push back into domestic and traditionally female employment opportunities (Honey 22-4). In November of 1943, over 45 percent of women production workers were being paid high wages in the goods industry. By 1946, less than a quarter of those women workers were in a similar paying position. The same survey indicated a powerful discontent among women forced to revert to prewar positions (Honey 24). This dissatisfaction led to a palpable friction between newly returning men and newly autonomous women in a post-war America. The male anxiety that results in response to this powerful but thwarted female figure is expressed in the rise of the *femme fatale* figure of film noir.
Honey argues that the prowess possessed by Rosie the Riveter was only admired when wives, sisters, and mothers were working to bring their men home. The honor bestowed upon women for their strength and capability was only exalted when viewed as a litmus test for wifehood. Upon the male return following the war, women were expected to revert to home life. Honey asserts:

The beautiful, courageous woman of action whose ability to take care of herself so enchanted men when she was single was transformed into a menacing monster if she retained her powers beyond her early twenties. Though men valued women for their strength at a time when life was uncertain, they admired female ambition only as a stage that prepared women to be strong partners. (72)

In mid to late 1944, there is an increase in pulp fiction stories that praise the female who capstone their career with a wedding ring, and admonish women who put a paycheck before motherhood. This same sentiment seems to be a warning littered throughout film noir. The menacing figure that is the femme fatale is characterized by her cold ambition and non-maternal nature. In the same way that the OWI used stories of heartless business women coming to an unhappy end as propaganda, it is conceivable that the femme fatale of film noir served as a subtle form of propaganda to show that ambition and drive leads only to an untimely demise or loss of freedom.

The new image to be propagated was one of defenseless homemaker. Honey argues that because women entered male-central roles to keep American industry afloat in a time of war, the propagandists had to change the national narrative to reestablish a
male central society. In doing so, they nullify any potential progress women made during
the war. Cultural perception of women as capable deteriorated under the resurgence of
women as vulnerable figures. Propagandists did this by infusing “new life into the very
image that the glorification of Rosie the Riveter attacked: the vulnerable homemaker who
depended on a man for her livelihood” (Honey 136-7). Women were being pushed back
into the home with the message that wifehood and motherhood were vital for female
existence; this message was delivered through the same mediums that earlier urged them
to join the workforce.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan argues that before World War II, female
leads in magazine fiction were determined go-getters with goals and hope of achieving
them. The postwar heroine, however, is “young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and
feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and
home” (Friedan 36). The image that Friedan is describing suits the “vulnerable
homemaker” that Honey sees time and time again in fiction and advertisements in a
postwar America (137). The OWI does its part to adjust the backdrop of magazines,
advertisements, and media to suit the new narrative of wife and mother. While fiction
focused on romance to convince women to take on wartime jobs, “reconversion pieces”
used love scenarios to convince women that life without children was no life at all
(Honey 169). 1944 is the year the female narrative drastically changes. Coincidentally, it is
also the year that *film noir* launches some of its most notorious *femme fatales*. While the
magazine and advertisement industry attempt to push women back into the home with
warm images of happy women pressing their husband’s shirts, Hollywood responded to
one of the most powerful female characters in American history by creating her antithesis: the *femme fatale*.

Near the start of America’s entry into the war, 1941, *The Maltese Falcon* was released. It is considered by most *noir* scholars as the first real piece of classic American *noir*. However, there is a three year gap between the release of *The Maltese Falcon* and explosion of the genre. Most *noir* experts attribute this lull to the urgings of the OWI and other government agencies for Hollywood to release escapist films: musicals, love dramas, and pro-war uplifting tales of Americans squelching the Axis of Evil. With that in mind, it would stand to reason that *noir* production would halt until the end of the war in 1945. However, conveniently coinciding with the change in rhetoric on females in male spheres, a slew of *femme fatale* laden films were released in 1944. Among them were four of the most iconic fatale women in *noir* history; Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, Laura Hunt in *Laura*, Helen Grayle in *Murder, My Sweet*, and Alice Reed in *The Woman in the Window*. 
Chapter 2: *Femme Fatale* Villain or Victim
Like Rosie the Riveter, *film noir* was a product of World War II. The filming style was rooted in German Expressionism. A style brought to and popularized in America by German expatriates during the war. Expressionism gave *noir* its harsh angles and dark, looming shadows (Hirsch 23). Furthermore, the tone of *noir* is strongly influenced by French fatalism, brought to America by expatriates and American soldiers exposed to French film while overseas. These French overtones interwove themes of death, mistrust, and uncertainty into the fabric of *noir*. Finally, the plots were often drawn from popular pulp fiction novels and serials of the day that were highly popular sources of American entertainment. Specifically, works featuring hard-boiled, tough protagonists with pessimistic outlooks that mirrored the angst of a postwar America were the most attractive sources for *film noir*. Foster Hirsch argues, in his book *Dark Side of the Screen:*
Film Noir that one of noirs most identifiable characters, the femme fatale, seemed to be a transformation of the “new” autonomous American woman into a:

negative image. Passed through the noir filter, the “new woman,” forced by social circumstance and economic necessity to assert herself in ways that her culture had not previously encouraged, emerged on screen as a wicked, scheming creature, sexually potent and deadly to the male. The dark thrillers record an abiding fear of strong women, women who steer men off their course, beckoning them to a life of crime, or else so disrupting their emotional poise that they are unable to function.

Noir’s treatment of women is thus systematic of the way in which the genre transforms reality; women who in real life were strengthened by their wartime experience, while their husbands were away, appear in films as malevolent temptresses, their power confined almost entirely to a sexual realm, their strength achieved only at the expense of men. (19-20)

The femme fatale, while seen as a form of cultural resistance to the “new woman,” could just as easily be interpreted as a cautionary tale for women who refused to relinquish the small amount of power they accrued during the war. This resistance to return to the home inspired male anxiety and which in turn created an audience for Film Noir’s Femme Fatale.

While most film noir, or dark film, was produced between the years of 1944 and 1959, film noir was not considered a proper genre until the late 1960s. In fact, the term film noir was not applied to the American genre until 1946. It was not prominently
applied in American film criticism until the late 1950s, early 1960s (Hirsch 8-9). Because real analytical scrutiny of these films didn’t occur until decades after their release, certain tropes and makers of the genre had a chance to take hold and color the viewing of the films in a way to create certain expectations for the characters and scenes. The most misguided of all of the stereotypes of the genre is the *femme fatale*. Admittedly she was drawn to be bad and to act immorally. She is hyper-sexualized and plays a part in putting the hard-boiled hero in danger. The traditional view of the *femme fatale* as defined by early French critics and clung to by subsequent critics ever since is that of “evil women casting their net and fatally contaminating the American male,” as result of a “shift in national psyche” in response to a “growing disillusionment with traditional American ideals” (Hirsch 8-9). While that explanation is widely held, the *femme fatale* may not have been put in that villainous light solely as a result of male anxiety. The *femme fatale* served as a cautionary tale for newly autonomous women across a Post-World War II nation.

*Film noir*, while characteristically gray in character motivation, almost contradictorily tends to stick to a simple categorization of many of its characters. There is the good P.I. that works outside of the law, the devilish *femme fatale*, and the angelic young innocent. Like the black and white film on which these stories were captured, *film noir* seeks to categorize all characters as black or white. Only the male protagonists, the anti-heroes and the hard-boiled detectives are colored in shades of gray when it comes to lapses in morality. As Grossman asserts:
Film noir movies demonstrate the violent consequences of cultural oppositions, mainly enforced according to gender, by suggesting that division of complex human experience into strictly circumscribed opposing realms. Further, noir reveals the ways in which structuring experience according to these dichotomies may result in palpable cynicism that keeps us from addressing social illnesses. (29-30)

Since the dominant perspective of the male lead colors *Femme Fatales* as evil, *noir* encourages viewers not to examine the *femme fatale* more closely. When the male protagonist condemns her, further scrutiny of her situation and her motives becomes irrelevant.

During the war, motion pictures were an incredibly accessible source of information. In the 1940s more than half of American’s potential audience attended movies at least once a week (Chambers 4). Film had the same demographic of large, middle class audience that propagandists hope to reach with pulp fiction magazines. With such a powerful and pervasive medium, propagandists could subtly pass along the new moral messages for women in a postwar America; primarily, the new moral truth that independence will lead American women astray. Concern for self will lead to selfish self-destruction. Hopes, dreams, and aspirations will only lead women to misery, and in most cases loss of life through death or prison. However, it is essential to recognize that while the *femme fatale* is “deadly,” she is usually also desperate. When you truly analyze her
role from a perspective other than from that of a cynical “dick” or a “manipulated” lover, she seems if not justified then surely sympathetic.

I have analyzed five pulp fiction novels and five corresponding films. In each film the leading female role is unquestioningly considered a *femme fatale*. They are even ranked as “Film Noirs Greatest *Femme Fatales*” by American Movie Classics. That these characters are categorized as “*femme fatales*,” “spiderwomen,” “evil sirens,” and “conniving devils” is confirmed in almost every critical analysis I have reviewed. However, when one looks beyond the shadows, harsh angles, and the seductive dress there is always a woman backed into a corner, given the choice to submit or fight her way out. The only women who come out of the fray relatively unscathed are the ones who subject themselves to the hard boiled heroes, and end the film professing their unwavering loyalty. Even if the female character is more vocal and opinionated, she still ends up making a declaration of obedience to the hero: which clearly diminishes her previous strong sense of self. Such action makes one wonder how much of that strong sense of self will remain after the credits roll.

*Film noir* is unquestioningly a product of cultural dissonance during and following World War II. An unfortunate element of World War II’s impact was the undisputed attempt of the media, the government, the free market, and the entertainment industries to shoo women back into their rightful place in the home once their role as war workers were no longer required. Like the use of pulp fiction before it, *film noir* served as a form of subtle manipulation and propaganda to propel the interests of a male dominated
nation. All of the attributes of the femme fatale, her drive and ambition, her comfortable awareness of her own body, her ability to speak her mind all reflect what the national narrative was fighting against. The virtues of Rosie the Riveter her strength, her ambition, her capability, and her power are all presented in a threatening light in the form of the femme fatale. This shift from virtue to vice is reflective of the shift in the national narrative. Women who refuse to drop their ambition and sense of self in exchange for a wedding ring and a baby carriage will be punished. Like the pro-war propaganda before it, by embodying resistance to this new national narrative in the form of a villain, once again fiction and the media are insinuating a subtle moral message. The femme fatale’s death serves as a warning to viewers that women who retained these particular characteristics postwar were inherently evil, and must be stopped. Consequently, the femme fatale of film noir was not a villain, but a victim of circumstance.
The Maltese Falcon originated as a 1929 pulp fiction serial by Dashiell Hammett. Like many noir inspirations, it was a serial that ran in a detective fiction magazine called Black Mask. The Maltese Falcon was later (tellingly) renamed for a TV version as the Dangerous Female. There were a number of versions of The Maltese Falcon; however, the one of greatest importance to noir was the third adaption released near the start of World War II, the 1941 cult classic starring Humphrey Bogart. The Maltese Falcon was the first American film that would bring noir into focus. Retrospectively, it lives on the fringes of noir, but it is vital to the study of film noir and the femme fatale as it was one of the first benchmarks of the genre. The Maltese Falcon has some of the shade and shadow of classic noir, but produces in full force the damning of the femme fatale.

Figure 7. Sam Spade, Miles Archer, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy in The Maltese Falcon
The opening shot of the film pans over San Francisco and the first scene is set after focusing in on the mirror image of the office window of Spade and Archer. Brigid O'Shaughnessy, *The Maltese Falcon’s femme fatale*, is introduced to us as a “knockout” by Spade’s “boyish” and loyal secretary Effie Perine. O'Shaughnessy gives Sam Spade and his partner Miles Archer the name Ruth Wonderly and a sob story about her missing sister and a violent Floyd Thursby. She pleads with the detectives to handle her case personally and pays them handsomely. Miles claims the case saying, “Maybe you saw her first, Sam, but I spoke first,” and leaves that night to start tailing Thursby. This isn’t the first time that Miles “claims” a woman that Spade will later bed. It is revealed that Spade is sleeping with his partner’s wife, and has total disregard and disrespect for his partner. The following scene shows Miles being shot by an unknown assailant.

The camera cuts to Spade calmly receiving the news of his partner’s demise, and he calls his secretary and coldly tells her Miles is dead and to inform Iva, but more importantly, to keep her away from him. He calls his secretary a “good girl” and an “angel” before disconnecting. Spade’s use of pet names for the women in his life are a means of pacifying them when they are demonstrating frustration or belittling them when they are showing dominance or power. It is interesting that Spade is unable to address them with their names during moments where the balance of power shifts. These pet names diminish the power of female characters and clearly establish their place as lesser than that of the male protagonist. The timing of Spade’s pet names seem to mirror the intent of pulp fiction propaganda from 1944 on that undercut the capability of female
characters by referring to them in simple and hyper-feminine terms like “dim-eyed” and “sweet” in “Diapers for Flight Six.”

At the crime scene, a cop tells Spade that Miles must have had some good points, and Spade half-heartedly replies “I guess so.” This is just one of a long line of snide comments Spade makes about his deceased partner. He doesn’t respect him in life, and he doesn’t care for him any more in death. The morning after Miles’s death his widow, Iva, comes into the office and clings to Spade. She asks him to “be kind to” her. She believes that he killed her husband so that they could finally be together—because as he said the only obstacle between the two of them getting married was Miles. This is the first instance of Spade using Miles as an excuse for his own actions, but it won’t be the last. It is clear that Spade has nothing but disdain for Iva, and that Miles was a necessary obstacle to allow him to have a no strings attached affair with a woman he found nothing more than physically appealing. He removes her from his office as quickly as he can and encourages her not to contact him again; which he claims is for both of their own good. However, it is clear that Spade’s only concern is for himself.

Later that morning Spade orders Effie to have Miles’s desk removed and the windows repainted to remove Miles Archer’s name so that his windows read “Spade” alone. From his exchange at the crime scene, his affair with and disdain for Miles’s wife, and his order to Effie to redecorate it is evident that Sam Spade had no respect or consideration for his partner. There were no tears shed at his murder, and no shame for
stealing his partner’s wife. Sam Spade had little use for or allegiance to Miles Archer, that is, until he becomes a convenient excuse to escape commitment to another woman.

Spade gets a call from Brigid and he goes to visit her at her apartment. She confesses that the story she told the day before was nothing more than a fiction. Spade assures her that he never believed in her; he only believed in the cash she offered him. When she shows remorse for Miles’s death, Spade stops her and said Miles knew the risks of the business and that it was his own fault for not pulling his gun. He goes further in voicing his distaste for Miles and nearly says he is better off dead “with ten thousand in insurance, no children, and a wife that didn’t like him.” In this scene, Spade speaks for Brigid, and tells her how she should feel. In 1944, three years after this film is released, post-war pulp fiction pieces continue to carry the same tone with the male lead summarizing how a woman should act: admonishing her when she “sins” and praising her when she falls in line with the new rhetoric of postwar propaganda. While telling Spade a new story of how and why she needs his help, Brigid gives an echo of Iva’s earlier pleas for him to “be kind,” and in turn begs him to “be generous, Mr. Spade...Help me, Mr. Spade.” Brigid appeals to Spade’s masculinity in the same way that Iva does, in the hopes that he will consider their needs and feelings, something Spade never does. Total disregard for female feelings will become a classic staple of later noir as well as postwar pulp fiction.

Spade calls Brigid’s act convincing, but claims that he doesn’t buy it. Brigid replies “I deserve that. But the lie was in the way I said it. Not at all in what I said. It’s
my own fault if you can’t believe me now.” Spade scoffs, “Now you are dangerous.” She begs him to shield her; he does so only after collecting almost every penny she has. He tells her to hock her furs and clothes if she needs money and that when he returns he will let himself in. In this scene Spade totally dominates her. He slices through everything she says, expecting truth while telling her that he will never believe her. He strips her of her money leaving her to fend for herself. Finally, he tells her she needn’t let him into her apartment; he will let himself in. This statement, while seemingly mundane makes clear their power dynamic—he is in control; he has the power, and he doesn’t need her help for anything, he doesn’t even need her to grant him access to her own home. He will let himself in.

After Spade’s office is searched by Joel Cairo, a man on the hunt for a black falcon statue, and Spade takes him on as a client, he returns to Brigid’s apartment and lets himself in with her own key. Spade and Brigid have one of the most telling exchanges of the male/female dynamic in the film:

Spade: “You, uh-you aren’t exactly the sort of person you pretend to be, are ya?”
Brigid: “I’m not sure I know exactly what you mean.”
Spade: “The schoolgirl manner, you know, blushing, stammering, and all that.”
Brigid: “I haven’t lived a good life- I’ve been bad, worse than you could know.”
Spade: “That’s good, because if you actually were as innocent as you pretend to be, we’d never get anywhere.”
Brigid: “I won’t be innocent.”

Spade: “Good.”

This scene will be especially important to recall during Brigid and Spade’s last exchange of the film. For now, it is important to note his use of “we’d never get anywhere.” The phrase has a double meaning, that the case couldn’t progress if she was as innocent as she presented herself to be and neither could their sexual relationship. Spade encourages this behavior; he wants her to be this way. However, at the end of the film, his actions don’t match his words. Either Spade wants her to be bad, or he is just as manipulative as she is, lying about what he wants and expects from her to suit his own ends. If this is the case, it is interesting to note that traditionally, critics don’t hesitate to label Brigid a liar, but tend to look the other way at Spade’s dishonesty and inconsistency.

Spade tries to push her for more information by telling Brigid of his exchange with Cairo and that he offered him five thousand dollars for the bird. She tells him that five thousand dollars is more than she will ever have to offer him if she must “bid” for his loyalty. He condescendingly tells her that she hasn’t offered him anything but money. That she hasn’t given him confidence or truth. She asks him what else she could possibly buy him with. In the film, Spade roughly grabs her face with his hands and kisses her harshly. In the book, she asks him if she could buy him with her body. Hammett describes Spade’s kiss as “contemptuous.” The kiss is followed by an “I’ll think it over” (Hammett 59).
Her body is a form of currency to him in the same way that his loyalty and his services can be bought in cash. In both the film and the book he follows the kiss with a speech imploring Brigid to tell him what it is all about; otherwise he refuses to help her. Brigid relents and agrees to speak with Joel Cairo in Spade’s apartment later that night.

In the novel, Spade has a run-in with Iva at his office. He tells her that she shouldn’t have come. She asks him if he means she shouldn’t have come to the office or if she should give up chasing after him. The following two lines seem to illustrate the argument that strong female characters of film noir are not to have any feelings or power of their own.

Spade: “Now, Iva, you’ve got no right to take that attitude.”

Iva: “I know I haven’t. I haven’t any rights at all, it seems, where you’re
concerned. I thought I did. I thought your pretending to love me gave me—"

Spade: “This is no time to be arguing about that precious. What was it you wanted to see me about?”

Spade cuts her off, and uses one of his go to pet names, “precious” to mollify her in order to have her drop her current train of thought; the train of thought leading her to the realization that her wants and needs are irrelevant. In the way that Spade accuses Brigid of leading him on with her sexuality and her feminine “helplessness” he too leads on Iva with his masculinity and false declarations of love. These situations are not much different as far as honesty and manipulation go. Brigid’s dishonesty revealed later in the narrative is considered a huge betrayal to Spade. Yet her dishonesty is another parallel to Spade’s betrayal of his partner by bedding his wife. However, while it is clear to the reader and the viewer alike that Spade has nothing but disdain for Iva, Brigid’s true feelings of love for Spade are seen as clearly as Spade’s revulsion of Iva. By the end of the film, it is conceivable that Brigid truly fell for the hard-boiled hero. These two parallel situations lead the viewer or reader to wonder who really is the more manipulative of the two when it comes to male and female power dynamics. And begs the question why is he the hero and she the fatale?

In another scene of male and female power play, Spade calls Brigid on her lies. She replies “Oh, I’m- I’m so tired, so tired of lying and making up lies, and not knowing what is a lie and what’s the truth. I wish...” Brigid seems genuinely worn down by the world of deceit in which she lives. In the film the scene cuts away, but in the novel, they
spend the night together. This scene is vital to show Brigid’s developing feelings for Spade. At the novel’s end, and in a coming scene, their experience of sleeping together furthers her bond with him. Spade agrees to hide Brigid at Effie’s home for the time being.

The following night Spade meets with a man who Brigid claims to fear, Mr. Gutman or the “Fat Man.” They verbally spar and Spade tries to get Gutman to reveal the falcon’s worth. Both men are vying for the position of dominant male, but Spade leaves the exchange with a violently stated ultimatum. Later that night, Gutman responds to Spade’s ultimatum and reveals to him the falcon’s origin story, value, and Gutman’s insatiable desire to possess it. As his vision goes blurry, Spade realizes that he has been drugged by Gutman so that he and his fellow falcon seekers can search for it without being impeded by the detective. This act of trickery, ultimately dominance over Spade, fuels Spade’s determination to take Gutman down. Spade seems to have an almost pathological obsession with holding the upper hand. Time and time again his actions demonstrate his absolute requirement for masculine supremacy. That desire for control will ultimately destroy his relationship with Brigid.

When Spade awakens he calls Effie to find that Brigid never arrived at Effie’s home the night before. By retracing Brigid’s steps and interviewing her cabbie, Spade realizes that after she got into the cab she got a paper, changed her destination, and got off at the docks. The way it is presented in both the film and the novel, there is an undercurrent of intentional double-crossing on Brigid’s part. However, when analyzed
from her position, it seems chance is more likely than malicious intent. On her way to Effie’s home, Brigid reads in the paper about a ship coming to port from Australia, the same ship Brigid sent the falcon on. She changes her destination, not to throw Spade off her case, but because in a snap decision she decides to go for the falcon.

Effie and Spade, now back at the apartment, are interrupted by a dying man who drops the newspaper wrapped falcon at Spade’s feet. After unwrapping the package, he finds the falcon. Spade says, “We’ve got it, angel. We’ve got it.” As he says this, he takes hold of Effie’s wrist and squeezes her so tightly she winces in pain and tells Spade he is hurting her. This scene demonstrates how wrapped up Spade is in his own desire to solve the case, to come out on top, that he is unconcerned with whom he hurts in the process. Again he is disregarding the feelings of a female in his life. This scene greatly foreshadows his final exchange with Brigid.

Brigid calls and gives Spade an address while he stands with Effie. Effie encourages Spade to go to her in case Brigid is in danger. Before going to her aid, Spade checks the falcon at a bus terminal and mails himself the claim stub. Even though the address Brigid gives him is a vacant lot, before he knew that, he took his time getting to her. Once again, Spade is putting the case, and his own desire to maintain control, over Brigid’s wellbeing. When Spade arrives home he finds a weak Brigid at his door. Once they reach his apartment, they find the rest of the players in the search for the falcon already there. Gutman gives Spade only ten thousand of the twenty-five he promised. Brigid holds the envelope full of cash. Spade and Gutman haggle over money and who
should be the fall guy, so Spade can be the hero for solving his partner’s murder. Once again, Gutman and Spade struggle to control the other. Brigid, while still considered the supreme villain of the film, doesn’t have a voice in these scenes.

Spade has the men clarify what has happened so far, while the female, Brigid, is sent to the kitchen. But before Brigid leaves the room to make coffee, Gutman has her hand him back the envelope containing the ten thousand dollars. Gutman counts the money and accuses Brigid of stealing a thousand. She looks shocked and denies it. In the film, Spade instantly believes her and accuses Gutman of “palming it.” Gutman claims Spade passed his test with flying colors. In the novel, however, Spade fails miserably. He viciously accuses her, and forces her into the bathroom. He demands that she strip naked. She refuses. He tells her that if she won’t strip he will take her back into the room and force her clothing off of her there. Horrified, she asks him if he could really do that to her. He told her he would do anything to know what happened to it and her “maidenly modesty” wouldn’t stop him (Hammett 194). She assures him that it isn’t her modesty, and that she isn’t ashamed to be naked before him, (this sense of comfort with her body, and control of her own sexuality is something that is demonized through the *femme fatale*, and does nothing to help her case with Spade) she just didn’t want it to be like this. She tells him if he forces her to strip, not out of an intimate bond like the night they spent together, but out of distrust and suspicion he would kill the closeness they have. He responds to her plea, “I don’t know anything about that” (Hammett 195). Once again the feelings of a female character are considered inconsequential by Spade. He forces her to strip and he searches her body and clothes. As she said, he found nothing. More likely
than not, the Spade of the film would have responded the same way if the censors would have allowed it.

After exiting the bathroom, Brigid is crying and flushed. She tells Spade he shouldn’t have done that to her, and he uses a pet name, “angel,” in hopes of pacifying her, and tells her he had to find out before he kisses her and walks back into the room of men. It is clear in this scene that any feelings Spade may have for Brigid are overshadowed by his desire to solve a puzzle and to not be duped. He violates her; he threatens to strip her naked in a room full of men if she doesn’t obey his order.

Afterword, when it is proven that Brigid didn’t do what Spade accused her of, he doesn’t offer her an apology. Spade only attempts to pacify Brigid with an “angel” the same way he did when he called Iva “precious.” This scene also illustrates how powerless Brigid really is. Yes, her sexuality is a tool that she has used in the past, but if this scene is any indication; her power is incredibly limited. When it comes to real control, like Iva before her, Brigid is not permitted to have any.

Back in the room the men discuss more business, and Effie delivers the falcon. When the falcon is proven to be a fake, Spade violently grabs Brigid and demands she reveal where the real one is. He accuses her of killing Miles. While she tries to concoct a lie, she stops. She looks at Spade and tells him she can’t lie to him. At this point in both the novel and the film, it is hard not to consider that her feelings for Spade are truly genuine. She confesses to him that she killed Miles, she stops lying, and she clearly cares for him. Spade’s response is that he is going to “send her over.”
The only sliver of compassion he gives her is that he tells her that he hopes they
don’t hang her by her “sweet neck,” and if they do he will always remember her. Even
that sentiment drips of condescension. She begs him not to and asks him if he loves her.
He says he does, but he won’t “play the sap” for her. For Spade love is irrelevant when
compared with losing the upper hand in a power struggle. He tells her he does believe she
loves him, but he couldn’t trust her. More than that, he couldn’t live his life with a
woman having something over him, that she could sink him by revealing that he
concealed her crime. Despite the fact that in order for her to do so, Brigid would have to
turn herself in, Spade still won’t allow her to have any power over him. She asks him to
just let her run, and he refuses. Brigid asks him if Miles meant more to him than she does.
Spade tells her that Miles meant nothing to him and that he was going to kick him out of
his office at the year’s end. (Not to mention that he had been sleeping with his wife.)
Brigid asks him how he could choose Miles over her if he never cared for his partner.
Spade responds that she will never understand him. That it was his manly duty to avenge
his partner. He was “supposed to do something about it” regardless of what he thought of
him. Again, like he did with Iva, Spade is using Miles as a shield to block the women he
claims to love from attaching any strings.

Spade also tells Brigid that it would be “bad for business” to let a murderer get
away with killing a detective. And that it is his nature to stop criminals. He tells her the
numbers are against her. She again reminds him of their love for each other, and he tells
her that love fades, maybe next month he won’t care so much for her. This comment
makes it fairly clear; Spade doesn’t feel love, only lust. So Spade turns her in. He betrays
a woman he claims to love out of duty to a man he himself betrayed and disliked. He
gives her to the police with the chance that she will be executed because he refuses to
give anyone any semblance of power over him. He refuses to be vulnerable to her, even if
it would mean saving her life. James Maxfield, in his book *The Fatal Woman: Sources of
Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991* argues that in order to follow his strict
masculine code, and maintain dominance, Spade forced his own hand to turn Brigid in. In
doing so, Spade removes the threat of female manipulation, and additionally refuses to be
ruled by “tender (feminine) emotions” and in exchange continues with his masculine
code of conduct (Maxfield ii).

In the final scene of the film, Spade walks away from Brigid standing behind the
steel cage of the elevator, showing her scared and helpless face between the bars—already
a prisoner. In the novel, the final scene is of Spade chastising Effie for her woman’s
intuition about Brigid. When Effie asks him if he really “did that,” sent Brigid to jail and
possibly to death, Spade replies, “Your Sam’s a detective” and takes Effie in his arms
(Hammett 216). Effie pushes him away and asks him not to touch her. That she knows
that he is right, but right now, she can’t stand his touch. The final sentences of the novel
are of Effie walking away from him only to return to tell him that Iva is back. He has her
send her in, intimating that he will go on using the women in his life for his own pleasure,
their feelings and futures be damned.

Critics still hail Spade as a hero. He solves the case. He stays true to his “moral
code.” In line with the postwar propaganda to come, the woman who is comfortable in
her skin, who has ambition and (criminal) capability is harshly punished. She loses her freedom, and potentially her life.
Chapter 4: *Double Indemnity*
Written by James M. Cain in 1935 as and eight part serial for *Liberty Magazine*, and compiled as a novella in 1943, *Double Indemnity* stands as one of the most iconic stories in pulp history. The novella was adapted for the screen in 1944 by Raymond Chandler who wrote two other noir classics *Farewell, My Lovely* (renamed for film *Murder, My Sweet*) and *The Big Sleep*. Barbara Stanwyck’s portrayal of Phyllis Dietrichson has been described over and over by critics as the most unnerving performance of a *femme fatale* in film noir history. One critic dubbed her a male-attracting embodiment of evil. Phyllis is a castrating Eve in a nightmare inversion of the Garden of Eden myth” (Hirsch 4). While murder is morally wrong, when analyzing Phyllis’s role in her husband’s murder, she may not be the predator film critics have come to label her. The spiderwoman interpretation is, however, a very successful piece of propaganda.

After the opening credits roll over a man hobbling on crutches towards the viewer, the first scene opens to a dark rain-slicked Los Angeles street. A car veers wildly all over the road with total disregard for the safety of the other drivers. Pulling up in front of an office building, our main character, Walter Neff, ambles up to the dark building and begins to knock. A security guard lets him in. The porter tells Neff that he couldn’t get insurance because of an issue with his heart. It is clear that his business isn’t a compassionate one, and neither is Neff. A disheveled Neff rides to his office floor and gets off. Bleeding and in pain, Neff lights a smoke and starts speaking into his Dictaphone. Unlike the novella, the film unfolds retrospectively. It is being narrated to us
from the single perspective of a desperate man confessing his crimes to a man he both admires and resents, Barton Keyes, Claims Manager.

The first flashback of the film is where the novella opens, at the home of the Dietrichsons. Neff stops to renew Mr. Dietrichson’s car insurance. Even though Mr. Dietrichson isn’t home, Neff forces his way into the house past the maid. This is just the first of a series of scenes in which Neff pushes women out of his way to get what he wants. In most critics’ opinions, Neff is manipulated by Phyllis to do her bidding. That she, like most *femme fatales*, is interpreted as the spark that sends an otherwise rational man into a murderous frenzy. But in both the film and the novella, Neff pushes his way into Phyllis’s life, and as the story progresses, the viewer and the reader alike will see that he is the first to outright suggest the murder that unfolds.

In the film, Neff interrupts Phyllis sunbathing. She appears at the top of the stairs wrapped in a white towel, and asks Neff if there is anything she can do (her husband not being home). Neff makes an insurance joke about her not being “fully covered” referring to her lapsed auto insurance, and her lack of clothing. As she goes to get dressed, Neff walks towards the living room. The maid tells him that the liquor cabinet is locked up. Neff replies that he always brings his own keys. Joking aside, Neff is again clarifying that he is a man that will get what he wants, even if it is to be denied.

The next shot of Phyllis is of her descending the stairs, the camera focuses on her legs, specifically, her anklet. The way the camera focuses on Phyllis, examining her body in the same way that Neff is assessing her assets, is reminiscent of Larua Mulvey’s
argument about the male gaze in her essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In which, Mulvey argues that the “male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 10). Phyllis is clearly an object of the male gaze as the camera follows her into the living room, with a focus on her buttoning her blouse. Throughout the film, Neff has an evident fixation on the anklet. After settling in, Neff comments on her anklet. In return she uncrosses her legs and tells Neff to stop in the next night when her husband would be home. He implies that he would rather be speaking to her than her husband. She uses a speeding metaphor to tell him he is moving too fast with her. The speed metaphor is interesting when compared to Neff frantically speeding through the streets of L.A. in the opening scene. Perhaps the whole fiasco that follows could have been avoided had he heeded her warning and simply slowed down. But critics seem to gloss over the subtle hesitation that Phyllis displays, and instead view her as puppet master. However this is a reading that is difficult to support. Following the speeding banter, Phyllis mentions her husband again in an effort to slow Neff’s sexual advances. Frustrated by her subtle rejection, Neff replies, “That tears it,” and tells Phyllis he will return the following night.

After their first encounter of the film, Neff says that he didn’t know that murder was a possibility that maybe Keyes would have, but he didn’t. In the novella, however, during their first encounter Neff thinks that a reputable agent wouldn’t get mixed up in what he had an inkling she was angling at. The second time they meet she mentions
accident insurance off-handedly and he speaks harshly to her, describing the accidents that may befall her husband, and then accuses her of causing them. She tells him he must be crazy, that she has never heard of such things. He accuses her of constantly thinking about killing her husband, and goes further to accuse her of coming to Neff to help her. She leaves in a huff. Phyllis returns the next night, and tells him he has read her all wrong, that she would never do it. Neff tells her that she is going to do it, and that he is going to help her. Phyllis tells him that it would be impossible. She asks him why he is going to do it, and he says for her and for the money. Before they can do it, he demands that she tells him where they stand. She starts to cry and she begs him not to let her do it because it is insane. Instead of heeding her pleas, as a rational person would do, Neff tells her again that she is going to do it. She cries harder and tells Neff she thinks her husband would be happier if he was dead, but she also doesn’t believe that her husband would think so. Neff tells her again that they are going to kill him. Phyllis continues to cry and then gives him insight into her deeply delusional mind:

There’s something in me, I don’t know what. Maybe I’m crazy. But there’s something in me that loves Death. I think of myself as Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night. I am so beautiful, then. And sad. And hungry to make the whole world happy, by taking them out where I am, into the night, away from all trouble, all unhappiness....Walter, this is the awful part. I know this is terrible. I tell myself it’s terrible. But to me, it doesn’t seem terrible. It seems as though I’m doing something—that’s really best for him, if he only knew. Do you understand me, Walter? (16).
Neff tells her no, that he doesn’t understand her, but they were going to do it anyway. In the novella, Phyllis is clearly disturbed, in the end; this is confirmed by her final actions. In the film, Phyllis is trapped in a confining marriage, barred from leaving, shopping, talking when her husband is around (this will be elaborated on later in the analysis). She is trapped and doesn’t have any other way out. In the novella, however, she says her husband is a fine enough man, who hasn’t done anything against her. However, she is trapped by her delusions of death. She is not a cold, calculating spiderwoman intent on destroying all the men in her path, but someone cut off from reality who thinks that death would bring people happiness. Her motives to kill her husband seem to be based some kind of warped sense of kindness. Neff’s are based off of sexual desire, greed, and an obsession with beating the system he helps to enforce. She even urges Neff to stop her, but he responds to her pleas with a repetition of his earlier statement, that they are going to do it.

Neff clearly states in the novella that Phyllis didn’t lure him into killing her husband; she was just the “plant” he needed to fulfill a fantasy he has been turning over in his mind for quite some time:

All right, I’m an agent. I’m a croupier in that game. I know all their tricks, I lie awake nights thinking up tricks, so I’ll be ready for them when they come at me. And then one night I think up a trick, and I get to thinking I could crook the wheel myself if I could only put a plant out there to put down my bet. That’s all. When I met Phyllis I met my plant. (21)
When comparing Neff and Phyllis’s motives for murder, who of the two, seems more callous, more calculating, more fatal? Then why is it that Phyllis is always interpreted as the instigator, the agitator, and the supreme villain? It is interesting that *Double Indemnity* was released in 1944, the same year that pro-war, pro-women propaganda shifted to women as tender homemakers or villainous career women. The film adaption of Phyllis Dietrichson and her motivations are so starkly contrasted from her original disturbed and troubled role in the novella. Her greed and ambition, more than a warped sense of morality are her driving motivations. Walter Neff’s condemnation of Phyllis at the end of the film convinces the viewer that, yes; the male protagonist was in the right. While that interpretation is debatable, Neff’s decree was all that the viewer really needed in a post-pro-women-propaganda America.

In the film, Phyllis and Neff’s second meeting gets moved from their evening appointment to an afternoon appointment. While he waits for their next meeting Neff says he kept thinking about “the way that anklet of hers cut into her leg.” Neff sees Phyllis as a sexual object; a source of pleasure and pain. He isn’t attracted to her traditionally sexual female parts, but to the way a piece of jewelry cuts into her skin. It shackles her. The anklet is a combination of pleasure (aesthetically pleasing) and pain (cutting into her leg). Similarly, Phyllis and Neff become bound together in a combination of pleasure (lust and attraction) and pain (the bind of committing murder together). The next time he sees her, the camera pans from her feet up, pausing at her anklet. Neff seems to mix sadism with sexual attraction. That combination brutality and desire is even more clearly defined in Neff’s final embrace with Phyllis. And yet
according to popular interpretations, she is still the villain and Neff her victim. This combination of desire and animosity that permeates film noir mirrors male feelings towards women in the workplace during and following the war. The sense of sexual desire and anxiety at a newfound female power that dominated the male psyche from 1942 to the early fifties seems to be represented and intensified in noir.

At their second meeting, Neff and Phyllis discuss the insurance policy over tea. Phyllis describes to him how trapped she feels in her loveless marriage. When Phyllis mentions accident insurance, Neff responds like Sam Spade in the Maltese Falcon before him who wouldn’t be Brigid’s “sap,” and tells Phyllis that he won’t be her “dope” before storming out. In Neff’s narration, he says that she didn’t “fool him” and that he was going to drop her before he got burned. After Neff arrives home, he realizes his own feelings, and hopes to jam up the insurance system are too powerful. For him, this was just the beginning. Neff seemed less appalled by Phyllis’s desire to murder her husband than he is indignant about her poorly constructed plan. He seems to be more irritated that she thought him a “dope” someone easily duped, than horrified by her murderous plans.

Later that night, Phyllis shows up at Neff’s apartment. She gives him more information on her confining marriage. She tells him that her husband doesn’t let her speak, that they sit silently together, that when he isn’t verbally admonishing her. She tells him how he won’t let her spend a dime, and when she does he loses his temper, and how he speaks to her harshly and rarely lets her leave the house. These claims are not elaborated or unsubstantiated. When we first encounter Mr. Dietrichson he is gruff,
unpleasant, and snaps at Phyllis during the entire exchange. His character doesn’t soften for the entirety of the film. That admittedly this is not a compelling justification for murder, but it does put more of a sympathetic light on Phyllis’s day-to-day life. She spends most of her time alone or with a controlling, verbally, and physically abusive man. This may suggest that the lesson is that it is a woman’s moral duty to stay loyal to a man even when he mistreats her. When Neff tells her if she tries to kill him on her own, Keyes will catch her and she will hang for sure, she cries. Neff narrates his thoughts from that moment; a parallel to his monologue from the novella, the film also calls Phyllis Neff’s “plant” so that he can make a bet on the system he helps to uphold. Yet another noir male attempting to gain dominance over a corrupt system, regardless of the cost or who he has to sacrifice to gain mastery. The narration dissolves back to the scene of Neff and Phyllis in his apartment. She is reapplying her make-up, and sex is implied. She calls his name loudly to pull him out of his deep thoughts of beating the system. Power and greed are clearly strongly intertwined with Neff’s sexual desire for Phyllis. In both cases, he wants to be the dominant male claiming the prize.

In the film and novella, Phyllis is worried they will hang her, and Neff replies that they won’t hang her because she is going to do it and he is going to help her. He is the guy who knows how. As he proclaims that he, Walter Neff, above all others that have tried before him, will be the one to crack the system, similar to Sam Spade’s obsession with cracking the case, Neff grabs her arms tightly and she squirms, just like Effie Perrine, and tells him he is hurting her. Neff, like Spade, is so possessed by the lure of coming out on top that he isn’t aware of who he injuring in the process.
When Neff goes back to the Dietrichson house to get Phyllis’s husband to sign the insurance policies, Lola, his daughter, serves as witness. The costume department does an interesting, but not unexpected thing for the two female characters. Like the Rosie the Riveters before them, the characters are defined by their apparel. Like the slacks and skirts defining apparel in war industries, *film noir* women are defined as either a Whore or an Angel of the House figure. Phyllis is dressed in black, a deeply cut v-neckline with her skirt hiked up to her thighs as she sits playing Chinese Checkers with Lola. Lola is dressed in light colors, a knee length skirt, and a blouse that ties at the neck. While the screenshot of the film below gives an idea of the stark contrast in styles, when you see the two characters in motion, the appearance of innocence and sin is much more evident.

Figure 9. Lola, Phyllis, Mr. Dietrichson, and Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*
Lola stands for youth, innocence, kindness, and compassion. Phyllis, on the other hand, moves with a total awareness of her body. A low-cut neckline and exposed thigh gives the viewer an intimate sense that she is comfortable in her skin, and that she knows how to use her body. While the argument could be made that it was a simple stylistic choice, the dress clearly divides the two women into the only two categories that really exist in such a patriarchal society: the Angel of the House and the Whore. By seeing these women interact, the audience is able to categorize them with greater ease. Lola’s role as the Angel of the House figure becomes all the more evident as her and Neff’s relationship progresses.

During this scene, Mr. Dietrichson’s controlling nature is revealed to the viewers. He grills his daughter on where she is going. He chastises Phyllis for shopping. He speaks with an overall tone of agitation and anger. He is unquestionably an unpleasant man. This adds credence to Phyllis’s claims that he is an unbearable husband. In the novella, however, Mr. Dietrichson is somewhat meek, and comes across as non-threatening. An average man, just as Phyllis of the novella describes him. What is important to note, is that in neither the film nor the novella does Phyllis mislead Neff about her husband’s temperament. As far as the viewer or the reader can tell Phyllis gives Neff an accurate depiction of the man we get to see. She doesn’t manipulate Neff with unfounded elaborations of who the man they are going to kill is. All the evidence shows that Phyllis is honest with Neff, and no manipulation is necessary.
In the scene before, when Neff tells Phyllis his plan, to kill Mr. Dietrichson on a train so that they can collect double the insurance money, for the double indemnity clause of being killed in an unlikely accident, Phyllis agrees and tells him it will happen “just the way” he wants it. Once again, Neff is pulling the strings, Neff is organizing the plan; Neff formulates and organizes the plan, and he informs her of how the murder will occur. Phyllis is just agreeing to the plan he concocted, possibly long before he came into her life.

After Neff leaves the Dietrichson’s residence, he finds Lola in his car. This begins his misogynistic, fantasy-based relationship with the young girl. She tells him of her troubles at home, and asks him for a ride to meet her boyfriend Nino. When Neff lets her out, Nino is a harsh and controlling young man who is short with Lola and rude to Neff. In the novella, Nino is a much kinder and more considerate character. The film version conforms Nino into a controlling and dominating male not unlike the other male figures in the film, Neff, Keyes, and Mr. Dietrichson. Neff leaves with an uneasy feeling about killing Mr. Dietrichson, not for Mr. Dietrichson’s sake, but for Lola’s.

In the next major scene, Phyllis and Neff meet up at Jerry’s Market, the recognizable image of Phyllis and Neff standing side by side looking aloof is one of noirs most iconic images.
The two talk amongst the canned goods, while shoppers move around them, plotting her husband’s murder. When Phyllis tells Neff that her husband was injured, and can’t go on the train trip which was vital to their plan, she asks him what they are going to do. Neff tells her that it is the train or nothing. He makes it very clear that he is in control of the plan, and that he calls the shots on how they will proceed. While Phyllis does try to push him, scared that he is losing his nerve, Neff makes it very clear that the murder will be done; it will just be done “right,” in other words, under his supervision.
In the novella, Phyllis doesn’t seem quite aware of the consequence of their actions; that their plan will end her husband’s life. When Neff insists that her husband take the train broken leg or no broken leg, Phyllis hesitates, and tells him that it might be too dangerous. When Neff asks her how it could be more dangerous, she tells him that she used to be a nurse, and if you get a broken leg out of bed too soon, when it heals it will shorten, leaving the patient with uneven legs. Neff just stares at her and lets her concerns sink in. Neff is fully aware of the consequences of their actions; the murder is on the forefront of his mind. This exchange seems to lend credit to the fact that Phyllis does not totally live in this world. Her delusions of Death combined with her not thinking of her husband as deceased leave the reader wondering how sane she actually is. She is concerned with getting her husband out of bed too quickly for their murder plot, because his leg won’t heal correctly if he does. Neff thinks in the novella that Mr. Dietrichson’s leg “was one thing he didn’t have to worry about” (Cain 48). How calculating can a woman be if she can’t think far enough ahead to view her potential victim as dead? It is interesting that the softness and delusions of the Phyllis from the novella are replaced by a colder and more callous interpretation of Phyllis in the film.

About a week after Neff and Phyllis’s exchange, Neff has a talk with Keyes in his office. Keyes is trying to convince Neff to take a job in his department even though it will mean a cut in pay. Their conversation is interrupted by a call from Phyllis during which she gives Neff some final details for their plan. After they hang up, Neff asks Keyes why he doesn’t find a woman and get married. Keyes tells him of his almost wedding, to a “dame” that didn’t happen. His “little man” spoke up. The same voice that tells him a
claim is phony made him question his bride-to-be. He has her investigated and found that “she’d been dyeing her hair ever since she was sixteen,” there was a manic-depressive family member on her mother’s side, and that she was divorced. Neff cuts him off before he can go on, and summarizes Keyes general feeling for the woman he was supposed to love, “She was a tramp from a long line of tramps.” This sentiment seems to apply to all women of a certain “type.” She is a tramp because her beauty comes from a peroxide bottle, she is a tramp because she is divorced and consequently tainted by another man, and she is a tramp because she has an instance of mental illness in her lineage. Harsh sentence for small crimes. Similarly, such harsh judgment is used when labeling the mentally ill Phyllis a malevolent “spiderwoman.” This harsh judgment is alive again when women of postwar propaganda are dubbed cold, castrating career women for the crime of maintaining a job in a postwar economy.

The next scene is of Neff setting up his elaborate alibi. All of his bases are covered—he has a plan; and he will be the man to beat the system. Neff sneaks into the back of the Dietrichson’s car, and waits while Mr. and Mrs. Dietrichson get inside. On the way to the train station, Mr. Dietrichson berates Phyllis. His behavior towards her is another confirmation that her portrayal of him as harsh and unfeeling towards her is accurate. He seems to have nothing more than disdain for Phyllis. When they get to the agreed upon spot, Phyllis honks the horn three times as a signal for Neff to come up behind Mr. Dietrichson and choke him to death. Phyllis stares straight ahead, coldly and almost detached from the situation next to her. Similar to how Phyllis of the novella seems detached from the murder plot and reality altogether. In the film and novella both,
Phyllis is literally and symbolically in the driver’s seat. While she isn’t committing the crime directly, she will shoulder most of the blame for Neff’s actions. The image of unhappy husband and wife riding upfront, while a lover lies in wait in the backseat will be revisited in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

![Image of Walter Neff and Mr. and Mrs. Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*](image)

Figure 11. Walter Neff and Mr. and Mrs. Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*

In the novella, while Walter waits for his cue, Phyllis and Mr. Dietrichson talk calmly. She speaks to him as if he were really going to Palo Alto. Walter thinks to himself, “Woman is a funny animal” (Cain 42). This could be a sign of Phyllis’s cold and callous nature, but more likely it is evidence of the fact that she lives in world so removed from reality, that the consequences of their actions are not fully apparent to her. She views death as happiness, as a release from an unpleasant world; she forgets that after their plan, her husband won’t have a leg to mend, and now she seems entirely unfazed by his eminent demise. Her disinterest alone would be one thing, but combined with her
perception of “Death,” and her concern for her husband’s leg length, it stands to reason that she is not fully responsible or aware of her actions. The same thing can’t be said for Walter Neff, the man with the plan.

After the murder, Neff and Phyllis continue with their plan. Neff takes Mr. Dietrichson’s place on the train and jumps from the tracks at the pre-determined spot. Phyllis brings the car to the tracks to dump the body. They plant the body and return to the car. At first, the car won’t start. Phyllis tries and fails three times to start it before Neff takes charge and gets the engine to turn over. Just like Phyllis was unable to kill her husband without him, she couldn’t get away from the scene of their crime without Neff either. Neff’s narration revels in the perfect nature of the crime he committed, proud that it went off without a hitch.

In the film, Phyllis is calm, cool, collected after the murder. In the novella, however, she panics; she couldn’t stand to be left alone with the body. She “raves” and as she does Neff slaps her and grills her on what she was to do next as part of the plan. She can’t stand his badgering questions and she tells him she will go insane if he continues. She tells him to get out of the car, when she does, he tells her she will continue to drive him home, or he will “sock” her (Cain 51). The film adapts her character from a woman on the brink of madness, being pushed by Neff into a crime she begs him to stop her from committing to being pushed by him on how to proceed after the crime. He threatens her in no uncertain terms; he makes it clear that she will follow his orders, or face the punishment. Many of the elements that make Phyllis sympathetic or not accountable for her actions are erased from the film. The only sympathy we feel for the film version of
Phyllis is one of an unhappy housewife with a harsh and abusive husband. For the time, the sympathy for her situation would have been held by a select few. As evidenced by the analysis of her character by a multitude of critics, the film’s intent is to make her appear to be a villain, not a victim of her circumstance. A subtle message to unhappy women everywhere, if you attempt to rid yourself of your husband, you’ll pay for it.

After novella Phyllis “cracks up” in the car, Neff begins to think of what he had done for her. And his perception of the murder shifts from his desire for her and to break the system to blaming Phyllis for everything that has unfolded so far. He begins to think of Phyllis as Sam Spade thought of Brigid when he contemplated not turning her in, “I had put myself in her power, so there was one person in the world that could point a finger at me, and I would have to die” (Cain 22). Just like Spade, Neff neglects to reason that she would have to implicate herself in order to sink him. But like Spade, this reason doesn’t come to mind. All that matters is a woman has power over him, and that is something that he cannot stand. This is the moment that Walter Neff begins to contemplate a second murder, this time of Mrs. Dietrichson.

Following the murder, a “suicide angle” puts a wrinkle in Neff’s flawless crime. The suicide angle leads Keyes to believe it is in fact a murder case. The suicide and murder suspicion draws Lola Dietrichson to Neff’s office. In his interaction with Lola the reader and the viewer see how polarized his perceptions of women are. While his feelings for Phyllis are fueled by sexual desire, lust for money, and to know that he is able to work around the insurance system; his feelings for Lola are derived from her pure and innocent nature. In contrast to Lola, both on the screen and on the page, whatever sins Phyllis
commits seem magnified when contrasted by the sweet, simple, childlike character that is Lola Dietrichson. In the film, Lola tells Neff her suspicion of Phyllis the first time they meet after the murder. She tells him that she suspects Phyllis of her mother’s death as well as her father’s. Lola informs him that she caught Phyllis trying on a black veil before her father’s death. In the novella, however, Phyllis is trying on a red silk wrap, similar to the one she describes in her delusions of her being the physical embodiment of Death. In the film, as well as the novella, Lola moves out and accuses Phyllis of stealing her boyfriend. In the film, it is intimated that Phyllis does in fact take Nino; however, in the book Phyllis doesn’t want anything to do with him. Nino comes to her home to dig for information about another mysterious death at a children’s hospital that Phyllis is linked to, and in order to not seem suspicious, Phyllis allows him to visit with her. In the novella, Phyllis’s interactions with Nino are not a betrayal, but another instance where she is backed into a corner by a man with nowhere to turn.

After Neff’s first meeting with Lola, they begin to spend time together regularly. In the novella, following their first meeting, Neff subtracts her age from his, thirty-four minus nineteen, a fifteen year difference. Because he did this simple math, he is convinced that it must mean he is in love with her. His snap decision of lust and love seem to indicate that Neff doesn’t think much of women. He was seducing Phyllis moments after they met, and falling in love with Lola, a young girl whose father he just murdered, after their second meeting. All he needed to see from Phyllis was her body, her flagrant sexuality, and all he needed from Lola was her apparent inexperience and innocence. To Neff, there are only two sides to women, the Angel of the House, in other
words the ideal woman, and the Whore. Neff only thinks about women in two camps, and nothing can sway that opinion.

Despite the “love” he feels for Lola, Neff puts his own self interest before her peace of mind by encouraging her to keep her opinion about Phyllis to herself. In the film, Neff acts as a “father figure,” as opposed to a love interest, to Lola in an effort to keep her quiet. The next time Phyllis and Neff meet, she is clearly jealous of Neff’s relationship with Lola; she is aware that she is being replaced. Neff repeats the mantra “leave her out of this” throughout their exchange. At the end, Phyllis reiterates the point that most critics seem to miss, “I loved you, Walter, and I hated him. But I wasn’t going to do anything about it. Not until I met you. You planned the whole thing. I only wanted him dead.” Neff forced his way into her living room, Neff concocted the plan, and Phyllis was just the scenario he needed to fulfill a long held fantasy. It is after this exchange that film Neff revisits his plan to murder Phyllis.

In the novella, Neff decides upon the when and where for his plot to murder Phyllis as he watches the moon rise over the ocean with Lola. Like the rising moon over the deep blue sea, the dark, evil Phyllis will be replaced by the illuminated, innocent Lola. He will kill Phyllis not out of fear for his safety, but out of fear that with Phyllis alive, Lola will go to court and spill what she knows, and that Phyllis will out him to Lola, destroying his dreams of being with her. Lola makes it clear to him throughout their time together that she has no interest in him, that her heart belongs to Nino. Neff’s insistence that they will be together demonstrates how he will allow no obstacle get in the way of what he wants, not even the interest or feelings of the women he claims to love.
In both the novella and the film, Keyes comes closer to the truth behind Mr. Dietrichson’s murder. Just as everything starts to unravel, Neff decides to get rid of Phyllis. In the novella he invites her out to a bluff, but she shoots him and runs before he can get to her. In the film however, Phyllis’s actions are even more sympathetic, but are still interpreted as the actions of a spiderwoman. Neff arrives at her home with the intent to kill Phyllis and frame Nino in the process. Thus getting both of the obstacles between his “relationship” Lola out of the way. Neff accuses Phyllis of using him and loving Nino, she denies both, and from what her final actions would indicate, she is probably telling the truth. After Neff shuts the blinds, she shoots him in the shoulder. But immediately after she fires her first shot, Phyllis lowers her gun. Neff tells her she can do better. He steps closer, taunting her to shoot him again. He takes the gun from her and she touches him lightly. Phyllis tells him she is “rotten” just like he said she was, but then she tells him that she realized she loved him when she couldn’t fire a second shot. Phyllis couldn’t kill him; she couldn’t hurt him. She puts her arms around him, he says “goodbye baby” before pulling the trigger and shooting her in cold blood, in the chest. Neff lays her down on the sofa before taking one final look at her anklet. Neff takes one final glance at the only thing about Phyllis that mattered to him, her sexuality mingled with his sadistic desire to end her life, as well as his own. Neff kills Phyllis when she couldn’t bear to hurt him again. Who is callous, cold, and calculating? Neff proved fatal to Phyllis, and yet she is dubbed the \textit{femme fatale}. 

Walter rushes to the office, starts his confession, and brings the plot back to present action. Keyes busts in on Neff mid confession. With Keyes’s help, Neff ensures
that Lola and Nino will be taken care of. He pushes past Keyes with the intent of escaping to Mexico. Neff collapses on his way out of the building, and Keyes takes him into his arms. Keyes shows Neff, a criminal, more compassion than Neff showed Phyllis, a woman he claimed to love.

In the novella, the ending is far more satisfying, and brings Phyllis’s status as a *femme fatale* even further into question. Neff doesn’t kill Phyllis in the novella. Keyes visits Neff and excuses Neff’s actions by saying that he got tangled up with a “cobra, that’s all” (*Cain* 103). Keyes calls Phyllis a “pathological case” (id). He tells Neff of Phyllis’s crimes, the former Mrs. Dietrichson’s death, the death of three children, and five patients in a hospital where she worked. He speaks of her coldly as evil, as opposed to disturbed. The reader is never given a glimpse into Phyllis’s perspective of these unproven accusations. Even supposing these deaths were actually caused by Phyllis, she killed ill patients and sick children. Ghastly, yes, but in her mind, it is clear that death is a kindness and a release. Her actions are more compassionate than cobra-like when viewed from the eyes of a delusional woman.

Keyes helps Neff and Phyllis escape to Mexico by sea. While on the ship, Phyllis and Neff discuss their next move. This final scene cements the fact that Phyllis is not of sound mind, and as such, should not be branded the calculating spiderwoman past book critics have deemed her. Phyllis tells Neff that they will have to wait for the moon to come up, so that she can see the black fin of the sharks cutting through the water. Only then will she finally meet her “bridegroom,” the “only one” she ever loved (*Cain* 112). Phyllis plans to jump into the ocean and kill herself. Neff, for the first time in the novella,
follows her lead, and tells her he will go with her. She paints her face chalk white, with black rings under her eyes, and red on her lips and cheeks. She is wearing the red silk shroud she discussed in her description of Death and that Lola saw her in. Wrapped in her square of red, cut off from reality, Phyllis and Neff welcome death. Her suicide is not the action of a sane, cold, calculating *femme fatale*, but of a deranged woman cut off from reality that believes that she is bringing people peace. A peace that she will finally have for herself. A peace that is never granted the *femme fatales* of *film noir*.

When closely analyzed, the film adaption of *Double Indemnity* seems less like the story of a manipulative “spiderwoman” and more the story of the impulsive, controlling nature of Walter Neff. This film is a prime example of the way in which subtle suggestion, like that of Neff’s condemnation of Phyllis through his narrative, and the harsh angles and dark lighting in which the *noir* style captured Phyllis can create an unwarranted reaction to a character. While Phyllis is an accomplice in a murder, she was not the orchestrator or the actual killer. Neff created their plan and executed it. But the actions of Phyllis and Neff are irrelevant to the viewer if there is a male narrator defining who the morally superior character is. That fact that critics, people whose sole job is to closely analyze films, have routinely described Phyllis as an “archetypal portrayal of a spiderwoman weaving her murderous web of sexual corruption,” and Neff as a hapless victim show how effective this form propaganda truly is (Crowther Chapter 9).

Intentional or not, *film noir* has turned powerful women into monsters. That was a lesson that postwar propagandists were desperately trying to impress upon the American public.
Chapter 5: *Laura*
The story of Laura Hunt was originally published in 1942 as a serial for *Collier’s Magazine* entitled “Ring Twice for Laura” by Vera Caspary. It was adapted for the screen in 1944 and entitled simply *Laura*. The film cut some of the books more “racy” details for the time, like male-lead Waldo Lydecker’s homosexuality, and replaced it with a sordid affair between the lead female’s fiancé and her Aunt. In the *noir* tradition, the film also casts a doubt on Laura, portraying her as a *femme fatale*. The film was one of *noirs* most critically acclaimed pieces; it was nominated for five Oscars.

The film opens to a still shot of Laura’s portrait. Unlike the casual dress she sports in the novel, the silver screen adaption has Laura in an evening gown, shoulders exposed, looking down, almost daringly at the painting’s viewer. Already, the tone for how the viewer should perceive Laura is set. Unlike the everyday simplicity with which she was described in the novel, film Laura is dark, dashing, and daring. The camera opens the first scene to pan Waldo Lydecker’s apartment— which is garishly decorated with glass cabinets filled with priceless collectables and a baroque grandfather clock. While the camera spans his apartment, Waldo narrates, setting the scene following Laura’s death. During his narration, Waldo claims to be the only one who “really knew Laura.” An echoed sentiment from the novel. As Waldo narrates, Detective Mark McPherson strolls through Waldo’s home, admiring his possessions. McPherson stops, and examines the grandfather clock. Waldo comments that the only other one like it is in Laura’s apartment.

McPherson and Waldo have their first exchange while Waldo soaks in the tub typing his column on his typewriter. Waldo tries to assert dominance, forgetting
McPherson’s name, and asking him to hand him a washcloth. He goes on to praise McPherson for his police work, particularly with an encounter he had with a gangster and a machine gun. In the novel, Waldo warns McPherson that “the activities of crooks and racketeers will seem simple in comparison with the motives of a modern woman” (Caspary Part 1 Chapter 1). Throughout the novel these two men try to figure out the “motives” of a dead woman, but are incapable of seeing beyond themselves.

It is clear through the opening scene of the film that Waldo has an ego, that is very dependent on outside validation. Validation through his collectables, through his prestige, and through the people around him. When McPherson mentions that he is a suspect, Waldo responds, “To have overlooked me would have been a pointed insult.” Moments later he taunts McPherson, commenting on how “singularly innocent” he himself looks that morning. Throughout their exchange, McPherson is playing with a small ball rolling game. A game that requires patience and control, something that will prove to set him apart from Waldo. He even offers Waldo a turn, which he declines.

Waldo tells McPherson that Laura considered him “the wisest, the wittiest, and the most interesting man she had ever met.” The way Waldo sees himself through Laura’s eyes is telling of their relationship. We only get his perspective, but as the story unfolds, it is clear to the viewer and reader alike, that while they were friends, Waldo read their relationship through self-centered lenses. The two men depart and head to Laura’s Aunt Anne’s apartment. She is a middle-aged, high class woman. In both the film and the novel Aunt Anne doesn’t approve of Laura’s engagement to her fiancé Shelby Carpenter, however, for very different reasons. Unlike the novel, Anne aids Shelby
financially. In the novel, she doesn’t think much of Shelby and that is why she found him an unsuitable mate for Laura. In the film, however, it is clear the two are having an affair in exchange for her patronage and her disapproval stems from jealousy. In the novel, Anne is strong, and relatively in control of herself, but in the film she is diminished to a weak woman lost in longing and love.

When Waldo and McPherson discuss Shelby, Waldo tells him that Laura had not made a decision as to whether or not to marry him. That Laura was going to head to the country to think on it. Waldo assures the detective that Laura would not have ultimately “thrown her life away on a male beauty in distress.” Shelby is penniless; he is living off of his looks and his charm. The novel and film turn a common film noir plot point on its head. Instead of a woman desperate for a better life, a man is using his physical appeal to secure a more stable and profitable life. In the novel, Shelby doesn’t borrow from Aunt Anne, but from Laura. When he isn’t borrowing, he is deeply ashamed that he makes less than one fifth of what Laura was making in the same field. He claims to have loved Laura ambition and all, but that he was “brought up to think of women...differently” (Part 1 Caspary Chapter 3). This sense of male shame at being dependent or being “under the thumb” of a woman is prevalent throughout film noir. Women who are depended upon are considered “castrating spiderwomen.” It is clear in films like The Maltese Falcon, Double Indemnity, The Postman Always Rings Twice, and The Big Sleep that dependence in a relationship can only go one way, female on male. Males work alone; they don’t need assistance from anyone, particularly from women. The role of protector and provider is turned on its head in both the film and novel version of Laura. Interestingly
enough, *Laura* is one of the only novels popularized by *film noir* written by a woman. To find this inversion in a story written from a woman’s perspective at such a socially uncertain time is telling to how aware readers and viewers must have been of that relationship construct.

Waldo and McPherson’s next stop is Laura’s apartment. At the door, McPherson imagines the murder. He off-handedly says, “When a dame gets killed, she doesn’t worry about how she looks.” Alluding to the fact that the gunshot wound to the face left Laura unrecognizable. McPherson’s use of the word “dame” is repeated throughout both the film and the novel. He usually refers to women as “dolls” and “dames.” A fact ironically pointed out by Waldo seeing as they have a similar philosophy on women. In the novel, Waldo goes as far as to call McPherson a misogynist. McPherson sees women as hollow shells. When asked by Waldo about his love life, he describes women as only concerned with parlor suites and fur coats. McPherson’s attitude toward “dolls” and “dames” seems to mirror Sam Spade’s view of the “precious” “angels” in his life. As McPherson makes his way around Laura’s apartment he begins to see her in a way he has never seen a woman before. He touches her books, her letters, her clothing. He is getting more intimate with a woman than he has ever allowed himself before due to his shallow interpretation of women to this point in his life. Being dead, Laura posed no threat to the balance of power.

As McPherson becomes more captivated by the woman he cannot capture, he is enthralled by her painting. He paints a picture of Laura in his mind; he molds her into his ideal for a woman. He becomes a man obsessed with possessing her, a running theme for
the men in Laura’s life. The way McPherson stares at Laura’s portrait, it is not difficult to see how engrossed he is becoming with not only solving her murder, but getting to the root of who she was while she was alive.

Figure 12. Detective McPherson staring at Laura Hunt’s portrait in *Laura*

Waldo takes McPherson to his favorite restaurant. They sit at Waldo and Laura’s table, giving Waldo an opportunity to reminisce and McPherson a chance to delve further into the life of a woman he desperately wants to unravel. During their meal, Waldo recalls his first meeting with Laura. In the film, Laura accosts him at a restaurant, hoping
that he will endorse a pen for an advertisement she is working on, and despite multiple rebuffs, she keeps standing next to him. He responds, “Young woman, either you have been raised in some incredibly rustic community where good manners are unknown or you suffer from the common feminine delusion that the mere fact of being a woman exempts you from the rules and civilized conduct, or possibly both” Waldo addresses the misconception held in a misogynistic society that women are able to use their femininity as power, when in reality; it is nothing more than a delusion. This sentiment seems to go hand in hand with the propaganda of the day. The power that comes from simply being a woman is nothing more than a socially constructed pacification to keep women from demanding actual equality.

In the film Laura is presented as persistent, but somewhat uncultured in comparison to Waldo. She calls him “selfish” and “lonely” and to this his ego responds that his self–absorption is “justified.” When she says she feels “sorry” for him, Waldo knows he must see her again. Walter Neff has a similar experience in the novel version of *Double Indemnity*. Once exposed to Lola’s innocence and sweetness; he felt an overwhelming love for her that leads him to want to possess her. Waldo too feels the desire to be close to her, and as the novel progresses how desperately he wants to possess her, like one of his many collectables, becomes clear. In the novel, Waldo has a much softer fist encounter, calling her a child and welcoming her into his home. In the opening of the novel, Waldo credits her strong, savvy, capable self as a gift bestowed upon her by him: “Under my tutelage she developed from a gauche child to a gracious New Yorker”
In the film he also claims her start in the advertising industry. “I gave her her start,” but he relinquishes to her “talent” and “imagination.

In the film, Waldo flashes back to another scene from his past with Laura. He tracks her down after he turned down her offer to endorse her ad; he apologizes to her, and takes her under his wing. Waldo leads the viewer through snapshots of their relationship, and of his “tutelage.” He changes her hair, her clothes, invites her to parties and introduces her to potential clients and to how own elite circle. He paints her into the Laura he wants her to be in the same way that McPherson is creating a patched-work-quilt image of Laura to suit his own desires.

While recounting his time with Laura, Waldo’s jealousy is evident in his treatment of the other men in her life. As seen in his interaction with Shelby in both the film and the book, all of Waldo’s rivals are inferior in the same way to both Laura and himself. In the novel, he manipulates Laura into eliminating her other suitors as they came one by one. Through his column, he is able to subtly sway Laura’s feelings for her man by obliterating him in text. Waldo’s means of manipulating Laura’s opinions through the subtle content of his column, as opposed to giving his opinion of her suitors to her face. This is reminiscent of the way the OWI used fiction and media to more passively drive a point home. Like the OWI, Waldo found it much easier to sway opinion with subtly than with an overt declaration of dislike. He relishes in the disposal of the artist who painted Laura’s portrait. He simply removes him with the subtle manipulation of the written word. Waldo seems to bond with McPherson because he wants to be abreast of the developments in Laura’s case, but also because he finds a kindred spirit.
Someone who pines for woman he cannot possess, and as she is dead, no longer could serve as competition for Laura’s affection.

The first man Waldo is unable to manipulate Laura into disposing is Shelby. In the novel, Shelby and Laura meet through work, as relative equals. In the film, however, they meet through Aunt Anne at one of her parties. Shelby pursues Laura and totally snubs Waldo. Waldo attempts to break them up, and does pull Laura away, only to have Shelby accept a job at Laura’s company. Shortly after, the two become involved. Waldo attempts to point out Shelby’s flaws, and to make Laura see he is using her for her money, and she tries to calm Waldo and tells him she is only helping Shelby. Waldo presents Laura with a gold cigarette case she gave Shelby for his last birthday. Diane Redfern, a model for their company, sold it to a pawn shop. She asks Waldo why he is doing this to her, and he responds that he is doing it “for her.” Like the males leads in the film noir already analyzed, he is again following though on what he wants, the feelings of the woman he claims to care about be damned. In the novel, however, Laura sees the cigarette case in Diane’s purse while they are having lunch the afternoon before her murder. She doesn’t need Waldo spelling out the possible affair to her.

Continuing with his flashback, Waldo tells McPherson that they confronted Shelby with Aunt Anne and Laura essentially called off the relationship. Waldo ends his monologue with “I shall never forgive myself for letting her become involved with Shelby. It was my fault. I should have stopped it somehow.” Yes, a disaster in her life was his fault, just not this one.
McPherson turns Laura’s apartment into his own investigation headquarters. He makes himself at home, rifling through her things, reading her diary, running his fingers over her clothing. Detective work, yes, but there is clearly something more. The detective is searching for clues not just about the investigation, but about the woman whom the case revolves around. While McPherson is in the apartment, Waldo returns and demands back the collectables he “loaned” Laura. McPherson makes it very clear that Waldo isn’t to touch or take anything from the apartment. After Waldo leaves, McPherson is again mesmerized by Laura’s portrait. Because he is able to release his masculine sense of superiority, he is given the opportunity to let his guard down, a dead woman being no threat. With slightly more open eyes, he is able to perceive her as a person as opposed to a “doll” or a “dame” and in doing so becomes obsessed with the unattainable beauty. It is after he reads her love letters that he storms her bedroom, searches her drawers touches her lingerie, smells her perfume. He knows her intimately in a way that he knows she will never be able to reciprocate. It is sexual and chilling. Possibly recognizing that he has crossed a boundary, he returns to the living room and once again focuses on Laura’s face.

Waldo, walking by, sees the lights in her apartment and confronts McPherson. He chastises him for invading Laura’s privacy, and shames him by informing McPherson that he knows McPherson attempted to buy Laura’s painting. McPherson and Waldo both try to possess Laura postmortem in the form of her portrait. Waldo goes further and accuses him of necrophilia, telling him the psychiatric ward has never had a patient fall in love with a corpse. Waldo leaves and McPherson is left alone again with Laura’s still stare.
Throughout the film, Waldo is shown amid his collections, and he prides himself on polishing Laura up to something worthy of the admiration she receives. In the novel, one of the most telling scenes of Waldo’s obsession to possess was when he and McPherson visit an antique shop. While there, Waldo sees a piece that he must have. When the shop owner tells him it has already sold, Waldo “accidently” smashes it. He pays for it gladly, almost gleefully, in the knowledge that while he doesn’t possess it, neither will anyone else. Laura seems to be the ultimate possession for Waldo, Shelby, and McPherson. And object to be vied for and fought over, the passion grows so strong that being her possessor is more important to them than her overall wellbeing.

When McPherson awakens, Laura is standing before him. She looks soft and delicate, in stark contrast to her dark and sensual portrait. Instead of a flowing gown she is wearing a light colored rain coat and a floppy hat. She looks unassuming and sweet. Laura stands as her own version of Angel of the House and Whore. Like the pulp fiction before her, Laura is completely and totally a construction of male fantasy. Her confused but firm stance, her powerful and seductive portrait, and a groggy McPherson create a powerful image. A man confronted with the reality and the fantasy at once. McPherson clearly struggles to unify the two Lauras that are presented before him. He must make a choice between the ideal, unattainable, sexual woman, and the flesh and blood Laura that stands before him.
Laura demands to know what he is doing in her apartment. She tells him she is going to call the police, he responds with great authority, “I am the police.” McPherson fills her in on the murder that took place in her apartment while she was away in the country. As Laura leaves the room to change from her wet clothing, McPherson steps forward, blocking the camera’s view of the portrait. This action seems to demonstrate that McPherson chooses his version of reality over the male fantasy.

When Laura returns from changing, she tells McPherson that she found one of Diane Redfern’s dresses in her closet, implying that Diane was the one who died in Laura’s place. In the novel, however, Laura offers Diane the apartment after their lunch. Laura’s offer was one of kindness, because it was a sweltering summer day and Diane did
not have air-conditioning. In the film, however, Laura’s act of thoughtful kindness to a woman who is suspected of chasing her fiancé is replaced by Diane and Shelby’s betrayal, using her apartment as a love nest while she was away.

In both the film and novel, after McPherson questions Laura about Diane, he orders her to stay inside and to contact no one. In the film, however, he asks her if she still plans on marrying Shelby, when she tells him no, it seems that his perception of her as a potential suspect softens, as if her being available to him alleviates some suspicion.

After the medical examiner confirms that Diane was the murder victim, McPherson finds that Laura has been in contact with Shelby. He comments, “Dames are always pulling a switch on you.” By choosing to contact another man, Shelby, over obeying McPherson’s orders, Laura becomes a “dame” in McPherson’s eyes once again. In the novel, Laura doesn’t reach out to Shelby, she follows McPherson’s instructions. The film puts Laura in the light of suspect. Her only way out is not her innocence, but her availability and obedience to the detective.

In both the film and the novel, McPherson returns to Laura the next morning with groceries and the two make breakfast together. In the novel, McPherson is already idealizing the flesh and blood Laura. “It seemed natural for me to be carrying the groceries and lounging in the kitchen while she cooked. I had thought of that kind of girl, with all those swell clothes and a servant to wait on her, as holding herself above housework. But not Laura” (Caspary Part 2 Chapter 4). He is enamored by her because despite her power, and wealth, she does womanly work. She waits on him while he
“lounges.” The power dynamic is clear, she serves him. This image of business woman doing wifely duties is exactly what postwar propaganda was trying to propagate. In both the novel and the film, Laura expresses her strong independence. In the film, she tells McPherson that, “I never have been and I never will be bound by anything I don’t do with my own free will.” In the novel, she tells him how her mother warned her not to give herself to a man. And that concept has become deeply embedded in her nature. After she gives him this speech, she reminds herself that women are all “dolls” and “dames” to him. However, this firm individualism must be extinguished by the end of the film, or else she would have to end up like most of the other femme fatales of film noir, dead or in prison.

In the film, there is a back and forth between McPherson and Shelby, Laura’s interest being split between the two of them, her allegiance to the men flitting back and forth. In the novel, however, she clearly aligns herself with McPherson. In the film Waldo, Shelby, and McPherson are all in Laura’s apartment. Waldo faints from the shock of seeing Laura alive. When Waldo recovers, the film creates a climactic moment by having an elaborate homecoming party for Laura. During the party, all of the main players act with little consideration for Laura. Anne proposes to Shelby, telling him that he needs her. He brushes her off telling her that Laura needs him. In an effort to maintain the masculine upper hand, Shelby tries to warn Laura of McPherson’s ill intent. Anne tries to push Laura towards McPherson. Laura thinks that her Aunt Anne could possibly be the killer only to have Anne respond, “No dear, I didn’t, but I thought of it.” This sentiment was not included in the novel, but was added to the film to illustrate that
women have more allegiance to men than to each other. This sentiment also increases the suspicion on Laura herself implying that she killed her rival Diane to keep her hold on Shelby.

McPherson, now seeing Laura as a “dame” takes her to police headquarters and grills her. Laura counters his questions with the accusations that what she says is irrelevant when he already finds her guilty. McPherson uses this opportunity to find out if Laura really and truly loves Shelby. As it was clear earlier, part of her innocence is dependent on her availability. He grills her until she says that she doesn’t believe she ever loved him. As soon as McPherson hears those words, he tells her “we’re going home.” In his mind they are now a “we” and her home is his. McPherson’s doubt wasn’t of her innocence, but his desire to clear her was dependent on if he could have her. If she were to deny his love, would he have denied her her freedom by failing to prove her innocent? McPherson says, “I was 99% certain about you. But I had do get rid of that 1% doubt...I’d reached the point where I needed official surroundings.” He uses his authority to find out, not if she is innocent, but if she could be receptive to his love. McPherson, once again, demonstrates to Laura who is in control of their relationship.

Shortly after this exchange, McPherson cracks the case, and realizes the true killer, and where the missing weapon may be. He rushes back to the apartment, and tells Laura that Waldo is the murderer before leaving to arrest him. It is then that Waldo sneaks into the apartment to destroy the object he desires before it can be possessed by another man. He stands before Laura and she begs him not to take another life. He defends his actions, telling her she is better off dead than being possessed by a man
unworthy of her “Do you think I’m going to leave it to the vulgar pawing of a second-rate detective who thinks you’re a dame?” His argument that she shouldn’t be with a man who views her as a one dimensional category of woman isn’t a bad one, but his method of assuring it, her execution, is horrifying. Symbolically, the gun Waldo used to kill Diane, and he plans to use on Laura is stashed in the priceless grandfather clock he “loans” Laura. He hides his means to destroy a woman he hopes to possess in a priceless possession. Waldo plans on destroying Laura in the same way he destroys the antique he was unable to buy. In the same way that McPherson was not working to clear Laura’s name before he was assured that he had a chance with her romantically. These men are not concerned with Laura’s wellbeing, only with claiming her as their own. Women are nothing more than objects to these men.

In the novel, before McPherson cracks the case Laura gives herself to him fully. She tells him that she is innocent, in more ways than one, that she has never truly given her heart to another. “My mother had said, never give yourself, and I was giving myself with wayward delight, spending myself with such abandon that his lips must have known and his heart and muscles that he possessed me” (Caspary Part 4 Chapter 6). The use of the word “possession” is vital to who Laura, and the other femme fatales of film noir are. They are objects to be possessed and fought over. Who they are isn’t as important as what they are to the males who are trying to attain them. Even after Laura gives herself to McPherson completely he still poses the question to himself, “do I look like the kind of sucker who trusts a woman?” (Caspary Part 5 Chapter 1). This sentiment of being a “sucker” echoes Spade’s refusal to be a “sap” and Walter’s refusal to be a “dope.”
Regardless of the fact that Laura was innocent throughout the novel, she is only saved by the fact that she pledges her allegiance and obedience to McPherson. Without allowing him to “possess” her completely her fate would have probably been the same as the other *femme fatales* of her day, or like the vixen Diane with a gunshot to the face. This sentiment seems to be an echo of postwar propaganda in which women are to only be thought of as wife or mother figures, not individuals.

Waldo’s final fantasy of killing Laura is not only to possess her, but to assert his dominance over McPherson. He tells Laura, “He’ll find us together, Laura as we always have been and we always should be, as we always will be.” This outlook not only leaves Waldo possessing her, but showing McPherson he is the one that rightfully belongs with Laura. He, not McPherson, will be with her “always.” Waldo shoots and misses Laura, but a bullet catches Waldo when the police break down the door. Laura falls into McPherson’s arms as Waldo dying on her floor, whispers “Goodbye, Laura. Goodbye, my love.” Once again, the love of a *film noir* man leads to death. Uncharacteristically, it was his, as opposed to that of the *femme fatale*.

In both the film and the novel, Laura seems to be a piece of the masculine puzzle. She compensates for what men lack. They believe that by possessing her, they will be made whole, or dominant. By idolizing her she ceases to be a woman and becomes a cure-all for their masculine ailments. Shelby, the ideal specimen of a man needs bankrolled, Waldo needs a woman to assert his masculinity, and McPherson needs a woman he could come to know without the threat of her “getting her claws” into him. In the novel, it is said that Laura “made a man of him as fully as a man could be made of
that stubborn clay. And when that frail manhood is threatened, when her own womanliness demands more than he can give, his malice seeks her destruction. But she is carved from Adam’s rib, indestructible as legend, and no man will ever aim his malice with sufficient accuracy to destroy her” (Casgary Part 5 Chapter 2). Once again, like the *femme fatales* that came before her, and the ones to follow her, if a woman’s wants, needs, desires, or ambitions exceed the capability of the male protagonist, she must be eliminated. Her power cannot exceed his. The only reason Laura is spared by McPherson is because she concedes her independence and “gives” herself, again that object language, to him fully. The message to female viewers being, submit or lose your freedom or your life. Even though Brigid’s prison sentence in *The Maltese Falcon* was literal, Laura’s abandonment of her individuality seems comparably confining.

Laura shoulders part of the blame for Diane’s murder solely because she is a woman, and therefore the driving force behind Waldo’s actions. Despite the fact that Laura does nothing wrong in either the film or the novel, her character is still called into question. One of the most respected film companies in the America, American Classic Movies, labels her one of the “Greatest *Femme Fatales* in *Classic Film Noir.*” Her success, her ambition, her sense of self are the only characteristics that marks her as a *femme fatale*. Her life outside of the domestic sphere is enough to warrant her culpability as a *femme fatale*. Laura only avoids the punishment that other *femme fatales* receive because she abandons her independence and recognizes her place in the kitchen; this is the point that the postwar propagandists were trying to push on the American public.
Chapter 6: The Postman Always Rings Twice
The 1946 version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is one of *film noir*’s most iconic representations of the genre. It was based off the 1934 pulp fiction novel of the same name by James M. Cain, author of *Double Indemnity*. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* contains some of the strongest erotic scenes in pulp fiction and *noir* of the time. The tension between the male and female power dynamic is explored through its charged sexual scenes. Like in Cain’s work *Double Indemnity*, lust and greed are two powerful motivators in this *noir* thriller. Lana Turner’s portrayal of Cora Smith has been dubbed one of the most seductive and dangerous *femme fatales* in *noir* history.

The film opens with a “man wanted” sign in front of a gas station/luncheonette. This sign has a dual meaning as the film progresses; it opens with a small business wanting a man to hire, and ends with a man wanted by the law for killing the proprietor. The perspective of the film is through the eyes of the narrator, and male lead, Frank Chambers. Frank is an unattached drifter. He hitchhikes his way to this small roadside stop. Before he gets out of the car, Frank tells the driver that he isn’t concerned about his future, that perhaps his future will start right now. This offhanded comment by a drifter carries a good deal of weight. Cora has long been considered the spark that ignites a passion in Frank to kill her husband. She, the *femme fatale*, sets the murderous plot in motion by impassioning Frank with her sexuality. But Frank is the one who drifts into their quiet little business. Frank is the one who starts his future by lusting after a woman.
he isn’t supposed to have. Again, like the noir male-leads before him, he is desperate to possess her no matter the consequences that will befall her.

When he arrives at the small roadside luncheonette Frank meets Nick Smith the owner. Frank tells Nick of his “itchin’ feet” and of his wanderlust. Nevertheless, Nick offers him a job to help around the property. Nick offers Frank food and rent along with a small salary and encourages him to accept. Before stepping outside to help a customer, Nick puts a raw hamburger patty on the grill. Moments later, a lipstick tube rolls across the floor and stops near Frank’s feet. Once again, the camera acts as the male gaze, emphasizing her sexuality by slowing panning her body, pausing on her slim ankles and shapely legs. Mirroring the view of the camera, Frank looks up to sees Cora Smith a slim, stunning, blond dressed in all white.
At no point in the film does the camera act as Cora’s eyes. This deliberate choice in filming style seems to indicate that Cora’s perceptions of the action that follows are irrelevant.

In the novel, however, Cora isn’t such a great beauty. Frank describes her as follows, “Except for her shape, she really wasn’t any raving beauty, but she had a sulky look on her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her” (Cain 2). From the first description of Cora we get, Frank’s sexual attraction to her is
mixed with some kind of animosity and violence. He wants to “mash” in her lips.
Throughout the novel the language he uses in reference to his sexual desire is colored by a stronger sense of violent rage. Again, this mixture of animosity and desire reflects the male anxiety of the newly autonomous woman of the 1940s.

After the camera takes its time panning up Cora’s body, putting her sexual appeal at the forefront of the viewer’s mind; Frank picks up her lipstick case. Cora stares at herself in her compact. Cora is aware of her affect on men; it is clear from her clothing, her makeup, and her preoccupation with checking the mirror that she is conscious of her skin, and presents herself in the most flattering way. Being sexually aware and proud of your body is a tell-tale sign of the *femme fatale*, and a fatal flaw that will no doubt contribute to her downfall. It seems reasonable to view the *femme fatale* as another subtle form of propaganda to strike down sexual vanity and confidence in newly independent women.

Frank and Cora’s first encounter set the tone for the male/female power struggle that will continue for the entirety of the film. When Frank bends down to pick up Cora’s case, she puts out her hand, expecting him to place it back into hers. Instead, in a clear demonstration of power, he leans backwards, and clutches her possession between his clenched fingers. He forces her to walk to him to retrieve it. Afterwards, she consults her mirror again, applies her lipstick, and then walks away; her own show of dominance to Frank. She is aware of her beauty, and she can deny him the pleasure of viewing her. After she leaves, Frank realizes that his burger is burning. The smoke and flames
symbolic of the destructive sexual tension between Cora and Frank, their union will end up leaving everyone burned.

The burning burger scene fades to Frank burning the “man wanted” sign. Frank is destroying an invitation for other men to take what he possesses, his job. Nick sees Frank burning the sign and tells him that he will tell his wife that Frank decided to stay on. Frank’s face shows his panic; he pulls the sign from the fire. He only planned on staying for Cora. When Nick confirms that Cora is in fact Nicks, wife, his face falls. But a moment later, he sees Cora standing in the doorway of the luncheonette and he throws the sign back into the fire. In the same way that he destroyed the sign to take the position, Frank decides to destroy Nick Smith to take possession of Cora.

Later that night, Cora begs her husband to let the man go with a week’s pay. She is fearful of her feelings for him, and she doesn’t want to stray from the path. Again, Cora is resisting the impending sin. It is Frank who chooses the position; Frank who consciously throws the sign back into the fire, knowing the consequences. Cora is attempting to get Frank out of their lives before he “starts” his new future. And yet she is still considered the sinner setting the fire.

During Cora and Frank’s first official conversation, Cora attempts to tell him what to do, trying to determine how much power she has over him. Frank immediately counters that Nick is his boss, not her. Again, only the males in the situation have power. She tries to get him to paint the chairs in the luncheonette, and he tries at all cost to avoid work. He asks her why she wants the chairs painted, she responds with another sign of
the \textit{femme fatale}, ambition, “Because I want to make something of this place. I want to make it into an honest-to-goodness...” Cora has dreams, and Frank responds to them with condescension, “Well, aren’t we ambitious?” He belittles that ambition by reducing it to nothing more than a desire for “pretty clothes.” He then grabs her roughly in his arms and kisses her. She pulls away, calmly reapplies her lipstick, and walks away without a word. Frank’s kiss cuts Cora off from defending her ambition or clarifying that she sees beyond petty possessions. This kiss is symbolic of the ways in which the post-war pulp fiction narratives were trying to stifle women’s ambition outside of the home by pacifying them with romantic entanglements.

In the novel, Frank locks the luncheonette door, stopping others from entering and keeping her in, he grabs her, “mashes” his mouth against hers. Again, he equates sexuality with violence by biting 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” (Cain 9). The next day, following their first kiss, Frank again asserts his sexual dominance of her with violence. “Next day I was alone with her for a minute, and swung my fist up against her leg so hard it nearly knocked her over. ‘How do you get that way?’ She was snarling like a cougar. I liked her like that” (Cain 11). Again, this “snarling” monster of a woman that critics call Cora Smith is not the product of her nature, but a direct result of Frank Chambers. He, not Cora, is the spark that ignites violent behavior. He brings out the cougar in her, and more than that, he likes it. Throughout the novel, Nick calls Cora his “little white bird,” and “little white dove” (Cain 6). Cora sarcastically asks Frank if he thinks she looks like “a little white bird.” He responds that she looks
more like a “hellcat” to him (Cain 13). Throughout the novel, Cora tries to remove the labels that Nick and Frank lay upon her. It isn’t until Cora is totally defeated by Frank that she concedes, that yes, she is a hellcat. Even then it seems more like a concession out of weariness than one of true admission. Nick tries to force Cora to conform to an image of innocence in the way that Frank tries to force her into the role of a predator. Neither man is willing to accept Cora as the woman she is. This sentiment of “hellcat” and “little white bird” seem to mirror the polarization of women in pulp fiction propaganda at the time. That Angel and Whore classification is clear yet again; women are either hellish career women or innocent little housewives.

In the film, Frank manipulates Nick into fulfilling one of Cora’s ambitious dreams. Frank convinces Nick of something in a moment that Cora had been trying to convince Nick of for quite some time, to buy a neon sign. This is another scene that shows that Cora’s opinion does not matter to her husband. It also demonstrates how manipulative Frank can be to get what he wants. Both Nick’s indifference and Frank’s manipulation have an impact on the fate of these three characters. Like the real world propaganda that preceded this scene, it demonstrates the power of subtle suggestion over overt declarations and requests. Cora had been directly asking her husband for the sign for a while, but by presenting the information subtly, Frank is able to convince Nick that it was his own idea. A woman’s opinions about matters of business are totally irrelevant.

To celebrate the new sign, Nick plays the guitar and forces Frank and Cora to dance for him. To break away from the situation, Cora says the heat is too much to dance
in and unplugs the jukebox. She tells Nick she is going for a swim. This is clearly a ploy to distance herself from temptation. However, when she walks to the car, she finds Frank in the driver’s seat. Again, Frank is forcing his way into her life while she tries to remove herself from him. Symbolically, Frank sits in the driver’s seat. He is the one taking control of the situation; he is the one leading them in the direction of death. Cora submits and joins him in the car. At the beach, they play in the water almost like children. During the car ride back, Cora treats Frank with much more kindness than she has in any scene past. She tells him that she will bake him a pie, putting herself in the domestic role, serving Frank. When Frank tries to kiss her, Cora asks him to “please don’t” her protest is weak, but it is a protest nonetheless. She is trying to resist Frank, and he is once again, pushing himself on her. They kiss passionately and the scene fades out.

The next day, Cora tells Frank why she married Nick. Frank tells her he bets that it was a wedding ring that got her. He is implying her feminine weakness for jewelry, vanity, and possessions. Cora sighs and tells him that she was never “homely” and that she was constantly accosted by men about her looks, “I don’t especially like the way I look sometimes. But I never met a man since I was fourteen that didn’t want to give me an argument about it.” From the time she was fourteen Cora was put into a certain male perspective that she couldn’t escape from. She marries Nick because she was tired of being pestered by men. She warned him that she didn’t love him, but Nick insisted that it would come. Like the men who came before Nick he tries to force her into his own light, that of the “little white bird.” Frank who comes after Nick also tries to force her into the
role of “hellcat.” She is unable to stop even the men closest to her from labeling her based on her appearance.

After this conversation, Frank and Cora plan to run away together. Cora leaves a note for Nick and she and Frank hit the road. As they are walking Cora laments that they couldn’t take the car. Frank’s lighthearted response is weighted down by the undertone that Cora is nothing more than property. “Even if the car were here, we couldn’t take it, not unless we wanted to spend the first night in jail. Stealing a man’s wife, that’s nothing. But stealing his car, that’s larceny.” After a short time on the road, Cora realizes that she couldn’t possibly live Frank’s drifter lifestyle. What she tells Frank next, the speech that drips with her ambition, will ultimately be the downfall of all three of the main characters. Her requests and aspirations are admirable and reasonable, but this female ambition must be punished, and it will be. The lesson being, female ambition leads to destruction.

Cora tells Frank she is turning back. That she can’t stand his drifter life and that if she divorces Nick their business will be torn away from her. In one of the most telling lines of the film Cora tells him, “I want to be somebody.” That female ambition alone is enough to condemn her. She turns back for Twin Oaks. When she and Frank arrive back at the luncheonette they see a drunk Nick almost hit an oncoming truck. Frank says he would like to see him “drive off a cliff.” Cora corrects him telling him he doesn’t mean it. That it was only a joke. Again, Frank is the instigator; Frank is the first person to openly hope for Nick’s death.
After this comment, Cora goes back to life as normal and treats Frank as any other employee. Frank interprets her actions as her knowingly putting him in his place, driving him crazy so that he would find some way for the two of them to be together. He is projecting his desire to get rid of Nick onto Cora.

Late one night Cora sneaks into his room, and she mentions that if something were to happen to Nick that they could be together. Frank chastises her for contemplating killing Nick. Her desire to get rid of Nick, her ambition for the business, and her clear sexuality, all of the sins of the *femme fatale* are present in one scene. The moments leading up to her desire to kill Nick and the actual execution of the murder are irrelevant when she can so tidily be characterized as the villain, the victim of her own sin. This single scene sets Cora Smith up to be the *femme fatale* she has been labeled. However, every scene before and every after seem to put her in the hands of Frank Chambers.

The viewer must remember, that this film is narrated from the perspective of Frank Chambers. He claims the while he worked out the details, the plan to kill Nick was Cora’s. Cora is to hit Nick on the head while he is in the tub and drown him. Due to a series of small mishaps, the murder does not go according to plan, and Nick is rushed to the hospital. Nick recovers in the hospital, in the meantime, Frank and Cora play house. As she speaks to him, he shuts her up saying, “Will you give me a big kiss before I sock ya?” Again, Frank is combining sex with violence. In the novel, his aggression is in response to her ambition. He tells her to “come here” she tells him “not now” because she wants to open up the business. Reminiscent of the line from the film, he replies, “Come
here, before I sock you” (Cain 26). This is not a hollow, “to the moon” like threat. He has hit her before, just to see her “snarl.” His violent statements are more than just empty threats; they are genuine ultimatums. Come to him, bend to his will, or be hurt.

When Nick returns from the hospital, Frank hits the road again. However, his desire for Cora proves too much, and he returns to Twin Oaks. Frank receives a cold homecoming from Cora. Later that night, Nick announces that he will be selling Twin Oaks and moving Cora to Canada so Cora can care for his invalid sister. A sister Nick has, up to this point, never mentioned. Nick speaks mostly to Frank, blocking Cora from the conversation. She is forced to wait on the men while they discuss her future. She does not get a seat in the conversation. Nick shuts her down every time she attempts to protest. He tries to pacify her saying that she will thank him in years to come. He is a man totally unconcerned with her thoughts or feelings. She has no say in her life. Nick will just pick her up and place her somewhere else, and expect her to devote her life to caring for a woman she doesn’t know. Like the *femme fatales* before her, Cora is backed into a corner and she can fight or she can submit. To her, there is no other way out.
Later that night, in both the film and the novel, Frank finds Cora in the kitchen holding a butcher knife. This is one of the most pivotal scenes in the narrative. Frank, a man who always puts himself first, automatically assumes that Cora is going to kill Nick. In reality, Cora is going to kill herself. Cora asks him why he came back. Frank tells her that he had to. Cora points out his selfishness, that she could have made it, she could have followed Nick’s orders if Frank had not returned to remind her of all of the things she is constantly being denied. She cries that if he loved her he wouldn’t let her live the way she does, without a voice, without a say, waiting on others. Frank says, “All right.” Implying that he will murder Nick. Cora cries “No” and asks him if there is another way out. Frank
tells her that there isn’t. That Nick’s murder is “in the cards” for them. In this scene, Cora is putting up the same resistance that Frank was earlier when they discussed murdering Nick. And yet, Cora is still the character labeled *fatale*. Her blow to Nick’s head left him cracked but living, Nicks, on the other hand, will prove deadly.

In their second murder attempt, Frank forces Cora to take the wheel, (and later the responsibility for their actions) while they attempt to stage a drunk driving accident. Frank smashes Nick over the head with a bottle before they push the car off of a cliff. Frank hits Nick with a cold and determined look. Cora, by comparison looks horrified and full of remorse.
This image mirrors the one of Walter Neff strangling Mr. Dietrichson from behind while Phyllis sits in the driver’s seat. In both scenes, while the males are committing an act of violence, of murder a rival man, the woman is placed in the driver’s seat, shouldering most of, if not all of the blame for the crime. Despite the fact that the female lead is not directly committing the murder, she is still considered the fatale character.

Following Frank clubbing Nick he asks Cora if she will be able to “go through” with everything that will follow as a result of the “accident.” She replies, “After seeing that, I can go through anything.” Cora is clearly troubled by the murder. Any yet, she is still perceived as cold, calculating, and unfeeling. While the murder isn’t justifiable, the critical characterization of her as a “spiderwoman” seems harsh when presented with the limiting realities of her life. Especially considering a similar title isn’t forced upon the male protagonist.

During the investigation that follows the district attorney is determined to see Cora hang for the murder. The D.A. begins by accusing Frank of helping Cora commit the murder, he offers him leniency for a confession. The D.A. then switches tactics; he accuses Cora of committing the murder alone. He gives Frank an out; he tells him that he was drunk and therefore not responsible, and if he signs a complaint against Cora, he will drop his investigation of Frank. In an effort to save his own skin, Frank signs away the
woman he claims to love. Like the film criticism surrounding noir, that solely wants to locate and condemn the femme fatale, like the D.A. within the film, The Postman Always Rings Twice seems content with punishing only the female party.

The novel and the film are ripe with power struggles. They are seen throughout the plot, even in the small casual passing of side characters. At the start of the film, when Frank Chambers gets off at Twin Oaks, he sees a police officer pull over a car, saunter up to the window before slinking back to his motorcycle. When Frank asked the policeman if the driver slipped him something, he replied, “yeah, three little words about him being the district of attorney.” Almost every interaction in the entirety of the film is a struggle for power, for dominance, with someone coming out on top and someone being pushed down. By the end of these little fights there is always a clear winner and a loser. Cora is consistently the loser. Cora’s fate in Nick’s murder trial is being betted on by her attorney and his rival, the district attorney. Not only is Cora agonizing over the potential loss of her freedom, but also she is confronted by Frank’s betrayal when he comes to watch the proceedings on the prosecution’s side. This already high stress situation is ignited when her attorney has her plead guilty to both the murder of Nick, and the surprise attempted murder of Frank. Following the arraignment, Cora confronts Frank. He opens their dialogue pushing the blame on her attorney, Keats. He tells her that “we’ve been double-crossed.” However, the only person in the situation suffering is Cora. Frank is cleared of all charges; he is a free man walking away from a murder rap. Cora, on the other hand, is facing life in prison or execution and her lover has betrayed her. Cora tells him that yes, she has been double-crossed, but not by Keats. She then makes a full confession to
Keats’s typist. During her confession, she calls them “equally guilty.” This is interesting, because throughout the narrative, Frank doesn’t seem to take much responsibility for his role in the murder; he subtly pushes the blame on Cora when speaking about their plan in the same way he allows her to take full responsibility for the crime when he was questioned by the district attorney. Cora doesn’t place responsibility for their actions solely on Frank. She sees them as equals, and equally culpable. Equal is something Frank, or any male of film noir never considers the femme fatale.

Keats enters the room with authority. It is clear that he is in control of the situation. He tells them that he is locking up their confession. He calls Frank “yellow” and that he will turn the tables on the district attorney when the trial commences. He gives Cora a speech about how the trial is going to go. He calls her a “girl,” and he gives her a lesson that many femme fatales fundamentally go against; she is to only speak when she is spoken to, and she is to look as “young and innocent as possible under the circumstances.” This saving advice seems to be the lesson women are to take from the cautionary tale of the femme fatale. The woman who subjects herself to male rule, who drops her ambition and drive, and who appears innocent escapes punishment. It is only the women who want, who desire, and who are aware of their sexuality that are punished, and punished harshly. What better way to drive that message home than through the subtle moral lesson that the “sins” of the femme fatale will lead to doom.

In the next scene, Keats reverses her plea to not guilty, and tells the court that he only had her plead guilty because of how dire her circumstance seemed. But due to a
better understanding of the case, and his client’s insistence on her innocence, the plea must be changed to not guilty. Keats points out to the district attorney that he has no physical evidence. His case is weak at best. In exchange for a guilty plea, the charges of attempted murder are dropped, and the charge of murder is dropped to manslaughter. Cora is sentenced to probation and is freed. Frank tells Cora that everything is going to be “alright” to which she replies, “that’s what you think.”

Back at Twin Oaks, Frank wants Cora to sell the luncheonette and go away with him. Again, another male is trying to force her to give up her ambition to make something of her business to move away with him. When Cora tells him she is staying, Frank says he is staying too:

Cora: “Well, let me tell you something. If you do stay, there's gonna be a lot of hard work done around here because I've got ideas for this place. I'm gonna fix up a nice spot out there under the trees and then I'm gonna get a license to sell beer...”

Frank: “You're in the hamburger business...”

Cora: “Can't you get it through your head that I'm gonna amount to something? So, if you want to keep your job, you'll have this place cleaned up and open for business tomorrow morning at seven.”

Frank: “OK. OK, Mrs. Smith.”

Cora: “That expresses it perfectly.”
By putting Frank in his place, Cora is condemning their relationship and herself for that matter, to death. This kind of female power and agency over a man will not stand in *film noir*. Her power is short lived, and Frank ultimately shows her who runs the show.

The business flourishes and Frank and Cora marry so that they can live together without whispers of impropriety. It is clear that their relationship has cooled and hardened. They have nothing but animosity for one another. Cora told him to leave and Frank decided to stay. Again, he is inserting himself in a situation and it only leads to disaster. Cora compares Frank’s wedding tie to a “noose,” and that is eventually what their marriage leads to. However, it seems the moral that the viewer is to take away from this scene is that Cora’s ambition that keeps them at Twin Oaks leads to their downfall. But it is just as equally possible that if Frank and his “itchy feet” were on the road where they belong, Cora’s business would have become “something” and so would she.

Not long after their wedding, Cora’s mother has a heart attack and Cora leaves to go be with her. While the (hell)cat is away, Frank plays. He picks up a woman named Madge and they go to Tijuana, Mexico together. In the novel, Madge is ironically, a big game cat breeder. This woman is symbolic of the freedom and danger he wants out of a relationship. He liked Cora “best” when she was a ferocious “hellcat.” By “hitting the road” with a woman who brings to life wild animals Frank has found his fantasy woman: one with a wild, untamed spirit and no claim on him. What he wants seems almost contradictory. He wanted Cora for himself, he couldn’t stand to see her with Nick, but he doesn’t want to be tied down by her. A woman can’t win with Frank Chambers.
After her mother’s funeral, and Frank’s infidelity, for the first time in the film Cora wears a color other than white. She is dressed in mourning. A stark contrast to the all white ensembles she has worn throughout the film. This change in her attire could be symbolic of the shift in her relationship with Frank. He cheated on her. He soiled their marriage. The only somewhat redeeming aspect of their relationship was their faithfulness to one another and that has now been tarnished. Cora’s dress could be an implicit representation of that darkening of their relationship, and of the unpleasantness to come.

When they return home, Keats’s typist, Kennedy, attempts to blackmail them with Cora’s confession for twelve thousand dollars. Frank and Cora attack the man and force him to call his accomplice to bring them the confession. The novel perfectly sums up the way in which the *femme fatale* is viewed by most critics. When Frank tells Cora that if he gives her a sign, she is to kill their blackmailer, Cora leans back and smiles. Frank thinks, “I think that smile scared Kennedy worse than anything I had done” (Cain 99). This aptly describes the fear or anxiety that viewers experience when they see women act with power, confidence, or authority. In truth, if one were to tally the crimes, twisted morality, or self-serving natures of the male leads and *Femme Fatale* characters in *Film Noir*, the males far exceed the *Femme Fatales* in the number of crimes they committed, warped morals, and perverse views of self and reality. It is that fact that makes this specific generalization of women as *femme fatales*, spiderwomen, sirens of death, and vixens so totally absurd. It doesn’t matter what the male lead does, or what the *femme fatale* does for that matter, she will always be more terrifying to the viewer. There is something
socially unacceptable about a woman with power, with drive, with ambition, and most importantly a voice. This message is clear throughout film noir. More importantly, it melds perfectly with female postwar propaganda. Where the virtues of men become vices in post-war American women who need to leave the factory and quietly return home.

Following the blackmail, Cora discovers Frank’s affair. She tells him that she is going to send him to prison. For the rest of the day, Frank trails Cora for fear she will turn him in, and Cora watches Frank for fear he will kill her. Finally, Frank tells Cora he loves her and that the other woman didn’t mean anything to him. He tells her that they are chained together, not unlike the savage bond between Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson in Double Indemnity. Cora tells Frank that they have to start telling the truth. Like Sam Spade before him, Frank is using love as a bargaining chip to get what he wants. He is saving himself by manipulating Cora’s feelings for him in the same way that Walter Neff uses Phyllis’s love for him as an opportunity to embrace and ultimately kill her.

Cora leaves late at night and Frank trails her thinking she is going to turn him in. She was in fact running away with their unborn baby. They reunite and decide that the baby’s life will make up for the one they took from Nick. To baptize their new relationship, and cleanse them of their past crimes, they go to the beach where they first found love. Cora swims far out into the ocean, so far that she is totally exhausted. She doesn’t want to live her life in fear that Frank doesn’t love her, or will turn against her. She gives him the option of letting her drown or taking her ashore. Giving him that choice cements her as a more considerate person than Frank is. How critics could ignore
her selflessness in this scene is baffling. When Frank was given the choice to turn on Cora to save himself he did. Cora isn’t even in danger and she is still giving Frank an option to walk away. Frank pulls Cora to shore and they get back in their car. Either Cora is acting selflessly, or Frank, the narrator of the film, is fabricating a story to establish that he had the opportunity to kill Cora, and chose not to. In either case, Frank is still the more self-serving character.

While driving, Cora applies her lipstick and Frank asks for a kiss. She tells him that when they arrive at home she will kiss him always. Frank doesn’t want to wait, and again his wants come before hers. One final time, Frank is putting his “needs” before her caution. She kisses him, and cries “look out” before he swerves the car off of the road killing Cora. As Cora’s arm falls lifelessly from the passenger’s seat, she drops her lipstick tube, and it rolls away from her; just as it did when she and Frank met. Her vanity is a symbol in her fall with Frank and her death at his hands. The lipstick also serves as a symbol of a vice of the femme fatale which marks her demise.

Frank is convicted of Cora’s murder. Frank tells his tale to a priest while awaiting the death sentence. He begs him to believe him. Frank begs the priest to tell him that Cora knew it was an accident, that he loved her. Again, Frank wants to be absolved of responsibility. He tells the priest that he would have died for her, something difficult to believe after he turned on her following their first auto-accident.

*The Postman Always Rings Twice* seems to link most of Cora’s sins with her ambition, with her vanity, and with her sexual desire for Frank. The brunt of the blame
falls on her despite the fact that most of the action is at the hands of Frank Chambers.

What is most ironic about Cora’s “sins” is that they would have been seen as virtues of Rosie the Riveter; her work ethic, her ambition, her drive, and her capability. All of these characteristics become tainted by her husband’s murder. The lesson being, a postwar woman doesn’t have the right to dream bigger than her husband.
Chapter 7: *The Big Sleep*
One of film noir’s most compelling films, *The Big Sleep* was released in 1946, but like most great *film noir* it was filmed over the span of 1944-1945. Based on Raymond Chandler’s 1939 novel of the same name, Chandler drew from two stories previously published by in *Black Mask* magazine. The novel was adapted for the screen by William Faulkner. The film is known as a confusing “whodunit,” but that effect might have had more to do with the restrictions on filming than it did with plot points. While the film stays as true to the plot as the censors would allow, in lieu of replacing the seedier scenes, (pornography, homosexuality, sexually active females, and the use of illegal drugs) with more “acceptable” substitutes Faulkner just smoothed right over them, covering nudity with clothing, but maintaining the same reactions the characters had in the novel. By the end of the film the viewer is entertained, albeit, a bit baffled at what it was really all about.

The opening credits roll over the silhouettes of a man and a woman smoking. They both lay their still burning cigarettes on an ashtray and walk away. The first scene of the film opens with Private Detective Philip Marlowe ringing the bell of the Sternwood mansion. He is there to meet with the elderly General Sternwood, Marlowe’s first real exchange of the film is with Carmen Sternwood; a waif-like young woman with a beautiful face and a dopey look. They exchange words, but when she realizes that he is not under her spell, she falls backwards, forcing him to catch her. She tells him that he is “cute” and sucks her thumb. Marlowe tells the butler that they should “wean” her, that she is “old enough.” Throughout the film, Carmen acts, and is treated like an infantile child. It is significant, that the consequence for a *femme fatale* who acts possibly more
hideously than those *femme fatales* before her, but does so in a less threatening manner allows her more leniency when it comes to her ultimate punishment.

In the novel, Carmen is described as having “sharp predatory teeth” (Chandler 2). Chandler’s focus on her teeth continues throughout the novel. What is most interesting is that when Carmen is trying to dominate Marlowe, trying to manipulate him with her sexuality, her teeth are consistently described in harsh almost disturbing ways. When she is vulnerable, broken down, or helpless, however, her teeth and face are described with much more gentleness. It is almost a subtle equation of female power with evil and female submissiveness with physical beauty. As seen through the pro-war propaganda, subtly implanting feelings about vices and virtues is the most effective way to get a point across.

Marlow is led to Captain Sternwood’s orchid greenhouse. He is a thin, elderly man in a wheelchair. Sternwood invites Marlow to drink and smoke so that he can “indulge his vices by proxy.” While Marlow sweats profusely, Sternwood tells him that the greenhouse is “too hot...for any man who has blood in his veins.” Isolated, this comment seems innocent enough. But as their conversation continues in both the novel and the film, Sternwood’s admiration for and appreciation of Marlow’s brand of masculinity becomes starkly contrasted with his contempt for his own two daughters, and the “blood” in their veins. This feeling of animosity between, “soldier” like men and independent “wild” women parallels the feelings felt by many Americans during and
following World War II. To so blatantly contrast the two here may be mere a coincidence, yet intentional or not, it is notable.

As their conversation continues, both Sternwood and Marlow agree on their distaste for orchids. Sternwood calls them, “Nasty things! Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men, and their perfume has the rotten sweetness of corruption.” Again, in isolation this comment seems relatively weightless. However, moments later, when describing his daughters, he uses the same term “corrupt” in describing their blood. “These nasty things, too much like men,” draws a nice parallel to his two daughters. Women grown up to be wild and untamed like he was when he was their age; something that is acceptable for men, but certainly not for women. While beautiful, or “perfumed,” that beauty is corrupted by the vices of the *femme fatale*, their authority, their sexuality, their utter lack of inhibition. This very well may be another implicit nod to the “Rosie” virtues that become vices in the *femme fatale*. Sternwood tells Marlow he needs to fix some trouble Carmen has gotten herself into. Someone is blackmailing the Sternwoods for one of Carmen’s unnamed crimes. Sternwood wants her sins to be erased, not really for her sake, but for his. The only person in his household he seems to genuinely care for is Sean Regan, he is missing, an idealized man the viewers, and readers never see.
Almost mistily, Sternwood tells Marlow of Regan, his bodyguard, (in the novel his beloved son-in-law). Sternwood admired Regan’s soldier-like attitude. Regan was a commanding officer in the Irish-Republican Army. Sternwood’s respect for Marlowe grows when Marlowe tells him that he and Regan used to swap bullets and drinks when they were on opposing sides of the law. He also respects Marlowe because he was fired for “insubordination,” a quality to be honored in men and stamped out in women. This sentiment of soldier worship and male comradery will be repeated throughout the film. There is something comforting about finding another like-minded, strong willed,
independent man, and something chilling about those characteristics existing in the women of the film. Their conversation turns back to business when Marlowe asks Sternwood why he doesn’t confront Carmen, his youngest daughter, about the blackmail. Sternwood offhandedly says that Carmen would only “suck her thumb and look coy.” Marlowe seconds that by saying she attempted to sit on his lap while standing up. He describes his girls to Marlowe, calling Vivian “spoilt, exacting, smart, and ruthless.” He calls Carmen a “child” who “likes to pull the wings off flies.” Marlowe promise to get Geiger “off of Sternwood’s back,” and leaves the sweltering greenhouse. Before he leaves, Marlowe is called into Vivian Sternwood’s bedroom.

Vivian asks Marlowe about his meeting with her father. She is met with resistance from Marlowe. He repeatedly asks her for a drink, attempting to force her to fetch it for him. When she tells him to help himself, he decides not to have one. Implying what he really wanted was for her to wait on him. Vivian’s strength in standing up to Marlowe in this scene seems to be totally eroded by the end of the film. When she tells Marlowe she doesn’t like his manners he replies that he doesn’t like them either. He “grieves” over them. He calls her an alcoholic and makes her aware that she isn’t in the loop as far as his investigation goes. Vivian tells him that people don’t speak to her that way and Marlowe gives her mock sympathy. When she asks him if he always treats people like “trained seals” he says yes, and he usually “gets away with it, too.” Marlowe establishes his dominance. He makes it clear to Vivian that she has no power over him. The independence she does display will be transformed into a declaration of obedience to Marlowe by the end of the film. That sentiment is echoed by the ways the filmmaker uses
camera angles to diminish Vivian’s power and dominance in a scene. In Marlowe and Vivian’s first exchange, the angle is wide, allowing for a full view of Vivian dead center of the screen. As the power dynamic shifts and Vivian subjects herself to Marlowe’s demands, Vivian becomes part of the background.

Marlowe opens his investigation in a public library researching rare books. From there he heads to the blackmailer, Geiger’s, Rare Book store. He asks the salesgirl, Agnes Lozelle, for a nonexistent rare third edition of Ben Hur. Her ignorance of all things book related and a customer being buzzed into the backroom makes Marlowe aware that the store is nothing more than a front. The film doesn’t say for what; a failure that makes the rest of the plot somewhat murky. In the novel, however, Geiger runs a pornography ring; a point that clarifies quite a few things in the scenes to come.

Marlowe heads across the street to the Acme Bookstore to get some local information on Geiger. Acme’s salesgirl is quickly enamored with Marlowe. The girl gives him a description of Geiger. She tells Marlowe he is welcome to stay in the store to stake out Geiger. When he agrees, she closes the blinds and locks the door. She grabs them two cups to drink from. Marlowe points to her glasses and asks her if she “has to.” When she lets down her hair and removes her glasses he responds with a very suggestive “Hello.” The scene fades away. When the scene returns, Marlowe is telling her goodbye. She offers him a chance to see her again, and he responds with a “so long, pal.” Throughout the film, women throw themselves at Marlowe. He is the one in control, he holds the power, and the women are supposed to like it that way.
When Geiger’s store closes and he leaves, Marlowe follows him home. Later that night, Marlowe watches as Carmen goes into Geiger’s house. A few hours later, at the sound of Carmen’s scream and the bang of gunshots, Marlowe rushes into Geiger’s house. Once inside, he finds a dead Geiger and a doped up Carmen sitting nearby, fully clothed, in a Chinese style dress. While it isn’t clear in the film, it is explicitly stated in the novel that Carmen was nude and posing for the pornography ring. In the novel, Carmen is naked and vulnerable, drugged and unaware. During this scene, Marlowe describes her as an “Egyptian goddess,” her “small bright teeth shining between her parted lips.” This description is much softer, more enticing than his earlier comment about her “sharp predatory teeth.” This moment of female weakness allows Marlowe to see her as beautiful, where he saw her earlier manipulative powers as hideous.
In the film, Marlowe slaps Carmen to pull her out of her drugged state. He shakes her and tries to find out exactly what happened. Before the police can get to the scene, and implicate Carmen, Marlowe drags her home. He has Vivian help him put Carmen to bed. Marlowe evades Vivian’s questions and returns her concern for her sister with sarcasm and brash language. Marlowe tells Vivian that she doesn’t need to know what happened and he won’t be clueing her in. This is just another instance where Vivian is being forced out of the loop of her family’s affairs by Marlowe. He tricks Vivian into
revealing information about Regan’s disappearance in relation to Carmen and when she acts upset, he treats her with even more coldness. When she tells him he goes too far, he mocks her by saying, “Those are harsh words to throw at a man, especially when he’s walking out of your bedroom.” Marlowe takes control by playing on female impropriety, a common tactic of postwar propaganda.

Back at Geiger’s house, he finds only a bloodstain remains. Geiger’s body has been removed from the house. Marlowe consults Geiger’s blackmail book of codes he found in the house, but is unable to decipher it. With no further leads, he leaves. Later that night, Marlowe finds himself investigating another murder, one of the Sternwood’s chauffeurs, Owen Taylor. Owen Taylor was intimated to be involved with Carmen. Again, another man attached to Carmen is found dead.

The next day, Vivian goes to Marlowe’s office. Vivian shows Marlowe a picture of Carmen that the audience does not see. From the earlier scene it would seem that she should be clothed; however, it is made clear in the novel that she is in fact nude. The Sternwoods are being blackmailed for 5,000 dollars to obtain the negatives. Vivian is clearly nervous; she fiddles with her gloves and tries to rid herself of an itch. Marlowe scoffs at her nerves, again displaying his dominance, his cold control of the situation while she is rattled by her nerves. Marlowe tries to force Vivian to call the police, to tell them everything. But again, this is just another power play. When she picks up the phone and dials he takes it from her, and plays coy with the officer. He accuses the police station of calling him. Vivian and Marlowe pass the phone back and forth, “You’d better
talk to my mother,” “my father should hear this,” playing the role of an inconvenienced family.

Because Vivian plays along with one of his games, Marlowe’s attitude towards her softens. Marlowe is now interested in her, knowing that he can push her buttons, and manipulate her into following his orders. When he hangs up with the police she asks him why he didn’t let her turn her information over to the police. He tells her because he is working for General Sternwood, and because he is “beginning to like another one of the Sternwoods.” Vivian, like almost every woman in the film, reciprocates his feelings.

Later that day Marlowe tails one of Geiger’s associates, Brody, the man who is blackmailing the Sternwoods. Marlowe’s female cabdriver gives him her number, and tells him to call her at night because she works during the day. Another woman in the film is making herself sexually available to Marlowe. Sexual desirability is a revered quality for Marlowe, but a vice for Carmen Sternwood. Her open sexuality is seen as threatening and disturbing where Marlowe’s is seen as masculine and virile. A running theme of *film noir*, that the virtues of the men are vices in women. That same feeling is prominent in American postwar propaganda.

Marlowe finds Carmen lurking around Geiger’s house. He has a run-in with Eddie Mars, a local gambling hall owner, and general “no-good” villain type. Following Marlowe and Mars’s confrontation, Marlowe and Carmen leave. Later, Marlowe trails Vivian and realizes that she is trying to pay off the blackmailers without him. Marlowe follows Vivian into the blackmailer’s apartment. Once inside, Brody, the blackmailer,
pulls a gun on Marlowe. Ever the hard-boiled hero, Marlowe acts nonchalantly and talks down to Brody. Marlowe uses this opportunity to make Vivian feel foolish and small. This sentiment is echoed by the director. The angle of Vivian of gets smaller and smaller as the scene progresses. Vivian is pushed to the background while the two males argue over her family’s fate. At the sound of the doorbell, Carmen bursts into the room clearly under the influence of something and brandishing a gun. Marlowe, ever the masterful P.I. uses this distraction to grab both Brody and Carmen’s weapons. Now that Marlowe has complete control, he pushes Vivian completely out of the picture by sending her and Carmen home, like two unwanted children.

With the “girls” gone, Marlowe grills Brody and his girlfriend Agnes, the salesgirl from the pornography front, about Carmen’s photographs and the blackmail. Agnes is bruised from where Marlowe grabbed her earlier. He asks her if he hurt her and she replies, “You and every other man I’ve ever met.” A sentiment that could be easily stated by every *femme fatale film noir* has ever seen. When Marlowe accuses Brody of murder, he opens up about his role in the blackmail. Brody helps fill in the gaps of Geiger’s murder. Brody confirms for Marlowe that Owen Taylor, the chauffer, killed Geiger to protect Carmen. Brody also admits that he knocked out Taylor and stole the film of Carmen posing naked. He denies, however, pushing Taylor and his car over the cliff to his death. Before Brody can reveal any more to Marlowe, Brody is shot at the door by an unknown assassin.
The shooter turns out to be Carol Lundgren, Geiger’s male lover in the novel (a fact that is obscured in the film). Lundgren wrongfully believes that Brody is responsible for Geiger’s death. Marlowe subdues Lundgren, takes him to Geiger’s house, and ties him up. In Geiger’s bedroom Marlowe finds Geiger’s previously missing body laid out on the bed. Marlowe calls the police and tells them everything he knows since the case appears to be closed.

The next day Vivian tries to pay Marlowe off to remove him from the case. However, Marlowe’s thirst for the truth can’t be quenched with cash. She changes tactics and flirts with him heavily. Marlowe accuses her of trying to “sugar” him off the case. Marlowe, again in the position of power, grills her about Eddie Mars and his connection with Regan’s disappearance. After his exchange with Vivian, refusing to back down, Marlowe visits Mars at his gambling establishment.

Mars and Marlowe both vie for the position of alpha-male. Marlowe peppers Mars with questions, all of which Mars has a convenient answers to. Marlowe believes Mars knows what really happened to Regan. Mars steers the conversation to a new topic, Vivian’s “gambling debts.” Mars claims she is sore loser and a greedy winner. Redirecting the conversation back to Regan, Marlow asks Mars why he isn’t concerned that his wife is missing. Rumor being that Mar’s wife ran off with Regan. This rumor takes suspicion away from Mars killing Regan out of jealousy. Like the soldier language earlier in the film, Mars tells Marlowe “better stop being curious, soldier.” Mars is clearly
a villain, by having him call Marlowe a “Soldier,” implicitly implies to the viewer that Marlowe is “one of the good guys.”

Both men leave the exchange without extracting any real information from the other. At the roulette table, Vivian is winning big, $28,000, serendipitously confirming what Mars said about her gambling habit in his office moments before. After leaving the casino, Marlowe sees, presumably, one of Mar’s men about to rob Vivian. Marlowe rushes to her rescue and knocks out her assailant after telling him to pass along a warning to his boss. Marlowe sees through this scene as an attempt by Mars and Vivian to show they don’t have any allegiance to each other. While Marlowe drives Vivian home, he grills her about her relationship with Mars. When she doesn’t give him any information, he kisses her. While her guard is down, he questions her again about Eddie Mars. She asks him, “so that’s the way...” and he replies, “that’s the way it is.” He is in control of how fast they move. He dictates when there will be romance and when they will be all business. Marlowe enjoys having control over their relationship. This is also clear with his interactions with the Acme salesgirl and the cab driver. He is the one to decide to act or not. He controls how far they go. Any loss of the upper hand when it comes to female sexuality and Marlowe will snap.

After dropping Vivian off at home, Marlowe returns to his apartment to find Carmen already there. In the film, she is fully clothed, but in the novel, she is naked in his bed. By catching Marlowe off guard and making him aware that he is attracted to her physically, even if not emotionally, Carmen gains the upper hand. To try to maintain his
sense of power, Marlowe once again turns her assertive sexuality into something sinister and ugly. In the novel, he describes her “sharp teeth” glinting (Chandler 117). In the film he spars with her, proving to her that he isn’t interested in what she has to offer. He ends their talk by physically pushing her out of his apartment. In the novel, he forces her to get dressed, and when he does, he claims she “hisses” at him, and her eyes are filled with “some jungle emotion” (Chandler 117). Like Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* an impassioned woman is being described as ferociously catlike. In the film, Marlowe seems calm and in control after forcing Carmen out of his apartment. In the novel, however, it seems he has less power over his desires, and after she is gone he rips all of the bedding off of his mattress and throws it to the ground.

The next day, a detective phones Marlowe to tell him to “lay off” the Sternwood case. Marlowe asks the detective to look at the case from his perspective. Marlowe tells him that he is trying to protect the “wonderful” and “not so wonderful” Sternwood sisters. While Vivian is presented in some shades of gray, she doesn’t really do anything menacing throughout the film. Again, *noir* is creating two women, one good and one bad. The two women are divided by Vivian’s ultimate sexual and emotional submission to the dominant male, and Carmen’s continued attempts to control Marlowe with her sexuality.

Later in the day Marlowe calls Vivian and she informs him that he can stop looking for Regan; he is in Mexico and that she is going there to see about him. In the novel, Marlowe also speaks to the butler who continues the theme of soldier adoration by telling him that General Sternwood respects Marlowe for his “soldier’s eye” (Chandler
160). Marlowe returns the compliment by telling the butler that his eyes are not unlike his own. Not long after the call, Marlowe is attacked by two of Mar’s men who warn him again to “lay off” the case. Harry Jones, Agnes the rare books salesgirl’s new boyfriend, comes to Marlowe’s aid. Back in Marlowe’s office, Jones tells Marlowe that he and Agnes know where Mars’s wife is being held. Jones tells Marlowe that they will give up the information for $200. Hours later, cash in hand, Marlowe goes to meet Jones. He stops outside of Jones’s door when he hears one of Mars’s men grill Jones about Agnes’s whereabouts. Jones gives him a fake address and the henchman kills Jones with a poisoned drink while Marlowe watches. After the henchman leaves the phone rings. Marlowe answers and plans to meet Agnes to give her the money, after telling her that, “your little man died to keep you out of trouble.” Again, the blame for a male death is put on the shoulders of a woman who wasn’t even at the scene of the crime.

Marlowe and Agnes meet and exchange information for cash. Their parting words cement her as one of film noir’s vice riddled women getting their comeuppance, perfectly in line with the anti-independent woman campaign of postwar America.

Agnes: “Well, so long copper. Wish me luck. I got a raw deal.”

Marlowe: “Your kind always does.”

And in film noir her “kind” does always come to a bitter end.

Marlowe heads to Mars’s wife’s hideout, Art Huck’s Repairs and Painting Garage. To give himself an in, Marlowe flattens one of his tires. When Marlowe goes into the shop for help, he is knocked out by two of Mars’s men. Marlowe awakens on the
floor of the house next to the shop, handcuffed and tied sitting near Mona Mars, Eddie Mars’s wife. As he is grilling Mona about Regan’s whereabouts, Vivian walks into the room. Vivian is living at the hideout to cover the fact that she isn’t in Mexico with Regan. Vivian asked him why he kept searching for answers, and Marlowe replies in a truly independent Dick fashion, “too many people told me to stop.” The same sentiment from a *femme fatale* would cement her as a villain.

Mona Mars, ever the loyal wife, tells Marlowe that she and Regan were just friends, and that Mars didn’t kill him. She makes it clear to Marlowe that she isn’t being held at the house, she came there voluntarily to clear her husband of suspicion in relation to Regan’s disappearance. Marlowe tears down her husband until Mona, in a fit of rage, throws her drink in his face and storms out.
With Mona gone, Marlowe turns to Vivian and asks, “I wonder if you’d do what she did for a man?” Vivian responds, “I was wondering that myself.” In true *noir* fashion, when her answer becomes “yes” Vivian is saved from the fallout. However, like innocent Laura before her, her fate is dependent on her pledging her full allegiance to Marlowe, that means abandoning her strength and her independence in exchange for a man’s love. Vivian asks Marlowe if she will “stay out of” the mystery if she lets him go. Refusing to give up the role of power, Marlowe tells her no. And so Vivian kisses him, releases him even though he refused to give in to her one request. By sacrificing her wants, and giving up the only leveraging chip she had, she concedes dominance to Marlowe. He even talks down to her while she is freeing him, treating her as if she were a child with a knife,
“Watch your fingers. Don’t cut toward your hand.” Even as she is releasing him, he makes it clear who is in charge.

Vivian creates a diversion by screaming so that Marlowe can retrieve his gun from his car. One of Mars’s men uses Vivian as a shield, but Marlowe still shoots and kills him. Marlowe and Vivian take off in one of Mar’s cars. Marlowe warns Vivian that there is going to be “plenty of trouble” as a result of the shoot out at Mars’s place. He tests her loyalty by giving her an out. Vivian’s reply saves her from the fate of other 
*femme fatales* “I don’t mind as long as you’re around.” Vivian tells him that she loves him. Marlowe tells her that he has to know the truth and he has to know it now. Vivian and Marlowe set up a trap for Mars at Geiger’s house, Marlowe tells Vivian that they have to “get the jump” on Mars. Mars arrives and tells Marlowe that Carmen killed Regan because he wouldn’t sleep with her. The same way Marlowe rejected Carmen. Mars covered up the murder for a drugged and delirious Carmen, and that is when Mars started blackmailing the Sternwoods. Marlowe makes it clear to Mars that he has the upper hand. He tells Mars that because he got there first, “everything’s changed now.” Marlowe forces Mars to run outside into the trap that Mars set for Marlowe. Mars rushes out the door screaming “don’t shoot,” but his henchmen kill him on sight assuming he is Marlowe.

In the novel, Carmen also tries to kill Marlowe. But being the dominant male that he is, he stops her, and forces Vivian to commit her. In the novel, he and Vivian respect, but don’t like each other. He refrains from giving Carmen to the police not to save
Vivian, but to spare General Sternwood the shame of his “wild,” “perverted,” “killer”
girls (Chandler 169). Marlowe conceals Carmen’s nature out of a desire to spare a fellow
“soldier.” Vivian tells Marlowe that their motives were the same, that she protected
Carmen to keep it from her father. So that he wouldn’t die thinking that his daughter was
a monster. Vivian maintains her independence in the novel, and she and Marlowe part
ways. The woman he longs for at the end of the novel is the devoted wife and defender of
men, Mona Mars.

In the film, Marlowe calls the police and tells them everything, except he pins
Regan’s murder on a now dead Eddie Mars. He does this because he loves Vivian and
wants to protect her father from shame. In the final scene, Marlowe makes Vivian
promise to lock Carmen up somewhere where there are not “guns and knives and fancy
drinks.” Marlowe tells Vivian to let him “do the talking” he calls her “angel.” This scene
sets a clear tone for how their subsequent relationship is going to go. He tells her his plan
and she tells him he forgot about her. Pulling her into an embrace, Marlow asks her
“What’s wrong with you?” To which she replies, “nothing you can’t fix.” This sentiment
of females being “fixed” thanks to the love of a man, and the abandonment of
independence is perfectly in line with postwar propaganda. All a postwar woman needs to
do to find peace is to abandon independence and pledge her allegiance to a male.

While the plot is incredibly confusing, the fact that is made clear to the audience
is that in order to survive, a woman must subject herself to masculine rule. This
submission to a patriarchal ideal is the exact sentiment of the postwar propaganda.
Carmen is bad, not only for her murderous blackouts, but also for her obvious sexuality and desire for power over males. Vivian is good because she undermines her own independence in an effort to serve Marlowe. Like the opening exchange between Marlowe and General Sternwood, vitality and virility in males is to be admired and not admonished. This fact was made clear by the repeated sexually charged exchanges between Marlowe and the female characters in the film. It seems that Marlowe plans to settle down with Vivian, but only after he, and the camera, made her smaller than she was when she was romantically independent. Once again, the camera acts as the male protagonist's eyes, making the female lead more insignificant the more he demonstrates his dominance. This subtle manipulation of Vivian’s image has in impact on how the viewer interprets her character. Similarly, pro-war pulp fiction attempted to use subtle manipulation to sway public opinion.
Chapter 8: Conclusion
Fiction is a mighty medium. Narratives have the power to subtly influence an audience in a way that direct statements of fact or opinion cannot. By reading a book, listening to a story, or watching a movie, the mind absorbs information in a more uninhibited way. Propaganda can be both direct, like the images of Rosie the Riveter produced by Norman Rockwell and J. Howard Miller, and subtle, like the works of numerous pulp fiction writers whose only alteration to their stock romantic stories was to alter the backdrop from an office to a pro-war factory setting. While both were effective, it was the work of pulp fiction writers that seemed to greatly mobilize a nation of women to follow the national rhetoric. In that same way, the subtle use of lighting and costume, and the more direct use of the male protagonist’s narration, film noir acted as an agent of postwar propaganda.

Dark film, or film noir, was born out of the ashes of World War II. The genre would not have been possible without the social, economic, and military conditions during and following the war. One of the most vital conditions was the cultural clash between newly autonomous women, and men returning from overseas. This discord between sexes resulted in a nation of anxious, threatened males. The femme fatale is widely considered a product of that male anxiety. This anxiety manifested itself in the form of a cultural backlash. While true, given the time period in which the femme fatale
gained prominence, it is also equally plausible that she is a medium for postwar propaganda.

The rise of *film noir* and the *femme fatale* coincided with the shift in national rhetoric from pro-war, pro-woman propaganda to happy homemakers and bouncing babies. In 1944, the same mediums that convinced women to enter the workforce were trying to force them out of it. The backdrops of popular pulp fiction pieces changed from munitions lines to kitchen counters. 1944 was also the year that *film noir* began to bloom. Many of the films released that year featured strong, capable, and ambitious women. However, their virtues, ones that were revered months before, were now being portrayed as vices. The female leads that could be characterized as independent or driven were presented in harsh lighting, skimpy clothing, and ominous camera angles. The woman with a goal outside of the domestic realm was no longer welcome in America. The *femme fatale* perfectly fit the postwar propaganda of “female irresponsibility.” Her disregard for domestic life and concern for self demonize her, and help to confirm her spiderwoman persona. In the midst of musicals, love stories, and pro-war films, this dark and fatalist film genre emerged. This new genre, like the musicals and love stories before it, was also a form of escapism. It gave disillusioned viewers a glimpse into a world where good and bad is colored by shades of gray. Something unseen in the war films of the time, but understood by the people living through the worst war the world had ever seen. The powerful, individualistic male leads of *noir* gave an anxiety riddled male viewer an escape from the newly unstabilized roles of gender in American society. By creating an
antithesis to Rosie the Riveter the cultural progress made by the pro-war propaganda was undercut, giving further comfort to an uncomfortable male audience.

After reviewing the five film and book pairs of classic film noir, it is difficult not to make the connection between female ambition and the downfall of the women of noir. Brigid wanted the falcon, Phyllis wanted her husband's life insurance policy, Laura wanted uninhibited independence, Cora wanted to make something of her business, and Vivian wanted peace for her family. The only thing that these women received for their efforts was an unjust comeuppance. Its true that Brigid, Phyllis, and Cora acted immorally, and participated in terrible crimes, but throughout the novels, films, and film criticism their fates seem far harsher than any dealt to the male protagonists. Regardless of their actions, female characters who displayed the feminine virtues turned vices in a postwar America were punished, and punished harshly. Laura and Vivian, two relatively innocent characters, are still considered femme fatales by critics and viewers alike regardless of the fact that they prove fatal to no one. It is interesting that the coloring of the films, the male dominated dialogue and narration, along with the camera's prominently male gaze has created a noir culture dependent upon a dangerous female.

It is my hope that the above analysis of noir films and their corresponding books has pulled the femme fatale from the shadows of noir, and demonstrated that she is more than a castrating spiderwoman. The longevity of the spiderwoman interpretation shows that the propaganda is effective. The technique of coloring the femme fatale as evil, regardless of her actions, the implicit aesthetics, and male dominated narration condemn
her before the audience has an opportunity to assess her as an independent character.

*Film noir* punishes autonomous women and underscores their humanity in the same way that postwar pulp fiction demonizes women who refuse to return to the domestic realm.
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