



PERSONALITY DISORDER AND THE *FILM NOIR FEMME FATALE**

by

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ABSTRACT

Motion pictures can influence the development of both normal and disordered personality. The *femme fatale* of the *film noir* movies of the 1940s and 1950s is representative of several related personality disorders characterized by histrionics, self-absorption, psychopathy, and unpredictability. This report will examine how various societal factors occurring during World War II and its aftermath influenced the portrayal of these disordered females and how these depictions, in turn, reflected and influenced American culture at the time. Specific reference to issues of criminology, economics, gender, as well as feminist viewpoints on this phenomenon will be explored.

INTRODUCTION

The 1940s were an era of "women's pictures." For the first time Hollywood assembled an array of films depicting the lives, challenges, and emotions of women. Audiences were almost entirely composed of women prior to 1945. The majority of box office stars were female. World War II induced an unparalleled collective response from women, resulting in new perspectives and rising ambitions. By 1944, 85 percent of women wanted to keep their jobs, whereas at the beginning of the war they viewed themselves as temporary custodians for their males' rightful positions in the workforce when they returned home from the war (Rosen, 1973).

The returning veterans were hesitant to patronize movies depicting women who were assertive, self-assured, and ran their lives smoothly and competently without a male. GI Joe needed reassurance about his own place in society. Displacing females from corporate positions was a critical undertaking. As Anne Leighton in *Harper's Magazine* stated in 1946: "Many American war veterans are silently bearing some unexpected ... difficulties in returning home to what used to be a pleasantly pliable and even appallingly incompetent little woman and finding a quietly masterful creature recognizing no limitations to her own endurance" (Leighton, 1946).

It may be no accident that the overabundance of films exhibiting the *femme fatale* coincided with female acquisition of economic and social clout in real life. In fact, *film noir* movies may be a result of the alteration of forties American culture, symbolizing the female threat to the status quo. Hollywood simplistically depicted this shift in terms of [end page 155] the *film noir femme fatale* – a composite of power, lust, and greed. These motion pictures implicitly criticized women for

considering alternative roles.

The thesis of this report is that the *film noir femme fatale* with her attendant psychopathology was at once a creation of the forties and a reflection of profound shifts in the role of American women in that era. The interplay between personality disorders, the *femme fatale*, and 1940s American culture will be explored. The significance of the character pathology of these fatal women in relation to the women of that time will be examined through an examination of specific films and key scenes and cinematic techniques from *noir* movies.

HOW MOVIES INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR

Hollywood film operates to legitimate certain values and its depictions help to instill ideology. Motion pictures create an illusion that what occurs on the screen is an objective recording of events, rather than a representation of a certain point of view. Film is a component of a wider system of cultural delineation that creates psychological order that results in a distinctive formation of social reality. Social institutions are sustained by these shared beliefs of what the world is and should be. Films have become part of that extensive cultural system of constructions that represent social reality. Such representations may be appropriated from the culture, embraced as part of the self. When these constructions are internalized, they may mold the self and help to shape our personality. Object relations psychoanalytic theory underscores the role of such representations in deciding the evolution of psychological life (Ryan and Kellner, 1988). An example of such representations is the relationship between exposure to violence in the media and real world aggressive behavior. Numerous major governmental reports since 1972 have concluded that viewing mass media contributes to aggressive attitudes and behavior (American Psychological Association, 1993; Wilson, Kukel, Linz, Potter, Donnerstein, Smith, Blumenthal & Gray, 1997).

Representations of sex also pervade the media. These depictions have repeatedly been shown to exert a profound influence on the sexual mores of viewers, especially youthful ones (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988; Zillmann, 1994). Americans may suffer from a "Sexy World Syndrome" (Strasburger, 1989) in which heavy media viewing contributes to false beliefs concerning sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, birth control, sexuality, etc. (Strasburger, 1995).

In this way, visual media, including motion pictures, may be conceptualized as a significant psychosocial stressor. Such psychosocial stressors are among the most important risk factors for the development of personality disorders (Paris, 1996). Personality traits derive essentially from the "unshared environment," the totality of life events unique to each person. Numerous factors which help to forge personality come from outside the family, evolving out of interactions with peers and the community (Paris, 1999). Extra-familial mechanisms known as "group socialization" (Harris, 1998), [end page 156] which include influences coming from peers, schools, and the community, can be as powerful as those coming from parents (Rutter, 1989). Personality traits and disorders are viewed as a product of genetic-environment interaction. Personality disorders are formed by both diatheses (variations in temperament) and psychosocial stressors (life events) (Kendler and Eaves, 1986).

CLUSTER B PERSONALITY DISORDERS

A personality disorder is "an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture." The pattern is evidenced in areas including cognition, affectivity, interpersonal functioning, and impulse control. Inflexibility and a

pervasive impairment in social, occupational, or other significant domains of functioning are hallmarks of a personality disorder. This entrenched pattern is of long duration ([American Psychiatric Association, 1994](#)).

Although ten different personality disorders are defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV* of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV) ([American Psychiatric Association, 1994](#)), four disorders – the antisocial, borderline, histrionic, and narcissistic – are the focus of this discussion. The Antisocial Personality Disorder is characterized by a disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others. Its traits include unlawful behavior, deceitfulness, impulsivity, irritability, aggressiveness, reckless disregard for the safety of self or others, irresponsibility, and lack of remorse. The Borderline Personality Disorder is defined by instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects as well as marked impulsivity. Identity disturbance, suicide attempts or self-mutilation, difficulty in modulating oftentimes intense, inappropriate anger, and chronic feelings of emptiness are frequent. A pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking is seen in the Histrionic Personality Disorder. Sexually provocative behavior, shallow expressions of emotion, self-dramatization and theatricality, suggestibility, and superficial interpersonal relationships are core features. Grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy distinguish the Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Individuals with this disorder believe they are "special," have a sense of entitlement, exploit others, and manifest envy, arrogance, and haughtiness. These four personality disorders comprise what the DSM-IV refers to as "Cluster B" personality disorders.

FILM NOIR, THE FEMME FATALE, AND CLUSTER B PERSONALITY DISORDERS

One of the most enduring cinematic representations of character pathology is that of the *femme fatale*, the "fatal woman" who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations. Although reference has been made to her throughout history, she began her cinematic construction in the so-called classic *film noir* era of Hollywood, spanning the [**end page 157**] years 1941-1958. The modern *femme fatale* continues to be a popular screen persona to the present day.

Film noir refers to a substantial collection of films that flourished in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. It is identified by its cynical, nihilistic view of the world. Urban crime and corruption along with a depiction of a demise of American culture are its mainstays. Vice, licentiousness, wrongdoing, impulsiveness are all portrayed in a manner and style more realistic than Hollywood had ever attempted before. The real world of *film noir* is "shadowy, crime-ridden, web-like, amoral, and illogical. The Hollywood world is just the opposite" ([Richardson, 1992](#)). America's most fundamental promises – of optimism, wealth, and freedom from fear – are threatened in *film noir* ([Tellotte, 1989](#)).

The fatal woman who leads men to their moral ruination and sometimes death is not unique to *film noir*, but the character reached its apotheosis in the genre. These *femme fatales* represented a concerted attempt by American filmmakers to depict women in a genuine, if somewhat harsh, way. They could be just as "sexually voracious and as potentially murderous as any man, and just as susceptible to corruption and greed" ([Stephens, 1995](#)). They epitomized the range of Cluster B psychopathology, especially antisocial, narcissistic, and histrionic.

These women are defined in terms of their relation to men. Feminist authors have viewed them as energized, intelligent, powerful, and able to elicit strength from their sexuality, cinema portrayals usually reserved for men. Society developed terms such as "dark lady," the "spider woman," and the "evil seductress" as a reflection of our misogynist, phallogocentric worldview ([Place, 1980](#)). *Film noir* is one of the few exceptions to the usual domination of American cinema

by men. It is not the eventual destruction of these women that we remember as much as their potency, drive, and compelling ability to manipulate men through the power of their sexuality. Porfiro (1976) notes that "a host of domineering women, castrating bitches, unfaithful wives and black widows seemed to personify the worst of male sexual fantasies."

During World War II, women were employed in unprecedented numbers in a wide array of industries. Women eagerly entered military production plants to avail themselves of higher wages, while over two million took office jobs (Wager, 1999). American historians have depicted this period as an advancement for the women's cause in the United States. "Rosie the Riveter," the strong and efficient representation of the American woman at war, became the country's heroine. The formerly doting mother, the *mater patriae* (priestess of home and hearth), was challenged by wartime propaganda to become devoted to the war effort, even at the expense of her maternal duties (Diedrich and Fisher-Hornung, 1990). But the ardent response of American women to the war effort to some degree also reflected a pervasive frustration with their traditional gender assignments and their search for even limited amounts of autonomy and self-reliance. The place of women in society was transformed forever. [end page 158]

Film noir was associated with this period in a manner that reflected the new role of women in American culture. However, it portrayed many of its females in a critical, disparaging way. This "new woman" was forced to assert herself in ways that our society had not previously sanctioned. She evolved on screen as an evil, duplicitous vixen, sexually powerful and poisonous to the male (Hirsh, 1981). These women may be viewed as figments of male anxieties over the possibility of being replaced in the workforce or even relinquishing some of their patriarchal role in the family and society.

The *femme fatale* thus represents the ultimate misogynistic fantasy. These women are to be feared while simultaneously scapegoated for society's problems. She controls her own sexuality, setting her apart from the patriarchal system. This rupture of the suppression of women by the society was summarized recently: "...women break out of the molds cast for them in the rigid spiritual and social structures of the ruling patriarchy. There's no greater kick in this town than when a woman finally wraps her delicate fingers around the trigger of a .38 Linga and blasts away every bit of genetic encoding and cultural repression in a roaring fusillade of little lead forget-me-nots" (Muller, 1998). She epitomizes the Cluster B personality disorder.

It is important to separate the popularity of the Hollywood bombshell as personalities versus the animosity many American viewers felt toward these *femme fatale* portrayals in selected films. Joan Crawford, Ava Gardner, Rita Hayworth, Veronica Lake, Lana Turner, Jane Russell, Gene Tierney, etc. were worshipped in the forties as popular icons in American culture based on a wide array of film roles. But it is crucial to realize that their screen personae in their *noir* appearances engendered an entirely different reaction to many viewers of the time. A substantial portion of women harbored ambivalent feelings toward them, reflecting the confusion some American women felt about assuming a more passive role after World War II in contrast to their vigorous involvement in the war effort.

For example, the masterpiece of dark cinema, *Double Indemnity* (1944), won numerous Oscar nominations, including for best picture, but was not a box office success. In fact, it was barely profitable. Its portrayal of the ultimate black widow, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), may possibly have contributed to this lack of popularity, since it was released at a time of primarily female spectatorship at the movies. The prosaic, mainstream *Going My Way* won the Oscar for best picture.

In the case of other *femme* stars, their off-screen lifestyle did mirror their *film noir* evil woman portrayals. For example, magazine articles in 1944 described Veronica Lake as "one of the most acute problems in Hollywood" with a "time-bomb mind" (Schroeder, 1944). Although immensely popular early in her career, she soon became infamous for rage reactions, insulting her colleagues, rampant alcoholism, and defrauding her fans by accepting money for autographs, and then refusing to sign. Her private life damaged her reputation irreparably, and she eventually died penniless and alone at the age of 53. [end page 159] Similar controversy plagued Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner, Gene Tierney and others to varying degrees (Burroughs, 1998).

NOIR STYLE AND THE POST-WAR DILEMMA OF THE AMERICAN FEMALE

Within a short time after the end of the war, "the feminine mystique" (Friedan, 1963) defined American cultural attitudes toward women. Women could achieve total contentment by fulfilling the roles of housewife and mother. As one magazine writer exclaimed: "... just being a woman is her central task and greatest honor... Women must boldly announce that no job is more exacting, more necessary, or more rewarding than that of housewife and mother." One Senator even declared that Congress should "force wives and mothers back to the kitchen" to guarantee positions for returning veterans (Chafe, 1990). At the conclusion of the Second World War, returning veterans were granted preference in employment, some companies banned women over forty-five from work, and large corporations reimposed previous policies prohibiting female spouses' employment (Wager, 1999). By 1947, three million women had resigned or been fired from their positions. Even the U.S. Department of Labor promulgated "Recommendations of Separation of Women from Wartime Jobs" (Rosen, 1973).

On closer examination, many women were resentful of their postwar role. "Choose any set of criteria you like," Margaret Mead wrote, "and the answer is the same: women and men are confused, uncertain, and discontented with the present definition of women's place in America." These women questioned whether their "place" was in the home and had learned directly how inequitable their treatment in the labor force was (Chafe, 1990). The employment changes that began with the war "helped to provide a crucial precondition for the emergence of a coherent political movement that challenged traditional values regarding women's and men's proper roles" (Chafe, 1990). The well-documented resistance of an overwhelming majority to abandon their jobs and return home after 1945 illustrates the enthusiasm the female worker had for her new position.

In summarizing feminist critical interest in *film noir*, Place (1980) suggests that "it stands as the only period in American film in which women are deadly but sexy, exciting, and strong." The *femme fatale* has successfully eluded patriarchal ideology. They are victimizers of men, rather than victims of patriarchal exploitation (Wager, 1999). As Richardson (1992) states, "*film noir* depicts spidery women answerable to a host of misdeeds and misadventures. Women connive, steal, and murder. They are not 'fallen women,' victimized by patriarchal exploitation...They are ambitious exploiters, whose misdeeds merit punishment...doled out in disappointment, grief, and sometimes...death."

The style and lighting of *film noir* is unique. Chiaroscuro (i.e. pictorial representations in terms of light and shade without regard to color) dominate their cinematography. "The mood of tragedy is enhanced by a strong contrast of deep blacks [end page 160] and glaring whites – shadows and highlights. In drama we light for mood, we paint poems. Lighting with its ups and downs becomes a symphonic construction paralleling the dramatic sequences" (Silver and Ursini, 1999). Style is crucial in *film noir*. "Like its protagonists, *film noir* is more interested in style than theme, whereas American critics have been traditionally more interested in theme than style (Schrader, 1977).

Out of the Past (1947) provides an outstanding example of this interplay of style, personality, and culture. It graphically depicts two contrasting environments. The western town of Bridgport represents the country. It is linked with light, openness, honesty, naturalness, and clean living. Lighting is in Hollywood's typical high-key style. Location shooting with wide-open vistas characterizes its cinematography.

The woman featured in this locale is Ann, the fiancée of the ill-fated protagonist of the movie, Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum). She is blond (fair) in contrast to the film's spiderwoman, Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer). She is filmed in bright light and usually appears in daytime outdoor scenes. She is the quintessential All-American girl, trusting her boyfriend without reservation and exuding warmth, stability, and nurturance. She is the "other woman" of *film noir*. Representing the "boring, potentially childbearing sweetheart" (Harvey, 1978), this girl-next-door is tiresomely home loving, with a devotion to the hero (Crowther, 1989).

In the so-called classic Hollywood films of the thirties, female characters were often depicted as powerless, ineffectual figures sheltered in stereotypical female roles of wives, mothers, and daughters. The stereotype of that era was of women so weak and inept that they required the potency and authority of men to survive. They relentlessly seek safety, security, and love from their male heroes (Silver and Ursini, 1998). The character of Ann and her predecessors conforms to the DSM-IV definition of the Dependent Personality Disorder. Individuals with this disorder are fearful and anxious. They have an all-encompassing need to be cared for that induces passive and clinging behavior and fears of separation. Indecisiveness, a delegation of responsibility to others, lack of self-confidence, and helplessness are also noted in this disorder. They represent the ideal American sweetheart envisioned by the returning G.I. hero.

The scenes from *Out of the Past* (1947) which take place in Acapulco, New York, and San Francisco stand in sharp contrast. The stylistic depiction of these cities is linked with darkness, oppression, dishonesty, corruption, and artificiality. Low-key lighting, frequent nighttime scenes, unbalanced compositions, claustrophobic and obstructive framing, and enclosing shadows characterize scenes from these locales. The female lead of these venues is Kathie Moffat, a dark brunette whose scenes usually occur at night or indoors. She is the diametric opposite of Ann: sexual, independent, assertive, cunning, and artificial. Her evil personality must be and will be destroyed in the end.

The narcissism of these fatal women is demonstrated as they often gaze at their own images in the mirror. They are totally self-absorbed. Scenes involving mirrors are [end page 161] quite common with these women. This may represent the devious, cunning nature of these women, where "nothing and no one is what it seems...oftentimes, these tenebrous reflections are more powerful than the real women they mirror" (Place, 1980). Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) exemplified this narcissism by hanging numerous portraits of herself throughout her mansion.

These "mirror shots" are a cinematic technique prevalent in *film noir*. The independence which *film noir* women seek is often visually presented as self-absorbed narcissism: the woman gazes at her own reflection in the mirror, ignoring the man she will use to achieve her goals. The self-absorption of Phyllis Dietrichson occurs in numerous scenes in *Double Indemnity* (1944). The "mirror shots" also indicate women's duplicitous nature: they are visually split, thus not to be trusted. The mirror motif also contributes to the murky confusion of *film noir*: nothing and no one is what it seems.

The quintessential example of the "mirror shot" occurs in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948). In

the final sequence of the film, Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) is confronted by her adversaries in a hall of mirrors at an amusement park. As the funhouse mirror shatters the frame, they reveal the many faces of this *femme fatale*, in some of the mirrored panels appearing strong and self-confident, in others weak and vulnerable. The spectator joins with the protagonists in viewing all of these aspects of her personality, so that the shot elicits both a literal (physical) point of view and a figurative (emotional) one as well.

The *femme fatales'* long hair, make-up, jewelry, and cigarettes are symbols of their sensuality. These women are very concerned with slick clothing styles that signify what has been described as "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Naremore, 1998). Compelling phallic power is conveyed by the handguns they often possess. Our first glimpse of these spider women is often of her either scantily dressed, wrapped in a towel, or a view of a comely leg (Place, 1980).

The visual presentation of the *femme fatale* is significant. The *noir* heroine is often photographed in a manner that emphasizes her sexuality. She is frequently photographed without softening filters and with abstract lighting techniques, which emphasize a severe, harsh, pallid face. In the picture frame, she is often placed in a superior position vis-à-vis the male. *Film noir* fashion either emphasizes her carnality – extended, running, suggestive dresses – or her autonomy and aggression – square, padded shoulders or tailored suits (Gledhill, 1978).

The famed *film noir* actresses themselves often possessed a physiognomy and cinematic presence reflective of Cluster B personalities. Barbara Stanwyck, the "undisputed first lady of *noir*," had a scornful, taut face and voice. Her posture was tight and defensive in keeping with a tough screen presence. A deadly, cold, sensuality characterized many of her films. Veronica Lake's face barely moved. Her voice and bearing were notable for their angularity, frigidity, and sleekness. She was shy, yet sexy, [end page 162] with a hazy, muddled quality; chiseled features and flawless beauty highlighted by a translucent Nordic complexion completed the picture. An efficient, dominating, wise-cracking quality set her apart. Joan Crawford had a screen persona characterized by fierceness, willfulness, and an almost diabolical, tyrannical ferocity with which she fought her enemies. She could dispatch men without compunction.

The first image and appearance of Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (1944) exemplifies these issues. We first view her as she coolly emerges at the top of a stairway landing looking down, as if from a pinnacle of power and desire, wearing only a bath towel. As Phyllis comes downstairs, the camera is focused on her legs, where she wears an engraved, gold ankle strap on her left ankle, flashing it at insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray). When she joins him in the living room, she looks cool and sexy in a summer dress, but slightly slutty, with a phony-looking blonde wig and bangs. She never laughs and rarely shows even the merest flicker of a smile on her ivory-hard face. "Blatantly provocative and visibly artificial, her ankle bracelet, lacquered lipstick, sunglasses, chromium hair give her a cheaply manufactured metallic look and synthetic quality" (Naremore, 1998). She represents a self-centered denial of motherhood and a pervasive narcissism. She is a monstrous castrator, exuding charm under pressure, demonstrating control and self-possession. The 1940s female audience would have been intrigued by her power and allure but ultimately repulsed by her antisocial and narcissistic Cluster B personality flaws. Such women could not be allowed to impede the existing social structure. She would need to be destroyed and American patriarchal culture restored.

The cinematic method of the *femme fatale* and the "old husband" is also a mainstay of *film noir*. The *femme fatales* realize their wishes by attaching themselves to men who are rich and powerful. They marry to achieve financial or social advancement, in the process manipulating the desire men hold for them. This inversion and perversion of conventional and legitimate sexual relations is

especially highlighted by the fact that the husbands tend to be old or physically infirm. In *Double Indemnity*, Mr. Dietrichson is altruistic to his wife because of the financial security he can offer. The aberrance of the woman's choice is made explicit when the younger, poorer, but more virile anti-hero Walter sets himself up as a rival.

Another societal factor influenced by *film noir* and its women is criminology. The viewing of *film noir* and its Cluster B disordered characters by the general public may be a reflection of, as well as a contributing factor to, violent crime of the 1940s. Homicide rates usually increase after wars. The U.S. homicide rate jumped from 1943-1950. The murders occurred (1) between family members, usually husband and wife or lovers and (2) two males known to each other who were arguing at the time (Gurr, 1989). The antisocial personality of the *femme fatale* reflected these statistics. In view of our present knowledge of how movies can affect behavior, it is clear that *film noir* and its fatal women could theoretically exert a not insignificant impact on crime rates by glamorizing and tacitly legitimizing aberrant personality disorders. A plethora of *noir* [end page 163] thrillers manifested just such homicides and related crimes in their screenplays. In *Out of the Past* (1947), Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) murders Fisher (Steve Brodie) while her lover, Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum), looks on. Phyllis Dietrichson of *Double Indemnity* (1944) kills her husband and then she is terminated by her co-conspirator, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray).

The interplay between popular culture, the *film noir femme fatale*, disorders of personality, and criminology has been explored. The *femme fatale* may be seen to reflect certain anxieties over the role of women in the workforce and family of postwar America. The fatal women serve as a repository for the rage and resentment of the returning GIs who needed to project their own insecurities and anxieties onto an accessible target. In many ways, women were even more conflicted over these "bitch goddesses" than men. They admired their strength, power, and sensuousness but were alienated by their deviousness, sociopathy, and licentiousness. The spiderwomen of *film noir* exhibit a personality that reflects the women of the forties and early fifties. The women of that era would see their emerging economic and social power stifled by a repressive male dominated culture that reinforced their return to a domestic, passive existence. It is apparent that women could be fascinated by such personalities but realized in the end that these fatal women were subjugated to male authority just as they had been prior to World War II.

CINEMATIC EXAMPLES OF THE INTERSECTION OF THE *FEMME FATALE*, PERSONALITY DEVIANCE, AND CULTURE

The World War II veteran who returns only to find society disordered and his life in disarray is depicted in a number of *noir* classics. Notable examples of this overlap of the *femme fatale*, psychopathology, and society are found in the *noir* classics *Dead Reckoning* (1947) and *The Blue Dahlia* (1946).

In *Dead Reckoning* (1947), paratrooper Rip Murdock (Humphrey Bogart) investigates the murder of his army buddy with whom he has just returned to the States. He is almost ensnared in the web of the seductress Coral Chandler (Lizabeth Scott) but manages to extricate himself from her, smashing the gangster organization she is involved with in the process. The commentary on women in *Dead Reckoning* is "(1) women are all the same; (2) they are not to be trusted, especially when it comes to money; (3) they will use their sexuality, which they control, or even murder to get money; (4) if you get involved with them, be prepared to detach yourself from them as soon as you learn what they really are...One ignores this prescription about women in *film noir* only at his own peril" (Tuska, 1984).

The Blue Dahlia (1946) depicts a veteran, Johnny Morrison (Alan Ladd), returning home to find

that his wife, Helen (Doris Dowling), has been unfaithful while he was serving in Europe. Disgusted, he leaves her. When she is found murdered, Johnny is suspected of the crime. With the help of Joyce (Veronica Lake), competent wife of a **[end page 164]** nightclub owner, he solves the crime and gets the "good" girl when her husband is accidentally shot.

Both of these films, and others like them, in quite literal terms are symbolic of the social and economic restructuring of America after the war. Our hero finds a country lacking structure and morality. A duplicitous *femme fatale* with a markedly disordered personality attempts to seduce and control him. But in the end, through his own ingenuity, sometimes with the assistance of a more pliable, dependable woman, he is able to attain male ascendancy and the Cluster B personality types are vanquished.

Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), of *Double Indemnity* (1944), demonstrates a range of vicious, calculating acts. In the very early stages of the film, she seduces a young insurance salesman and manipulates him into murdering her husband after insuring his life. She proceeds to coldly participate in the killing, and we later discover that she had poisoned her husband's first wife. When complications in her scheme develop, she tries to murder the salesman. Toward the end of the movie, we learn that she has been having an affair with her daughter's fiancé while this whole chain of events has been unfolding.

After murdering her husband, Phyllis is located unambiguously as a phallic woman who seeks to usurp male authority (in her desire for money, for the destruction of the family, and for control of Walter). But her inability to fire the fatal shot in the climactic scene with Walter signifies a weakness in her, suggesting she cannot fully live up to her own phallic desire. She is made vulnerable through lust and passion, that is, through her nature as a woman. On the other hand, Walter's comparative potency is callously demonstrated by the ease with which he can pull the trigger on her.

The women on the American wartime home front who viewed the movie were taught that it does not pay to violate patriarchal structure. The maintenance of the traditional home and family during these turbulent times was paramount, and the deviant personalities and behaviors of a Phyllis Dietrichson were simply unacceptable. Character and morality meant something in these times and transgressors would be severely punished. American values had to be preserved for the returning veterans.

CONCLUSION

The type of character pathology personified in the *femme fatale* may be viewed as representative of certain misogynistic conceptualizations of the women of the time. Concurrently, these screen women may have helped to create a certain cultural image for some real-life women of the 1940s and 1950s as reflected in the areas of fashion and style, personality, and social status. "Bidirectional" causality is therefore noted in regards to the relationship between *femme fatales* and behavioral manifestations of Cluster B disorders in society. These fatal women are both a representation of some aspects of the larger American culture and a causative factor in helping to create **[end page 165]** a certain style and personality for this era. These cinema seductresses, with the potency and strength to annihilate men, may in some ways be viewed as overdrawn, cynical, precursors of the liberated woman of the sixties.

ENDNOTE

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