



The Femme Fatale's Power: Constructed Transgression

Sam Pearson*

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Abstract

The *femme fatale*, stemming from a French term meaning “fatal woman,” is one of the most common female archetypes in popular culture. First emerging in classic film noir stories, the femme fatale is most well-remembered for her proclivity to manipulate and seduce the male lead. However, in classic noir tales, she frequently meets an unhappy end in her narrative—either imprisoned or dead by the end of the story. By comparing the femme fatales of both the film and short story versions of *Gun Crazy*, the film *Too Late for Tears*, and the novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, this research seeks to understand the ways in which the femme fatale gains and loses power over the course of her narrative. To address the reasons behind this loss of power, I contextualize the narratives of film noir within the cultural expectations of the time period—in particular, the expectations of the Hayes Production Code. I also address the sensational advertising that explains why we still think of the femme fatale as a powerful woman who gets what she wants rather than as a victim of the patriarchy in her own way. This media's portrayal of the femme fatale reflects women's treatment in the post-war era, reinforcing the patriarchy and possibly even leading to the delay of the second wave of feminism.

In popular culture, there may be no female archetype more well known than that of the femme fatale. She appears in every iteration of noir, from the classic black-and-white films of post-WWII America to futuristic neo-noir imaginings of today. Elizabeth Menon, in her book *Evil by Design*, even argues that the biblical Eve could be considered the first femme fatale for tempting Adam towards his fall (4). In this essay, I compare femme fatales from classic noir films and written stories. I discuss their experiences gaining and losing power within their narratives and discuss the influence of outside forces on their power—specifically, I explore how the Production Code clashed with the advertising of these films. These influences will demonstrate that while the femme fatale may have had her day holding power, she was really at the mercy of the patriarchy, and she wound up punished for her daring.

Used to describe the powerful woman from the classic era of film noir, the French term

“femme fatale” means “fatal woman,” and was coined around the same time the term “film noir” (another French term meaning *dark movie* in reference to the visual and thematic style of post-World War Two American film) came into use. The femme fatale seduces the leading man of the story, manipulating him to assist in her grab for money, power, sex, or violence. Often, she aims for more than one of these targets. She is a seductress, a temptress, a lethal woman in an era where women were expected to be good, sexually submissive, and out of the way. She frequently causes trouble for the characters around her and, at least at first, she gets away with it.

In many classic noir narratives, the femme fatale appears to succeed in her plans, but by the end she is punished for her willingness to disrupt the patriarchal status quo. Thanks to the pressures of the general social atmosphere and the Hayes Production Code placed on writers and directors, she was forced to lay down in the end of her story. Often she would die at the hands of the law or

*Sam Pearson (sampears@uoregon.edu) is a second-year undergraduate student who is part of the Clark Honors College. Despite the fact that they are a biochemistry student, they opted to take a film-centric class as part of the Honors College curriculum requirements and found it vastly more interesting than they previously thought, leading to them producing this paper. They hope to pursue a career in optometry.

herself, or be being imprisoned in marriage. However, we generally do not remember her for her misfortune. Studios specifically crafted the image of the femme fatale to attract customers, luring them in with the promise of sex and violence and getting away with as much as they could before they ran into issues.

First, we must define the femme fatale. Jack Boozer, film studies professor at Georgia State University, defines her as a woman who takes sexual initiative to grasp for financial independence, addressing both of the ways women were controlled in the post-war era (21). Julie Grossman, English professor and film program director at Le Moyne University, however, defines the true femme fatale as a woman who aims to murder and deceive just because she can. She then goes on to claim that the women that we think of as traditional femme fatales are not the real fatal women (19). This paper combines the two definitions to define the femme fatale as a woman who uses violence and sexuality to gain financial and sexual freedom. Violence, deception, and sexuality are her tools for her gaining independence—though that does not mean she dislikes using them.

Now that we have defined our subject, we need to discuss the Hayes Production Code: a set of industry guidelines regarding Hollywood movies between 1934 and 1968 designed to enforce certain moral standards. Specifically, the Be-Careful segment where the code prohibited “Sympathy for Criminals” (MDPPA 8). As previously defined, the femme fatale acted as a criminal. Murder, theft, assault, deceiving law enforcement—the femme fatale did it all. Since films at that time were required to uphold the “highest possible moral and artistic standards” of the day, the femme fatale—the archetype of immorality—obviously had to be punished for her violent actions (MPPDA 2). These punishments were typically enacted by law enforcement, although sometimes the femme fatale brought the punishment upon herself in other ways.

One of the most potent examples of the lethal

femme fatal who is punished for her actions is in the film *Too Late for Tears* from 1949. In the film, Jane is willing to do near anything to keep control over a suitcase of money tossed into the back of her car. She seduces, lies, schemes, and commits at least two murders, which is why she is a great example of one of the more lethal femme fatales of the era. However, her luck runs out at the end of the film when she falls over a balcony in Mexico as the police arrive to arrest or kill her. One of the most interesting parts about this ending is the concept of her fate. In a world where a woman’s fate is controlled almost entirely by her husband and children, the femme fatale desperately wants the control over her own destiny. She desires the autonomy to make her own choices instead of having them made for her. As Elizabeth Bronfen says, the femme fatale knows that she is fated and attempts to control her own fate to her benefit (106). While the fall over the balcony looks accidental, Jane has actually made the decision that she would rather control her own death than die at the hands of the Mexican policemen. It is her final act of independence. Even though her death is punishment for her transgressions against the patriarchy, her choice to fall is transgressive in and of itself. In her punishment for defying the patriarchy, she defies it one final time.

Even femme fatales in written works reflected male anxieties about women’s independence; notably, the tale of Cora in James M. Cain’s novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* shows a classic femme fatale. In the novel, she conspires with Frank in order to murder her husband and have an affair. Despite not being under the purview of the Hayes production code, the femme fatale and the leading man are both punished in the end for their transgressions. This reflects another crucial aspect of the femme fatale narrative—the fatal woman is a personification of male anxieties at the time.

The femme fatale, as Yvonne Tasker, chair of media and communication at the University of Leeds, puts it, is merely a projection of the anxieties men face around women’s sexuality and

independence (367). It is no secret that in the post-WW2 era, the patriarchy struggled to reestablish itself. Women had a taste of independence that came from holding traditionally male jobs, such as those in factories building the instruments of war and Cain's work demonstrates the anxieties men faced due to this newfound independence. In his story, Cora went to California to pursue her dream as an actress but wound up married to a gas station owner. Through the course of the novel, she is visibly upset about the direction her life has taken as a housewife, which leads her to murder her husband. This is a projection of how men feared that women would retaliate violently towards coming back into the home. Cora's desire to return to her dreams, and the lengths she will go to in order to get there, is an exaggerated mirror of the anxieties men felt about the women in their life desiring to return to a life where they were financially independent. At the end of the story, Cora is killed in a final car crash similar to how she murdered her husband. She is punished in the same way she gained her freedom to prove a point about how the patriarchy punishes women who try to escape traditional values.

One interesting point of comparison between femme fatales in different storytelling mediums (e.g. film, novels, radio dramas) comes from the two versions of *Gun Crazy*, which began as a short story before being adapted into film. In the different version of *Gun Crazy*, the femme fatale can be seen as both a minorly transgressive, and majorly transgressive character; the version of the character who is freer and more transgressive is punished more harshly. In the short story, Antoinette is mentioned in passing as the woman who seduced the leading male into a life of crime, relying on his obsession with firearms to carry him to the side of crime with her. She has no dialogue, she is not the one to originally challenge the leading man to prove his gunmanship, and when he outshoots her, it is mentioned briefly that she kisses him—but there is no overt seduction. Antoinette is sentenced to prison offscreen about a third of the way through the story and then never

mentioned again; her punishment is first to face the law and then to descend into obscurity. Compare this to the film version of the story, where not only does the female lead Laurie, the adapted version of Antoinette, play a much more active role in tempting the leading man towards the dark side, but she is the lethal and beautiful face of the advertising as well. On the main poster (Figure 1), she is posed with her guns smoking. She is turned half-way to display both her breasts and her behind, and with a slit in her skirt, showing off both her seductive and violent prowess—two of the most transgressive properties for a femme fatale to have. Her dark clothes contrast with the red background, drawing the eye towards her body. Of course, thanks to the Production Code, she was advertised as far more of a scandalous figure than she actually was (Biesen 3).



Figure 1. Poster for the film *Gun Crazy*.

Still, for this blatant display of sexuality and violence, she meets a much more gruesome fate than her literary counterpart, being shot by her lover after a police chase through a swamp; the more transgressive the femme fatale, the harsher her punishment. Antoinette is merely a common

criminal, and if she were a male (and therefore did not kiss the lead), she would have likely had an identical fate of mere off-screen imprisonment, since the short story does not focus on her at all. Laurie, however, uses her sexuality, her cunning, and her violent tendencies, and thus her lover explicitly kills her.

The femme fatale poses an interesting cognitive dissonance to the American audience of her film. According to the traditional American Dream, a major goal in one's life is pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, becoming financially successful, and consistently striving to achieve a higher social status. This dream, in full force after the national victory in World War Two, would dictate that she should have the power to do whatever she wants, doing whatever it takes to climb in status. However, the patriarchy demands that she be subservient to men, content with her slot in life as a daughter, then as a wife and mother. These two competing ideologies come to a head in these films as the femme fatale attempts to take power for herself. Not only that, but the American Dream requires a selfishness to constantly fight for your own betterment. When these women choose to fight for their own independence, they are acting against the prevailing social idea that women are selfless. The femme fatale is willing to do anything to be an independent figure and achieve her goals—embodying this spirit of the American Dream. Concerning this cognitive dissonance, the men are at the forefront of creating these films choose to prioritize the patriarchy and stifle the ambition of the femme fatale rather than uphold the ideals of the American Dream. While it is not explicitly addressed in the text of the Hayes Production Code, upholding the patriarchy winds up being an important part of the imperative to uphold the strict moral standard. To do this, the femme fatale is used to teach the audience a heavy-handed lesson by killing or otherwise incapacitating the transgressive woman.

Despite the femme fatale consistently finishing her story with her power stripped from

her, our collective consciousness still remembers her as deadly and seductive. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that the femme fatale is a powerful woman for the majority of the work. Cora enjoys most of her story scheming to murder her husband and have an affair with the leading man, and she is not punished until the last few pages of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In the film version of *Gun Crazy*, Laurie gets multiple months committing theft and murder with her husband and is not killed until the last few moments of the film. Since the characters only get their punishment at the very end, the majority of the film, the part with the exciting seduction, violence, and scheming, is what sticks in an audience's mind. The character that does all the exciting things is the deadly, seductive femme fatale, not the dead femme fatale, and exciting characters stick in audience's minds more than dead ones do.

It is not just the timing of the femme fatale's life and death in films that played with the audience's perception of the femme fatale. Studios specifically advertised their leading women as deadly and seductive in order to draw in audiences who desired sex appeal and violence in film, but the Production Code meant that studios had to strike a delicate balance. They had to produce films that had enough sexual and violent content to draw in an audience that sought out sex and violence, while being careful not to alienate those who were more offended by that type of content (Smith 104).

One of the ways studios promoted their sexual and violent content in their movies was through the use of provocative, eye-catching posters. For example, the poster for *Too Late for Tears* (Figure 2) shows a man raising his hand to hit a cowering woman, holding her still with the other. This pose is also sexually charged, as the woman's red blouse and the yellow text box draws the eyes towards her chest. However, in the film, Jane (the femme fatale of the film) is the opposite of a coward, and Danny, the insurance investigator who gets caught up in the scheme, does not strike at Jane in this

way during the film. One might call this poster false advertising, as it does not truly represent how Jane and Danny interact during the film; however, it reinforces the patriarchy with the woman submitting to the man, appealing to the conservative crowd. It also draws in the more ambitious audience with its sexual and violent aspects, providing a perfect example of the balancing act movie studios used in their marketing for films, and how they toed the line on how they portrayed their films to draw in the largest crowd.



Figure 2. Poster for the film *Too Late for Tears*.

After the French defined film noir as a style, its classic elements became used so frequently that they became passe. The classic femme fatale finally faded into the past. In order to make them more interesting, studios had to deconstruct, subvert, and play with her in other ways to give the audience new experiences. Thanks to that, it is impossible to see a true straight-forwards 1940's style film noir as anything but a pastiche or homage to the real greats of the era. Noir plots are connected deeply to the social views of the time and are disconnected from those of today. The femme fatale is one of the biggest characters this

change affects, as it is no longer a transgression for women to be sexually and financially independent. Nowadays, modern deadly women like Catwoman from the Batman franchise, and Catherine from *Basic Instinct*, take their roots in murder and seduction but survive their stories. They no longer need to be punished to prove a patriarchal point. More, like Jessica from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, act like femme fatales initially but later reveal themselves to be on the side of the protagonist, allowing women to be both independent and good.

The second big reason the classic femme fatale fell out of fashion is because of the gains of the feminist movement. As women gained more rights in the 1960's second wave of feminism, stories about women doing desperate things to gain freedoms became less of a fuel for fantasy. Women no longer had to gain financial independence through crime when they could join the workforce normally so there was no need for escapism in the form of a femme fatale. They no longer had to consider murder as an option for disposing of a bad husband when divorce was becoming increasingly socially acceptable. As Shiela Johnston writes in her article for *The Independent*, women had increasing social and economic power now—even if it was more mundane than the power they had in film noir. Disempowered women no longer needed the fantasy of the femme fatale as a coping mechanism. The more relaxed attitudes of the 1960's around censorship also helped bring down the femme fatale with the fall of the Hayes Production Code. It was no longer necessary to punish every criminal for daring to break the law, nor was it necessary to hold up perfect moral standards and punish those who did not comply. Since the femme fatale was no longer alone in committing crimes, she lost her luster and faded away. Now, any woman can commit a murder or two without being an over-the-top villain who must be punished. They can even be redeemed, like Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

The femme fatale of the classic noir film has persisted in the public consciousness for years as a powerful and deceitful woman who seduces the leading man into a life of crime for her own benefit. However, as we have explored in this essay, she was never actually the unpunished sexy angel of death and destruction that we think of when we hear the term. More often than not she was killed, as we see in the films *Gun Crazy* and *Too Late for Tears*, as well as the novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The classic femme fatale reflected the women in post-World War Two America—caught between the American Dream and conforming to social expectations of how women behave before finally submitting to the patriarchy. She had a taste of freedom, but the patriarchy quickly stripped it from her, and she longed to return to the autonomy she had. This image of the femme fatale was carefully crafted to bring in the biggest audience while keeping the overseeing patriarchal structures intact. Her reinforcement of these structures could have contributed towards the dissuasion of women from taking agency over their lives, delaying the second wave of feminism to the sixties.

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