

**Sirens in Command: The Criminal Femme Fatale  
in American Hardboiled Crime Fiction**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities**

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## Abstract

**Of THESIS submitted by Maysaa Jaber to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and entitled “Sirens in Command: The Criminal Femme Fatale in American Hardboiled Crime Fiction”. August 2011**

This thesis challenges the traditional view of the “femme fatale” as merely a dangerous and ravenous sexual predator who leads men into ruination. Critical, especially feminist, scholarship mostly regards the femme fatale as a sexist construction of a male fantasy and treats her as an expression of misogyny that ultimately serves to reaffirm male authority. But this thesis proposes alternative ways of viewing the femme fatale by showing how she can also serve as a figure for imagining female agency. As such, I focus on a particular character type that is distinct from the general archetype of the femme fatale because of the greater degree of agency she demonstrates. This “criminal femme fatale” uses her sexual appeal and irresistible wiles both to manipulate men and to commit criminal acts, usually murder, in order to advance her goals with deliberate intent and full culpability.

This thesis reveals and explains the agency of the criminal femme fatales in American Hardboiled crime fiction between the late 1920s and the end of World War II in the works of three authors: Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. The criminal femme fatales in the narratives of these authors show a subversive power and an ability to act – even though, or perhaps only if, this action is a criminal one. I show that these criminal femme fatales exhibit agency through their efforts to challenge not only the “masculine” genre and the criminal space that this genre represents, but also to undercut the male protagonist’s role and prove his failure in asserting control and dominance. Hammett’s narratives provide good examples of how the criminal femme fatales function on a par with male gangsters in an underworld of crime and corruption. Chandler’s work demonstrates a different case of absent/present criminal women who are set against the detective and ultimately question his power and mastery. Cain’s narratives show the agency of the criminal femme fatales in the convergence between their ambition for social mobility and their sexual power over the male characters.

To explain how these female characters exhibit agency, I situate this body of literature alongside contemporaneous legal and medical discourses on female criminality. I argue that the literary female criminal is a fundamentally different portrayal because she breaks the “mad-bad” woman dichotomy that dominates both legal and medical discourses on female criminality. I show that the criminal femme fatales’ negotiations of female agency within hardboiled crime fiction fluctuate and shift between the two poles of the criminalized and the medicalized women. These criminal femme fatales exhibit culpability in their actions that bring them into an encounter with the criminal justice system and resist being pathologized as women who suffer from a psychological ailment that affect their control.

The thesis concludes that the ways in which the criminal femme fatales trouble normative socio-cultural conceptions relating to docile femininity and passive sexuality, not only destabilize the totality and fixity of the stereotype of the femme fatale in hardboiled crime fiction, but also open up broader debates about the representation of women in popular culture and the intersections between genre and gender.

## **Declaration**

that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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## Introduction

The term “femme fatale” circulates in literary, cinematic, and cultural portrayals of women. As a standard figure (even a cliché) in popular culture, the femme fatale is deemed to be sexually voracious, irresistible and dangerous, leading men to their ruination. She is an archetype, one as old as Eve – a figure who has existed in various forms since ancient times, in folklore, myths, and literatures. She comes to life in different guises: the spider woman, the evil seductress, the sexual predator; she stands for the vampire, the temptress, the wild woman, the prostitute, the murderess. She still makes her presence felt in literary works and films. The femme fatale became a stock component of mid-twentieth century crime fiction and film noir in the United States from the interwar period through to the post-World War II period; she has an overwhelming presence in these narratives. As will be the focus of this thesis, she particularly dominates the texts of hardboiled crime fiction, a distinctively American tradition of crime writing that originated in pulp magazines, most notably *The Black Mask* in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Hardboiled crime narratives tell stories of violence, corruption, and betrayal, and portray characters (both detectives and criminals) enmeshed in urban chaos and an amoral underworld, an underworld in which the femme fatale is more often than not a criminal: a beautiful and perhaps promiscuous woman with a gun who, by the end of the story, might shoot a man dead.

Literary and cinematic scholarship tends to see the femme fatale in literature and popular culture as a misogynistic construction. Much of the feminist criticism concerning the femme fatale criticizes how she is portrayed in the quintessential role of the “bad” woman, and how literary texts and films use a taxonomy which ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> For the history and survey study of pulp magazines see Sever (1993). For more on *Black Mask* and hardboiled crime fiction, see Nolan (1985) and Smith (2000).



reinforces the binary between “good” and “bad” women. The canonization of the femme fatale in iconic and rather static images of the dangerous “bad” woman is often read as a projection of a male fantasy that serves a misogynistic and phallogocentric worldview. Jack Boozer, for example, observes that the femme fatale in 1940s film noir is typically viewed as an “indicator of wartime misgivings about sex roles, marriage and sexuality” (1999: 20), adding that the femme fatale is a catalyst to men’s criminal behaviour in a way that “encouraged the blame heaped on women’s sexuality and furthered the calls for her sexual repression and restriction to the household” in society at large (21).<sup>2</sup> The current study, however, aims to complicate the notion of the femme fatale as simply a seductive and threatening woman by arguing that there is more to the femme fatale in American crime fiction than is usually allowed for. Specifically, I will examine representations of femme fatales that open a space for imagining female agency within fictional representation. The female characters that I discuss in the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction are agents who demonstrate power, intelligence, and independence as they successfully mobilize their skills in a male-dominated milieu (both textually and at large), breaking normative conceptions and expectations of gender roles by challenging the pattern of female submission, domesticity, and dependence. In order to reconsider the image of the femme fatale and explore the possibilities of her agency, I propose the term *criminal femme fatale*, a woman who goes beyond the arena of dangerous sexuality to enter the realm of criminality.

I examine the representations of criminal femme fatales in American hardboiled crime fiction, looking at the works of three authors: Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain. These three are not the only writers in this genre whose

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<sup>2</sup> Boozer also argues that the pervasive presence of the femme fatale in classic noir films clearly pointed to “a mass market” which wanted these women to be “put back in their domestic ‘place’” (1999: 22). See also Place (1978) for a compelling reading of the femme fatale in film noir.

works are popular and widely read. But, as influential, canonical authors who all offer compelling depictions of criminal femme fatales at the heart of their narratives, these writers open up the possibilities for recognizing versions of this figure in other works of literature. Moreover, these three authors' works enable a subversive reading of the roles of femme fatales in the light of their criminality. Such a reading makes it possible to reconsider the hardboiled genre as a transgressive space where gender roles can be reimagined.

Although one can find evidence of the kinds of transgressive female characters I am calling the criminal femme fatale in the early short stories published in pulp magazines such as *Black Mask* in the 1920s, this thesis concentrates on the presence of these figures in novels, where Hammett, Chandler, and Cain make a more sustained consideration of their dangerous female characters.<sup>3</sup> The narratives I have selected occupy a timeframe that begins in 1929, which marks the Wall Street Crash and the beginning of the Depression, as well as the year in which one of the very early hardboiled stories, Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, was published as a book.<sup>4</sup> I end my period roughly at the close of World War II, which precipitated a significant shift in gender roles in the US that was reflected in their representation in both fiction and film. This study thus focuses on criminal femme fatales in fiction, which largely preceded the cultural predominance of femme fatale iconography in film noir, especially after the end of the War.<sup>5</sup> I adhere to this periodization with one exception, which is my discussion of

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<sup>3</sup> Both Hammett and Chandler published short stories in *Black Mask*. Hammett made his first appearance in *Black Mask* with "Arson Plus" in 1923. His first two novels (*Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse*) were also serialized in this magazine between 1927 and 1929 before they were published as books. Chandler first appeared in 1933 with "Blackmailers Don't Shoot." He went on to publish many other short stories in the periodical, the plots of which were reworked for the novel format.

<sup>4</sup> *Red Harvest* was originally published in four parts serialized in *Black Mask* from November 1927 to February 1928, and it was published as a book only in February 1929.

<sup>5</sup> Film noir is usually bracketed between 1941 (*The Maltese Falcon*) and 1958 (*Touch of Evil*). This view, which is embraced by Schrader (1986) and some of the contributors to Kaplan's influential book *Women in Film Noir* (1978) such as Place, is challenged by other critics of film noir. For example, Palmer (1994) argues that film noir started in the late 1930s and early 1940s and continues to the present. Despite the

Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* published in 1953. No periodization marks an absolute division in time, and my brief analysis of this text, with which I conclude my third chapter, is included to complete my argument about female agency in this chapter.

As there is very little scholarship devoted to femme fatales in crime fiction rather than film noir, my chief aim is to call attention to the unique ways that fiction can imagine and represent female transgression and female agency – things that films may not be able to do in the same way. Because the figure of the femme fatale in cinema, especially in film noir, has been covered by a large number of critics, this study situates itself in the body of critical scholarship on crime fiction and aims to reclaim a space for the (criminal) femme fatale as a fictional figure and not merely as a cinematic construction. I also hope to challenge the surprising number of scholarly arguments that ignore the formal, structural, and generic differences between cinema and fiction, as if the female characters in the film should be interpreted in exactly the same way as the fictional characters, even if the adaptation is a faithful one. Thus, while I sometimes depend on criticism that mostly situates the femme fatale and/or the criminal female figure in cinema, I mainly avoid discussing the film adaptations of these works, even where the authors themselves were involved in the adaptation, such as in Raymond Chandler's work adapting James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* for the screen in 1944.<sup>6</sup> The one exception to this occurs at the end of my fourth chapter on James M. Cain,

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disagreement on the timeline of film noir, the late stages and the immediate aftermath of World War II marked the prominence of many noir films, which presented iconic images of the femme fatale on the big screen. As Krutnik (1991: 38) suggests, after a diversion during the early years of the War when Hollywood was under pressure to produce war films, the "hardboiled cycle" in film noir was in full strength between 1944 and 1948. Examples of noir films within this "hardboiled cycle," some of which are adaptations from hardboiled crime fiction, include, but not limited to: *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Laura* (1944), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Detour* (1945), *Fallen Angel* (1945), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *Lady in the Lake* (1947), and *Out of the Past* (1947).

<sup>6</sup> While it would be interesting to examine the filmic adaptations of hardboiled crime narratives, I focus in this thesis on the representations of women in crime fiction in order to fill the critical gap in the study of literary femme fatales, and hence begin to reinterpret these characters' transgressive potential as agent women in hardboiled crime texts.

where I briefly examine the film *Mildred Pierce* (1945) in comparison to Cain's 1941 novel of the same title. Here, in addition to showing what the changes in the adaptation can reveal about the novel, I use the filmic femme fatale to open up the debates that I gesture towards in my concluding chapter about the differences between film and fiction insofar as the representations of criminal femme fatales are concerned. Finally, this project is also interested in focusing almost exclusively on the fiction because it seeks to trace early representations of criminal femme fatales in American hardboiled crime fiction before the advent of overtly feminist female characters as criminals and/or detectives in crime fiction.<sup>7</sup> While other scholars have worked on feminist representations of female characters in later works of fiction, I want to determine to what extent these works by male authors can be read subversively as containing a space for female empowerment and female agency, even if the works themselves cannot be readily described as proto-feminist.

This study will map out representations of criminal femme fatales in the texts of Hammett, Chandler, and Cain by looking at different forms, and sometimes even formulating new understandings of female agency. These works of fiction do not provide a single or fixed image of the criminal femme fatale that is generalized across narratives. Nor do these narratives offer a single picture of the agency that these criminal femme fatales exhibit. Instead, the narratives offer varying images and manifestations of how these characters negotiate the space of male-centred narratives by operating as counterparts to the male characters in the underworld of crime and

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<sup>7</sup> Feminist detective fiction emerged in the 1970s and 1980s with the writings of female authors such as Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky, among others. The works under feminist detective fiction feature a female protagonist, usually a detective, who is an addition to the genre that is notorious for the central role of the male detective. The female detective is granted, in Smith's words, with "emotional baggage—conflicted friendships, troubling memories of dead parents—unknown to the hard-boiled, masculine, sturdy-individualist PI" (1991: 80). For more on feminist detective fiction see, for example, Knight (2004), Klein (1988 and 1995), Watson and Jones (1999), Munt (1994), Irons (1995), and Cranny-Francis (1988).

corruption. And although many criminal femme fatales show cunning intelligence, independence and control (as in, for example, Brigid in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and Mildred/Muriel in Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake*), the narratives also portray pathologized female characters who stand as foils to the criminal femme fatales. These pathologized characters do not assume full culpability, as the crimes they commit are related and indeed ascribed to psychological ailments (for example, Carmen in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and Gabrielle in Hammett's *The Dain Curse*). In proposing this analysis, I in no way mean to suggest that these narratives lack the kind of sexism and misogyny that critics have identified in these works for decades. Nevertheless, the chapters that follow still distinguish the ways in which these criminal femme fatales operate skilfully and ably within the limited spaces of the criminal underworlds they inhabit, and of the narratives themselves. This kind of subversive reading in turn clears a way to identify varied facets of these female characters' agency.

Despite the variable representations of these female characters across the different texts, however, it is still possible to extract some general characteristics of criminal femme fatales. The criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime fiction are not only women whose beauty and sexual charms ensnare men into compromising, even deadly, situations; they also wilfully transgress legal as well as social norms by committing criminal acts, for which they openly claim culpability. What I am calling the criminal femme fatales' agency is located at the intersection between their excessive display of feminine gender characteristics, such as the exaggerated sexuality they use to seduce and manipulate men to their advantage, and their apparent deviation from typical gender roles by engaging in "masculine" crime. In this way these characters not only transgress and disrupt norms of female sexuality that define women in terms of passivity, but also break the laws of society with their criminal acts. The transgressive

spaces that hardboiled narratives create for criminal femme fatales, in which their criminal actions trouble the male characters' attempts to assert control, invite a reading of female agency.

By "agency" I refer to criminal femme fatales' power and determination, their ability to use sexual appeal to realize their plans, and (often self-proclaimed) culpability in carrying out these acts. Yet the term "agency" is problematic: it is an "abstraction greatly underspecified, often misused, much fetishized these days by social scientists" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 37), which has been mobilized across disciplines and is available to varied and complex interpretations.<sup>8</sup> In the context of women's studies, agency has been understood by a number of scholars as an individual and psychological notion that, in Shoshana Pollack's words, refers to "an internal or psychological quality from which a woman derives a sense or feeling that she can function as an autonomous, self-determining individual" (2000: 82).<sup>9</sup> This definition, however, limits our understanding of agency to subjective aspects such as self-esteem and feelings of empowerment, and leaves out a larger context of cultural, social, political and, economic conditions, which ground the marginalization of women and circumvent their capacity to be agents, as critics such as Laura Ahearn have argued.<sup>10</sup> I agree with Martha R. Mahoney's critique that the difficulty in reaching an understanding of agency

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<sup>8</sup> A number of scholars propose different types of agency. Ortner (2001) suggests a differentiation between "agency of power" and "agency of intention", although she acknowledges the practical difficulty in making these distinctions. Others, such as Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom (1993), Vygotsky *et al* (1978, 1987), and Bateson (1972) propose a non-individualistic approach to agency because "it is frequently a property of groups and involves 'mediational means' such as language and tools" (qtd. in Ahearn 2001: 113).

<sup>9</sup> Pollack notes and criticizes the psychological paradigm within which the concept of agency is often individualized, especially in discussions about female criminality. That is, in the context of criminal women "*feelings* of disempowerment, rather than *actual* disempowerment, lead to women's lawbreaking behaviour" (2000: 82, original emphasis). See McClellan, Farabee, and Crouch (1997), Henriques and Jones-Brown (1998), and Sommers (1995) for accounts of agency in relation to female offenders. For more on agency in relation to social work, see Young (1994), Browne (1995), and Townsend (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Ahearn (2001: 112-13) rehearses some of the questions that militate against a simplified definition of agency: "Must agency be individual, leading to charges of unwarranted assumptions regarding Western atomic individualism (Ortner 1996)? ...What does it mean to be an agent of someone else? Must agency be conscious, intentional, or effective? What does it mean for an act to be conscious, intentional, or effective?"

revolves around how the concept of victim and that of agent are seen as mutually exclusive. Mahoney criticizes the dominant misconception that “agency and victimization are each known by the absence of the other: you are an agent if you are not a victim, and you are a victim if you are in no way an agent” (1994: 64). The risk of defining agency in the total absence of victimization and marginalization is that such a definition renders invisible the oppressive contexts in which women operate.<sup>11</sup> Bearing this in mind, I will expand my understanding of agency, as I use it in relation to criminal femme fatales, to call attention to their power, will, and independence, but also to address the tension between discourses of free will against those of containment and punishment which hardboiled narratives invoke. This expansive definition is therefore flexible enough to accommodate the nuances of different texts and contexts that I will delineate in the following chapters.

The variable forms of agency in hardboiled crime novels can be found, for example, in these female characters’ attempts to engage in criminal activities alongside other male criminals and gangsters.<sup>12</sup> The agency that these criminal femme fatales exhibit is not absolute, but is mobilized in a limited space within the hardboiled narratives and shown through forms which might not initially appear to look like agency. For example, in my third chapter on Raymond Chandler, the women characters do not dominate the narrative, yet this absence can nevertheless be read an aspect of female agency. Chandler’s female characters destabilize the authority of the detective, Philip Marlowe, despite or because of their absence. Hence, my reading is different from other studies that focus on the detective. What some critics read as the dominance

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<sup>11</sup> The victimization of women is ascribed to male power and domination both on the individual and institutional levels. It is usually discussed in relation to living under oppression. On the victimization of women, see, for example, Dobash and Dobash (1979 and 1998) and Hanmer (1978). Nonetheless, a number of scholars such as Austin (1995), Mahoney (1994), Abrams (1995), Richie (1996), and Chetkovich (2004) show how women can act as agents even under oppression.

<sup>12</sup> See Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*, for example.

of a male narrative via the powerful presence of the detective, I read as an example of how the “invisible” criminal femme fatale undermines the power of the detective by hindering his attempts to solve the mystery and establish order. My reading of (in)visible agency prepares the ground for more complex formulations of agency to be explored. For example, I suggest that women characters who act as accessories to crimes, such as Vivian in Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, offer another variation of women’s agency. While Vivian’s sister, Carmen, initially seems to embody a more obvious form of agency, Vivian herself as an accomplice helping and manipulating her sister from the background is ironically more able to advance her agenda of seizing the family wealth, despite not being the primary antagonist. Yet another variation on female agency is explored in my fourth chapter on James Cain. Here, I challenge the established reading of Cora’s death at the end of Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as a punishment or containment of the female character. I argue alternatively that Cora not only gains the upper hand over both the male protagonist and the criminal justice system, but also continues her dominance over Frank even in death. Thus, the agency of criminal femme fatales in these works takes different forms, such as self-actualization, subtle manipulation to get others to act on their behalf, disguise and faked identities, and gaining power by destabilizing the mastery of the male characters – all methods whereby these texts comment on the perceived containment of women in America at that time.

In understanding how these different hardboiled texts imagine multiple forms of women’s agency, I borrow from Wendy Chan’s (2001) and Arlene Elowe MacLeod’s (1992) valuable remarks on agency, which take into consideration the complexities around the term as a multilayered concept. The former argues that although women are constructed in a male-dominated society, the ways in which agency is negotiated in this



context “reveal a more complex and entangled situation than prevailing assumptions allow for” (2001: 13). I also mobilize MacLeod’s reading of women as “subordinate players” who play “an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest – sometimes all at the same time” (1992: 534). I use this conceptualization to argue that the criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime fiction are main players in their narratives, who master the game of seduction and domination. Thus, fiction is a space for these notions to be realized. As Pollack suggests, one can speak of two aspects of women’s agency: individual/subjective and external/political. These two aspects are not unconnected: “*Political agency*, the opportunity for effecting change in women’s lives, provides the context in which *subjective* agency evolves” (Pollack 2000: 83, original emphasis). The intersections between political and subjective agency parallel those between societal oppression and acts of female resistance,<sup>13</sup> thereby providing a perspective from which to understand agency as a broad and flexible concept. This multilayered understanding of agency reveals the non-fixity and the fluidity of the term as I employ it in this study and accounts for its different forms in hardboiled crime narratives, as I explained above.

Although hardboiled crime fiction is often described as a “men’s genre” (Irwin 2002: 264), in which, according to many readings, female characters serve the purpose of asserting the male characters’ control, the inevitable complexity of any literary work means that these novels can still be read as vehicles for a critique of traditional gender roles and of a broader socio-cultural and political milieu.<sup>14</sup> Hence, despite the unmistakable sexism and misogyny in the novels in this genre, which perhaps initially

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<sup>13</sup> Many feminist readings of agency argue that resistance to the patriarchal order is necessary in order to demonstrate agency (Goddard 2000: 3). For more on resistance and agency see Bosworth (1999), Faith (1993), Sanchez (1999), MacLeod (1992), and Ortner (1995).

<sup>14</sup> See Brauer (2003) for an excellent survey of the scholarship on 1930s crime fiction that focuses on its relation to cultural and historical contexts and its function as social and political critique.

reveal dominant and prevailing societal norms and thus prevent us from treating them as proto-feminist works, it is still possible to offer a counter-reading of women's roles that accounts for their power. I argue that what emerges from the narratives – when taking the femme fatale and inserting her in a criminal underworld – is a space where we can read their agency. That is to say, through close reading the narratives of Hammett, Chandler, and Cain, I explore the possibilities for uncovering, recognizing, and creatively imagining subversive female roles in the narratives. The ways the texts incorporate varied models of criminality infused with dangerous femininities reveal varying forms of agency that enable more positive readings of gender transgression. This study, however, does not use biographical material of the authors' lives, nor does it approach the narratives from authorial point of view. Despite the connections between these authors, especially as scriptwriters in Hollywood,<sup>15</sup> I avoid questions of authorial intention and speculations about why Hammett, Chandler, and Cain created these particular female characters. The trends that this thesis addresses are cultural and discursive; they exceed the bounds of any single biographical subject. I have worked from the assumption that fictional works can contain far greater levels of meaning and significance than their authors intended or even could have anticipated. The radically feminist potential of reading forms of agency within these criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime fiction – for which there may not necessarily be any evidence of an authorial intent – is, I think, a key example of the complex possibilities that are specific to fiction.

Therefore, the present consideration of women's criminality will emphasize women's agency without understating the misogyny in the genre. My reading of the roles of the criminal femme fatales does not wholly exclude or deny the misogyny or

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<sup>15</sup> For biographical material on Hammett, see Layman (1981) and Marling (1983); for Chandler, see Hiney (1997) and Marling (1986); and for Cain, see Hoppes (1982) and Madden (1970).

oppressive milieu in which these women are positioned in the male-authored narratives. But at the same time I acknowledge the powerful roles of criminal femme fatales in these works, not as marginal figures whose presence, according to some readings, merely reveals and fulfils a male fantasy.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, I will attempt to untangle the issues that surround the agency of women in hardboiled crime fiction, situating my reading against other readings that dominate the literary scholarship of hardboiled narratives, such as Frank Krutnik's description of hardboiled fiction as "an empathic process of masculinisation" (1991: 42),<sup>17</sup> and hence reexamine questions of misogyny and the containment of female characters in different and innovative ways.

By focusing on agency, this study aims to reorient critical attention cast on femme fatales in order to examine these characters as multi-faceted, complex figures who work to break the patriarchal order of women's entrapment within a domestic sphere. I also problematize the binary opposition between "bad women" and "good women," on which the very notion of the femme fatale depends, a binary that usually favours the "good" woman and seeks to contain the "bad" one.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the scholarship on the femme fatale comprises mainly of two trends – the first delineating the history of the representations of the femme fatale and the second addressing the cinematic presence of the femme fatale – and mostly favours the positioning of the femme fatale within the spectacle of male fantasy. A good example is Mary Ann Doane's influential book *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, in

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Place (1978). Not only does Place maintain that women in film noir are defined by their sexuality, but also "*in relation to men*" (35, original emphasis). She adds that the "centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture."

<sup>17</sup> Nyman provides a similar reading of hardboiled crime fiction. He argues that that the genre primarily serves to reaffirm American masculinity and a "disturbed masculine social order" (1997: 3).

<sup>18</sup> Both Gledhill (1978) and Place (1978) discuss what the latter calls "the two poles of female archetypes": the "dark lady ... and her sister (or alter ego) the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer" (35). Gledhill also describes this polarity in similar terms; women "on the fingers of the underworld ... bar-flies, night club singers, expensive mistresses, *femme fatales*, and ruthless gold-diggers ... and then there are women on the outer margins of this world, wives, long-suffering girlfriends, would-be fiancées who are victims of male crime, sometimes the object of the hero's protection and often points of vulnerability in his masculine armour" (14, original emphasis).

which she defines *the* femme fatale as a “figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma,” who is merely a “carrier” rather than a subject of her conscious will (1991: 2). Doane also maintains that the femme fatale’s body is overdetermined and has an agency independent of her consciousness – the femme fatale thus “has power *despite herself*” (2, original emphasis). That is, the femme fatale, according to this view, occupies an ambivalent position as she “overrepresents” the body, (her body is “allegorized and mythified as excess”), but she is not the subject of the power that her body has. To Doane, the femme fatale encounters an “evacuation of intention,” rendering her no more than an “articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the [male’s] self, the ‘I’, the ego” (2).<sup>19</sup> As well as linking the femme fatale to the notion of castration anxiety, Doane also strips her of any agency: the “textual eradication” of the femme fatale reasserts the control of the threatened male subject (2). This study sets itself apart from arguments such as Doane’s by exploring the culpability of criminal femme fatales (as a plural category that does not adhere to one definition) and the ways that these characters use their sexual appeal to fulfil their ambitions. Rather than addressing how the femme fatale reasserts male power through her containment, I focus on reading the hardboiled narratives’ representational dynamics of *criminal* femme fatales as women in control of their bodies and ultimately destabilizing male mastery.

Studies of the history of the representations of the femme fatale are distributed across different epochs and disciplines. The nineteenth century is an important moment in that it witnessed an explosion of femme fatales, especially in the literature and art of

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<sup>19</sup> Allen (1983: 2) also positions the femme fatale as an embodiment of the “that moment of abandonment in the sex act—a loss of self-awareness following a conscious seduction of the male.”

the fin-de-siècle period, and has thus been the focus of many critical studies.<sup>20</sup> The pervasive presence of the femme fatale at that time denotes the “confluence of modernity, urbanization, Freudian psychoanalysis and new technologies of production and reproduction (photography and cinema) born of the Industrial Revolution” (Doane 1991: 1). Examples of the scholarship on the nineteenth century femme fatale include Bram Dijkstra’s 1986 study, which examines images of women in the second half of the nineteenth century in both European and American art, and shows that the representation of the femme fatale was influenced by quasi-scientific discourses of the period, such as evolutionary theory and Darwinism. Rebecca Stott (1992) also studies the femme fatale in the Victorian age, contending that she is “fabricated” – that is, she is constructed according to the specific preoccupations and predilections of the Victorians. For Stott, the positionality of the femme fatale is intimately related to and probably dependent upon dominant nineteenth century notions of sexuality and class – the seductive woman with destructive sexuality thus embodies fears about threats to the normative sexuality of Victorian society. Similarly, the hardboiled crime fiction that I am examining explores post-war male anxiety and fear of sexual and economic female power. And yet, I propose an alternative reading that reclaims the positive dimension of female power in these texts.

Yet it is film scholarship that has arguably played the most vital role in formulating critical attitudes regarding the femme fatale.<sup>21</sup> Laura Mulvey’s theorization of the male gaze (1975) – which mostly centres on misogyny and the objectification of screen women – is perhaps the most influential and oft-cited example used in feminist

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the femme fatale, especially in fin-de-siècle period, see Auerbach (1982), Allen (1983), Menon (2006), and Craciun (2003).

<sup>21</sup> Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” was first published in 1975 in film theory journal, *Screen*, but was republished a number of times since then. I am using the reprinted article in Durham and Kellner’s *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* (2006).

scholarship on the femme fatale.<sup>22</sup> Feminist film scholarship, which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, saw the classic film noir of the 1940s and 1950s as ripe for analysis, reading the femme fatale figure of this film genre from a range of perspectives.<sup>23</sup> The continuous debate about the position of the femme fatale is part of a larger conversation about gender representation that rehearses issues of identity, race, and fantasy, with many analyses circling back to whether or not the femme fatale is an objectification of male desire. Nonetheless, film critics have recognized the inherent contradictions that the femme fatale embraces, contradictions which are neatly encapsulated in two distinct positions in the feminist conceptualization of the femme fatale (Grossman 2009: 1).

The first understands the femme fatale as a projection of post-war male desire and anxieties. This position, which informs the majority of the criticism, presents itself as a feminist critique of patriarchy and owes much to psychoanalysis in framing its deconstruction of the films. Examples of this criticism include Doane (1991), Krutnik (1991), and Maxfield (1996), but more importantly Ann Kaplan's seminal collection of essays *Women in Film Noir* (1978/1998), which contains some of the most celebrated readings that shaped the field of feminist criticism of women in film noir. Janey Place's essay, for instance, is fairly orthodox in its description of noir as "hardly 'progressive'" as its women do not resist their fate (1978: 35). Place acknowledges, however, the power of women's sexuality (which ultimately has to be destroyed by men) that problematizes a straightforward reading of noir women as "static symbols." Kaplan's collection also offers other readings that deal with female confinement within the masculine domain of film noir. For example, Pam Cook provides a compelling reading of the control of women and describes how the 1945 film *Mildred Pierce* is an example

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<sup>22</sup> For studies of the femme fatale in film noir see, for example, Gledhill (1978), Harvey (1978), Place (1978), Dyer (1978), Cook (1978 and 1993) Maxfield (1996), Snyder (2001), Vares (2002), Scruggs (2004), Hanson (2007), Hales (2007), and Grossman (2007 and 2009).

<sup>23</sup> A common trope that emerged was male anxiety with women's acquisition of power and economic influence during the war. See, for example, Boozer (1999) and Scruggs (2004).

of reinstating the patriarchal order, a reading that I will engage with in my chapter on James M. Cain. Sylvia Harvey also discusses the absence of the nuclear family in film noir as an indicator that invites the “consideration of alternative institution for the reproduction of social life” (1978: 33). Claire Johnston’s psychoanalytic reading of the 1944 film *Double Indemnity* stretches away from the focus on the central role of the woman that I am concerned with in this study, and looks instead at the film as an Oedipal drama that serves to instate the role of the Father. In fact her contention that the genre “performs a profoundly confirmatory function for the reader ... by the assertion of the unproblematic nature of the Law” (1978: 100), shows how a lot of the filmic critical arguments of the femme fatale limit her by emphasizing her containment. These readings are helpful insofar as they enable my counter-reading of the roles of this figure in fiction not only as femme fatales but as criminal women who transgress the distinctions between law and crime and hence maintain their power in the male-dominated underworld of the narratives.

The second line of argument that dominates film criticism conversely reads the femme fatale as a symbol of unchecked female power.<sup>24</sup> The femme fatale here is a “lawless agent of female desire, rebelling against ... patriarchal regulation” (Grossman 2009: 4). Christine Gledhill (1978), Helen Hanson (2007) and Julie Grossman (2009), who see female sexuality as an index of strength, not weakness, all occupy this critical position. Each of these critics makes a different case for women’s power in noir: Gledhill interprets the femme fatale as an archetype designating the “mysterious and unknowable power of women” (1978: 122), an approach criticized by Grossman (2009:

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<sup>24</sup> For similar readings, see also Wager (1999: xiv), who traces the roots of film noir to Weimar street film, as well as addressing spectatorship in her analysis of the female film viewer. She argues that film noir is not merely focused on male experience and that the films offer “stories that address a female spectator by providing her with various visual and narrative pleasures.”

4-5).<sup>25</sup> Hanson suggests that there is more to the women in the 1940s than reducing their agency to sexuality. To Hanson, this is due to limitations of the Hollywood genre and the ways that the femme fatale has been linked to anxieties raised by World War II and its aftermath (2007: 4).<sup>26</sup> She adds that the femme fatale is only “one manifestation of the ‘tough’ female characterization during the 1940s” (5). She thus concentrates on “Hollywood heroines” in noir and female gothic film, addressing women’s narratives rather than merely female images by focusing on a range of alternative representations of women, such as what she calls the “working-girl investigator.”<sup>27</sup> Grossman criticizes the extant scholarship on women in film noir, demonstrating the “limits of psychoanalytic readings which seek to abstract representations of men and women from the social world” (2009: 2). But despite Grossman’s bold assertion that her study veers away from the spectator and gaze theory, and that her aim is to shed light on women’s narratives rather than “mystifying women as objects or images”, her focus remains on women as victims in film noir.<sup>28</sup> Grossman’s reading of women in film noir is another example of how the critical readings of the cinematic femme fatale, even when not focusing on issues of control and containment, still pay little attention to venues where these characters demonstrate agency. Although these readings, including Grossman’s, point to the power of femme fatales, they do not go as far as recognizing their subversive roles or uncovering their transgressive potential.

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<sup>25</sup> Grossman (2009: 5) criticizes Gledhill’s description of the power of the femme fatale as “mysterious and unknowable” on the basis that this view not only participates in producing a “misreading” of many films in the noir genre, but has also “fed into cultural and critical obsessions with the bad, sexy woman, which inevitably become prescriptive and influence cultural discourse about female agency in counterproductive ways.”

<sup>26</sup> Hanson leans on Neal’s contention that the category of the femme fatale, within the domain of film, is “heterogeneous” and is not limited to film noir (Neale 2000: 153).

<sup>27</sup> Hanson explains that the “working-girl,” for example, the secretary in films such as *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *The Dark Corner* (1946), are qualified to assume the role of the “investigator” by their “possession of intelligence, resolve and resourcefulness” (2007: 19).

<sup>28</sup> Grossman states that women in film noir are doubly victimized, first by “the social rules that dictate gender roles and, second, [by] reading practices that overidentify with and overinvest in the idea of the ‘femme fatale’” (2009: 2).



Although this thesis is not primarily concerned with films, the critical scholarship that emanates from this field has developed a number of key arguments regarding the figure of the femme fatale, and I will use this scholarship as a point of reference against which I will advance my textual analysis of hardboiled literary texts. As illustrated above, the critical scholarship is extensive where the femme fatale on the big screen is concerned, while a significant gap in the study of femme fatales in crime fiction remains, which this study tries to fill. However, the insights from the cinematic criticism are valuable to the ways in which I frame my argument on criminal femme fatales in crime fiction, especially in my fourth chapter on James M. Cain. The second position delineated above, which acknowledges the power of the cinematic femme fatale, assists my reading of criminal femme fatales in the fictional texts, many of which inspired the body of film noir that emerged in the late 1940s, or even served as the basis for filmic adaptations. My engagement with the scholarship on film noir helps to identify and scrutinize female power in the literary texts, and also reveals the depth and complexity of criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime narratives as figures who resist easy categorization either as objects of the male gaze or as dangerous bodies to be labelled and contained.

Hence, despite the valuable insights that both historical and cinematic treatments of femme fatales furnish, these are limited in their conceptualization of female agency within the literary texts examined here. While both focus, to varying degrees, on issues of victimization, objectification, and misogyny in the representations of the femme fatale, this study alternatively emphasizes female power and agency of criminal women in hardboiled crime fiction. I thus propose an approach to the study of the criminal femme fatales in crime fiction that involves reading these characters alongside other discourses pertinent to an understanding of women's criminality, namely criminological

and medical discourses. An examination of the criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime narratives through the lens of medico-legal discourses permits a different perspective to that found in other studies of the femme fatale. This approach concentrates on representations of female criminality, and engages both the discourses and the feminist critiques that deal with the construction and conceptualization of images of criminal women. Situating criminological depictions of the female criminal next to literary ones allows me to reconsider the roles of criminal femme fatales in the hardboiled narratives as agent women.<sup>29</sup>

I thus explain the evolution of common assumptions, preconceptions and theorizations about female criminality in my first chapter on medico-legal discourses. Although Hammett's, Chandler's and Cain's different representations of criminal femme fatales are tied to a range of historical and literary contexts, including the socio-economic and political factors precipitated by the Depression and the shifting of gender roles during World War II, the ways that the narratives rewrite the figure of the femme fatale as a criminal can be seen most clearly when we examine the differences between these literary representations and the depictions of female criminals in criminological discourses. I therefore do not explain these novels exclusively through a detailed historical discussion of the political, socio-economic, and sexual politics of the US at the time. Instead, I refer to these contextual dynamics (for example, Prohibition, the Depression, World War II) mainly to help situate and reveal more fully the discourses of criminality and policing in the US during this period and continuing even to today (these are especially pertinent to my discussion of Hammett's *Red Harvest* in my second chapter). Hence, Chapter One examines both criminological arguments that are

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<sup>29</sup> Nicole Rafter's *Shots in the Mirror* (2000) also employs theories of criminality in her study of crime films. As a law professor, she argues that views of criminality are products of their time and with this in mind addresses a range of film genres including noir. She contends that film noir is an "alternative tradition" which presents crime as the rule rather than the exception (60). Her work, however, is limited to film, and does not look at crime fiction with which this study is concerned.

contemporary to the fiction and later feminist criminological critiques of those arguments, especially with respect to their designation of criminal women as “mad” and/or “bad.” This focus permits me to advance a reinterpretation of literary criminal femme fatales as figures who push the boundaries of these traditional images and challenge discourses of containment and control.

By showing how medico-legal discourses were used to judge, explain and control women’s behaviour in the interwar period and after, I will thus compare the ways that these knowledge economies characterize women to the ways hardboiled crime writers depicted women involved in crime.<sup>30</sup> These literary and criminological representations operate in dialogue, though not necessarily in harmony, with one another, and offer an entry point to begin interpreting female criminality in hardboiled crime fiction in new ways. I do not, however, uncover *a* model of female criminality based on criminological data that I discuss in Chapter One, nor do I aim to apply a specific type of female criminal behaviour to the hardboiled crime narratives. Rather, the goal here is to show that when we read the literary texts against and/or alongside what is being said about female criminality elsewhere at the same time, we see how the differences between these two discourses provide ways to reread the representations of female criminals in literary texts. Hence I do not propose that the fictional female criminal emerged from criminological discourses contemporary to hardboiled crime narratives, and I am also not making the case that “real” criminal women are the

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<sup>30</sup> There are a number of studies that address the “disordered” femme fatale in film noir. For example, Doane argues for the tendency to medicalize women in American films in the 1940s. These films were prevalent “when Hollywood attempted on a rather large scale to incorporate and popularize psychoanalysis as the latest medical ‘technology,’ is a cluster of films which depict female madness, hysteria, or psychosis” (1985: 206). Hales (2007), who makes the case for the influence of Weimar culture on film noir, also argues that medial discourse is particularly relevant to films directed by German émigrés to defining the relation between mental illness and criminality. She discusses the female “sexual criminal” suggesting that she is a response to constructions of masculine identity that ascended in the wake of the First World War. For more on medical discourse in film noir, see also Snyder (2001) and Fischer (1983).

originary source from which criminal femme fatales emerged. Rather, I aim to show that different depictions of female criminals between criminological and literary discourses highlight how hardboiled crime narratives offer transgressive portrayals of criminal women as femme fatales who cross the boundaries between feminine behaviours and masculine criminal acts. For example, the image that emerges from criminological discourses on the female criminal, especially that put forward by feminist criminological scholarship is that of an abused, somehow helpless woman who is a victim of a male-dominated criminal justice system and a broader societal order. The array of criminal women in hardboiled crime narratives, by contrast, illustrates images of criminal femme fatales who demonstrate ambition and autonomy and assume culpability in the crimes they fiercely commit to fulfil material gains. Therefore, I aim to reveal that agency is determined through reading available discourse against fictional representation.

In order to read the representations of criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime fiction, I will frequently use the terms *criminalized* and *medicalized* women. The prominence of these terms in criminological and medical discourses provides a useful terminology for mapping out the roles of criminal women in crime fiction. These discourses also enable us to use these terms to look at the different ways the narratives depict the criminal femme fatales. The criminalized woman as presented in the hardboiled crime narratives is a lawbreaking, frequently murderous woman placed in an encounter with the police or law enforcement institutions and pitted against the justice system. She manifests autonomy and self-control and takes responsibility for her actions. The medicalized woman, conversely, is pathologized in a narrative that links her criminal acts to a psychological ailment or mental illness. This pathologization questions and ultimately countermands her agency and her culpability in the texts (that

is, her capacity to be accountable for her actions). In hardboiled crime fiction, these two manifestations of female roles are not inherently incongruous or contradictory, nor are they fundamentally inconsistent with the notion of female agency. Rather, they offer a continuum on which negotiations of criminal femme fatales' agency take place. The criminalization and medicalization of criminal women in these novels necessarily draw the discourses of literary and crime studies together. This facilitates a reading of women that complicates the extant scholarship on the femme fatale. Through an analysis of the differences between criminological and literary discourses on the female criminal, I show how criminal femme fatales in hardboiled narratives trouble the misogynistic stereotyping of the femme fatale as an archetype of seduction and manipulation by demonstrating multiple forms of agency.

Hardboiled crime fiction developed in the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s, fully maturing in the 1940s. The genre can be said to emerge from the turmoil spawned by Prohibition, the Depression and two World Wars. Expressive of cultural concerns in American society and more broadly addressing (and often challenging) the structures and patterns of cultural realities as far as gender, race and class are concerned,<sup>31</sup> hardboiled crime fiction renders a dark portrait of what Raymond Chandler describes as “a world gone wrong [where] [t]he law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night” (1964: 7). In contrast to British detective fiction, in which the detective is the main crime solver, hardboiled crime fiction changes the formula from ratiocination, the solution of the mystery and accomplishment of justice, to a grim depiction of the “mean streets” where a “hardboiled” detective strives (with varying degrees of success) to protect himself

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<sup>31</sup> For readings of class in crime fiction see, for example, Denning (1998) and Smith (2000); for race, see Reddy (2003), Pepper (2000), and Klein (1999); for gender see Plain (2001), Nyman (1997), Forter (2000), Breu (2005), and Cranny-Francis (2002).

from the threats posed by attractive and dangerous women. Linda Mizejewski describes the transition from the classical detective to his hardboiled analogue, as “Americanized and masculinized in the same breath,” emblemizing a shift to the detective “hero” who takes possession of urban America. The hardboiled formula encompasses “Danger, deadly women, tests of wit, and macho personas – add guns, booze, and reckless bravado, and the testosterone-driven model of this hero is complete” (Mizejewski 2004: 17).

Primarily written by male authors,<sup>32</sup> hardboiled crime fiction is considered “male oriented” both as far as its notoriety as a “masculine genre” and the history of its literary criticism are concerned. Masculine toughness and masculine codes are essential in hardboiled narratives, and are part, as Jopi Nyman argues, of a larger ideology of masculinity: “the focus is now on the different constructions of gender and their relationship to culture and history rather than on an individual writer’s intentions” (1997: 39). Bethany Ogdon also suggests that the genre’s “hardboiled ideology” is predicated on the narratives of “white heterosexual men” (1992: 71). The detective’s masculinity in relation to notions of individualism and toughness are amply discussed by critics of the genre.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the femme fatale is typically mentioned only as a clichéd component of a formula that privileges the male detective – indeed, she is often discussed only to shed more light on the detective himself. This study, however, aims to question the apparently hegemonic masculinity of the genre by carefully reading images of criminal femme fatales and showing how they represent a threat to the detective by challenging both his mission and his physical and emotional security. I also propose that

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<sup>32</sup> This is not to suggest that there are no female authors who wrote detective or crime stories. Anna Katherine Green and Mary Roberts Rinehart created female detectives around the same period that this study covers. Yet, it is notable that the voice of these female writers was subsumed by the overwhelming presence of male authors at the time, and it is only recently that critics have given sustained attention to these female authors. For more on early female hardboiled crime authors, see Nickerson (1998) and Maida (1989).

<sup>33</sup> See Nyman (1995 and 1997), Breu (2005), Abbott (2002), and Worpole (1983).

the hardboiled crime narratives offer negotiations of female agency that challenge the “masculine ideology” of containment and punishment, an ideology preoccupied with “confronting and taming the monstrous ... [through] a narrative that ‘makes safe’” (Plain 2001: 3). I argue differently that the criminal femme fatales in the narratives of this genre take central and even superior roles and thus undercut the tough persona of the detective by thwarting or showing the futility of his efforts to fulfil justice and solve the mystery. That is, not only are these criminal femme fatales competitors to their male counterparts in the narratives, but they also mobilize their skills as important players within the male-dominated underworld of the narratives.

The issue of genre in crime fiction (and film noir) has been considered problematic and overlapping in terms of classification and terminology.<sup>34</sup> I use the term “crime fiction” as a broad term that encompasses the detective and non-detective narratives that this study addresses. The critical debates about crime fiction vary greatly, not only in terms of terminologies but also approaches and categorizations.<sup>35</sup> Critics have approached hardboiled crime fiction from many different perspectives, usually mentioning the femme fatale as an iconic figure of the genre. Yet the issue of the criminality of femme fatales has not been fully investigated, particularly with respect to female power in the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction. This study, however, does not provide an exhaustive overview of the genre, and it is not a historical survey. If anything, it intends to move away from the generic complexities of the history of crime

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<sup>34</sup> I will describe hardboiled crime fiction as a “genre” throughout this study, despite critical disagreement on using “genre” or “subgenre” to refer to the hardboiled tradition. For more details on genres and formulas, see for example Cawelti (1976). Also, there are different views on the classification of crime fiction. Knight in *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2004), contends that terms like “hardboiled” and “golden age” are emotive and suggests “private eye” and “clue-puzzle” respectively.

<sup>35</sup> Longhurst, in his introduction to *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure* (1989), gives a comprehensive overview of how popular fiction has been studied within two different traditions. The first approaches works of popular fiction from a sociological perspective, portraying them as commodities; the second adopts the vantage point of what Longhurst calls “English Lit.,” which views popular fiction as the negative counterpart to “high” or “great” literature.

fiction and genre models that have been extensively addressed by a number of critics including Julian Symons (1985), Dennis Porter (1981), Stephen Knight (1980 and 2004), Robin Winks (1980), and John C. Cawelti (1976), who focus on formulas of and divisions within crime fiction, as well as issues of genre and the distinction between high and popular culture.<sup>36</sup>

I will concentrate specifically on the hardboiled narratives where the figure of the criminal femme fatale is most apparent – even as she varies in appearance from text to text. Not only do the narratives of Hammett, Chandler, and Cain feature criminal femme fatales in abundance, they also offer a spectrum of possibilities with respect to female agency.<sup>37</sup> The current study, in its focus on these three authors, is thus most interested in the emergence of criminal femme fatales in the incipient years of hardboiled crime writing, before other, possibly different forms of the femme fatale achieved an iconic status in film noir in the post-World War II period. By so doing, I trace the depictions of criminal femme fatales prior to post-war era in the US when the “Hollywood lethal siren” became prominent (Boozer 1999: 20). Arguably, World War II and its aftermath marked considerable shifts in the US not only in the political and socio-economic scenes, but also in cultural and sexual politics.<sup>38</sup> The return of the GIs to a new reality of working independent women shook the stability of gender roles and normative views on marriage and sexuality, a shift echoed in Hollywood through numerous images of femme fatales in film noir. I argue, however, that representations of transgressive women, who break the laws of society and show independence and autonomy in their actions, can be traced to crime fiction that preceded the post-war era.

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Stowe (1986) for a detailed account of the debates around the divide between high and low culture. Stowe outlines the two main positions towards popular culture, what he calls “elitist” and “populist,” trends in relation to crime fiction.

<sup>37</sup> Other writers of the same period whose work features femme fatales include Horace McCoy, Paul Cain, Cornell Woolrich, and W.R. Burnett.

<sup>38</sup> See Friedan (1965).



Indeed, as I will speculate at the end of this thesis, it even seems to be the case that Hollywood limited the representation of this gender transgression more than in the case of fiction, making it all the more important to understand crime fiction on its own terms.

This study comprises four main chapters and a concluding chapter. My first chapter, “The Mad-Bad Woman,” maps out frameworks of the study of female criminality. Through an examination of the literature on female criminality, this chapter draws upon a range of discourses in an attempt to show the differences between the literary representations of criminal women in hardboiled narratives and those in criminological and medical literature. Despite the ostensible credibility that criminology assumes as a discipline concerned with “real” criminal women, I argue that the construction of the female criminal in medico-legal discourses during this period is inflected by the gendered assumptions of the male-dominated discipline of criminology. Feminist criminology, which developed in the 1970s, went some way to correct these biases, but is also problematic in its conceptualization of the female criminal as a victim who is stripped of any culpability to commit criminal acts. In contrast to these discourses, I read hardboiled crime fiction as offering a different imaging of criminal women. Despite the male-authored narratives that dominate the hardboiled genre in this period, the female criminals they depict exhibit different forms of agency that question the images of the mad and/or bad woman so prevalent in medico-legal discourses.

Chapter Two, “Narratives of the Underworld,” examines the criminal femme fatales in the works of Dashiell Hammett. Hammett’s stories depict an amoral and lawless underworld in which gangsters, lawyers, businessmen, policemen and even the detective are equally immersed. I argue in this chapter that the criminal femme fatales function on a par with her male counterparts, the gangsters and corrupt men that

populate the narratives. The violent chaotic city – the underworld – gives these female characters the opportunity and the space to exhibit agency through criminal acts. Hammett’s first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929), can be read as a nexus where changing discourses on criminality and policing meet the socio-economic upheavals in the US at the time. My discussion of this novel takes the form of a two-fold intervention that interrogates both hardboiled crime fiction and criminological discourses as far as their assumptions about criminality, especially female criminality, in the US at the time are concerned. The chapter will then examine the representations of criminal femme fatales in *The Dain Curse* (1929) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), in which Hammett presents two manifestations of criminal women – namely, criminalized women and medicalized women. The chapter will show that the agency of these criminal femme fatales exists within in a continuum that extends between criminalization and medicalization.

In Chapter Three, “Narratives of Detection,” I address the detective stories of Raymond Chandler. Unlike Hammett’s flawed detectives, Chandler’s Philip Marlowe is described by both his creator and critics as a “hero” or a “knight-errant.”<sup>39</sup> I will argue that this characterization needs to be complicated because of the relation between the male detective and the various criminal femme fatales he encounters. I argue that Chandler’s criminal female characters are dangerous (in)visible murderesses. That is, while they are not always visible in the narratives, in the sense that the reader does not see them commit the acts that testify to their agency, the crimes they commit outside the frame of representation nonetheless countermand the role of the detective and reveal his vulnerability. Chandler thus structures his narrative around the absent/present power of his female characters who are at odds with Marlowe’s professional status. I begin my

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Skenazy (1982: 37-38), Durham (1963: 32), Lid (1989: 42), and Marling (1986: 81-83).

textual analysis with *The Lady in the Lake* (1943) which, I will argue, showcases the (in)visible female agency through a criminalized woman who dominates the narrative through her absence and eventually gains the upper hand over the detective. I then turn my attention to *The Big Sleep* (1939), which presents a medicalized woman alongside a form of “accessory agency,” manifested in Vivian’s accessory role in the murders that her sister commits. I conclude the chapter with a brief account of the *Long Goodbye* (1953) to trace Marlowe’s development into a more vulnerable and ambivalent character in relation to Chandler’s female characters who, conversely, grow even more dangerous.

Chapter Four, “Narratives of Seduction,” departs from the world of the detective to consider erotic crime fiction, or what some critics prefer to call “noir fiction,” as represented in the works of James M. Cain. A subset of the hardboiled genre, these narratives de-emphasize the role of the detective and the resolution of the mystery, instead foregrounding the situation of the protagonist in a darkly criminal world where sexual desire emerges as the principal motive for lawbreaking. Here, the female characters I am labelling as criminal femme fatales are sexual deceivers who lure a man into committing crimes either with or for them. I argue in this chapter that female agency in Cain’s texts can be located at the point of convergence between the woman’s desire to achieve economic success and her sexual power over men. The woman’s empowerment – and danger – therefore stems from her willingness to use sexual enticement to realize her desire for independence, and she does not hesitate to commit crimes to achieve her goals. Meanwhile, Cain’s male characters fall victim to a sexual obsession which eventually leads to their downfall. This chapter will consider the ways in which greed and ambition operate in concert with eroticism in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Mildred Pierce* (1941). In this novel, I argue that Mildred’s

daughter Veda fits all the characteristics of the type I am calling the “criminal femme fatale,” even though she does not actually participate in or incite any crime whatsoever. However, when compared to the 1945 film adaptation, which tellingly changes Veda into a murderess, it becomes easier to see how Veda in the novel resembles the kind of criminal woman who is central to this thesis. I end the chapter by considering how the film’s departure from the novel further reveals the difference between literary representations of femme fatales and the kind of femme fatale that went on to dominate the cultural imaginary because of her heightened visibility in Hollywood cinema.

The conclusion synthesizes the issues and concerns raised in my four chapters in an overall account of female criminality, agency and genre. By summing up the different models and manifestations of female agency that I explore in the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction, my conclusion reveals the wider implications of the points of connection between female criminality and power on the one hand, and popular culture on the other. I thus stress the position of criminal femme fatales as transgressive figures who blur the distinctions between lawfulness and crime, and challenge genre conventions by disrupting the stereotype of the femme fatale as a seductress who is punished at the end of the text. My analysis of criminal femme fatales, then, permits a re-envisioning of gender roles in the period with which this study is concerned, which in turn reconfigures the relationship between gender and genre. Moreover, the contentions made in this thesis with respect to hardboiled novels might facilitate new readings of their cinematic adaptations in film noir and of other works of crime fiction published later.

# 1

## **The “Mad-Bad” Woman: Medico-legal Discourses on Women’s Criminality**

### **1.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine medico-legal discourses pertaining to women’s criminality and how these discourses intersect with American hardboiled crime fiction. The aim of the chapter is to establish a framework for the current study by looking at the ways in which the images of the female criminal are constructed in criminological contexts alongside literary ones. I examine legal and medical discourses to help investigate the representation and treatment of criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime fiction. By analyzing criminology and psychopathology as disciplines concerned with the study, evaluation and regulation of criminal behaviour, as well as how the precepts of these discourses differ from the portrayals of women in hardboiled crime fiction, I will reread the depictions of criminal femme fatales and provide a subversive reading of their roles in hardboiled crime narratives. Exploring literary representations of the female criminal alongside criminological ones, I argue that hardboiled crime fiction constitutes a space that portrays an image of the female criminal which departs from the “mad-bad” constructs that usually govern the representation of women in medico-legal discourses. Hardboiled crime narratives reveal criminal women whose transgressions allow them to exhibit agency. Indeed, the criminal femme fatales in these narratives are central characters who both instigate and perpetrate the crimes.

In the period between the start of the Great Depression in 1929 and the immediate aftermath of World War II (the era to be considered in this study), the US underwent a large number of social, political, and cultural changes. One manifestation of these changes is the redoubled effort to fight crime through a rather draconian policing ideology in response to an increase in urban crime, gangsterism, and corruption.<sup>40</sup> This trend is intimately related to the emergence of hardboiled crime fiction in general and to the prevalence of the criminal woman in this genre as a figure who communicates an anxiety about security and maintaining order. As such she can be read against the notion of transgression of socio-cultural and legal norms as an avenue to locate female agency. Moreover, the social structure of American society was undergoing important changes, including shifts in prevailing attitudes towards gender roles and familial relationships, which also played a part in shaping literary images of criminal women. Broadly speaking, the shifts in gender roles that grew out of the efforts of the women's movement to gain political rights were translated in different ways that range from the hard-won gains that the "New Woman" seemed to enjoy in the 1920s; to the rescinding of this freedom during the Depression of the following decade; to women's subsequent involvement in the wartime economy and an unprecedented rate of women's employment during World War II; and, finally, to a return to a more repressive ideology towards women in the 1950s.<sup>41</sup> These cycles are far from being simplistically unified or representative of one dominant pattern, yet they are

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<sup>40</sup> See Gurr (1981) for a detailed analysis of the historical trends of violent crime in Britain and the US. Gurr refers to Zahn (1980) who surveys homicide rates in the US during the twentieth century and concludes that homicide increased after 1900 and reached a peak in the 1930s.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed account of the "New Woman" in particular, see Freedman (1974). There is a massive body of scholarship on American women more generally. Examples of a comprehensive history of American women include Banner (1974), Evans (1997), Berkin and Norton (1979), Groves (1972), and Hagg (1992). For more on women during the Depression, see Ware (1982), Humphries (1976), Doss (1983/1984), and Hapke (1995). For more on women in the 1940s, especially during the Second World War see Hartmann (1982), Anderson (1981), Weatherford (1990), and Dobie and Lang (2003). For women in the post-war period and the 1950s see Anderson (1944), Friedan (1965), Kaledin (1984), and Meyerowitz (1994).

transformations which speak to parallel changes in economic, social, and political life that had a profound impact on women's lives and, consequently, the representation of women in literature and popular culture.

This unease around gender roles in American society of the time is evident in representations of women as dangerous, powerful and criminal in hardboiled crime fiction. The criminal woman thus appears as a recurrent image in popular culture, especially in crime fiction of the period. Yet the question of the representation of women extends beyond historical factors, important as they are, to broader discourses – namely, criminology and psychopathology. These different yet related disciplines that are concerned with criminal behaviour, including criminal behaviour by women, do not always produce the images of criminal women we find in crime fiction: that is to say, these discourses are not necessarily the originary source from which literary discourse borrows. Rather, I suggest there is a complex relation that imbricates criminological “facts” and literary representations.

The examination of criminological texts, views, and theories of female criminality in this chapter will serve to shed light on various aspects of this issue, and thereby lay the groundwork for the analysis of women in hardboiled crime fiction to be developed later in this study. An understanding of a trajectory that covers a wide range of studies and theories of female criminality is important to my exploration of how perceptions of women's crime have developed over time and how this change is reflected in the representation of women in hardboiled crime fiction. By examining traditional criminological texts from both before and during the period in which hardboiled crime fiction was written, I will develop insights into the treatment of criminal women in this genre. The feminist theories about women's crime, which emerged in the 1970s after hardboiled crime fiction's heyday, will be employed as a

means to enable a critique of traditional criminological conceptions of women's crime. I will use feminist insights to contest the representation of criminal women in hardboiled crime fiction, particularly in terms of women's agency. Also, traditional theories are important to consider not only because they helped inaugurate the study of women's criminality, but also because they continue to influence research into this issue (Smart 1977: 7).

This chapter will address the tension between literary and criminological discourses, shedding light on the question of gender and crime and how established conceptions of gender and gender roles contribute to the construction of women's criminality in American culture at large. The chapter consists of two main sections: the first deals with legal discourses on women's crime, while the second is concerned with medical discourses. The former interrogates the gender gap in criminal behaviour; definitions and motives of the female criminal; and the question of gendering the discipline of criminology. Theories of women's criminality will also be explored, taking into consideration the development of the study of women's crime in relation to both criminological discourses and fiction. What do, for example, traditional notions of criminology from the same period as the fiction say about criminal women, and how do these conceptions compare to the representation of crime in that aforementioned fiction of the earlier period? And how do the later developments in criminological discourses of women's crime, especially those issuing from a feminist perspective, depart from traditional theories of criminology, and how can they be used to critique conceptualizations of women's crime in the fiction? The second section moves on to discuss medical discourses in order to facilitate a better understanding of how medical knowledge has been used to judge and control women, and how this compares to the representation of women in the fiction with which this study is concerned. Here, I will



also examine the use of medical discourse to pathologize the female body, as well as the interrelationship between legal and medical discourses in relation to women's crime. I will also discuss female psychopathy in relation to the notions of criminalization and medicalization of women.

## **1.2 Legal Discourses on Women's Criminality**

### **1.2.1 The image of the nonaggressive woman: Gender gap in crime**

We can attribute the widespread fascination with women's crime to a deep-seated cultural anxiety about such behaviour. The fear here is of the threat which women's criminality poses to the traditional gender roles of wife and/or mother within the domestic sphere. Candace Kruttschnitt, Rosemary Gartner, and Jeanette Hussemann argue that the scholarship concerning women's criminality has always been informed by "agitation over the shifting nature of gendered social boundaries" (2008: 11).<sup>42</sup> This bears a particular significance to hardboiled crime fiction, which was written during a time that witnessed significant shifts in the structure of American society, especially during World War II when women assumed "masculine" jobs. Criminal women in the narratives of this genre may be said, then, to reflect society's anxiety about the changes that affected the work force, family life and many other spheres of American culture. I will argue, however, that the female characters' function in these hardboiled narratives is not limited to simply being an outlet for social anxiety; rather, the narratives disclose a space where women can express agency. Responding to dramatic social changes, hardboiled crime fiction can be said to have operated as a channel to imagine women differently. In the chapters that follow, I will examine the contention that deviance

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<sup>42</sup> Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Hussemann's study is concerned with shifting patterns of women's criminality. It draws on data collected by Ward, Jackson, and Ward (1969) in their work on violent female criminals, and aims at answering the question of whether and how the characteristics of crimes have changed. Also, for an analysis of women's criminality in the United States, see Leonard (1982) and Simon (1975).

appears when it is most feared, and look at how the relationship between the lawbreaking behaviour of women and social anxiety is manifested in hardboiled crime fiction. In order to contextualize this discussion, I will first examine the findings of criminological scholarship focusing on women's crime and views on gender gap in criminal behaviour.

Criminological scholarship shows that the image of criminal women in crime literature is no less of a construction than that found in fiction, and this construction is based on the entrenched view that women are passive. It is often assumed that women are less criminal than men.<sup>43</sup> The widespread acceptance of gender differences in crime can be attributed in part to a long history of consigning women to submissive, nonviolent, and dependent gender roles. This view is affirmed in similarly prevalent assumptions about a gender gap in criminal behaviour. A large number of scholars working in the field of criminology have maintained that women commit fewer crimes than men. Despite changing views on the criminal behaviour of women, there is, from the scholarship of the 1970s at the beginning of feminist criminology to recent studies on the issue, a general agreement about the existence of a gender gap in criminality.<sup>44</sup> For example, Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin consider it obvious that men are more aggressive than women (1974: 227), while Frances Heidensohn contends that women's engagement in criminality is modest, and that "whereas convictions are,

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<sup>43</sup> The term "criminal" is typically employed to describe a person who commits a crime that is subject to punishment by a governing authority. It will be used interchangeably with the term "offender" in this study. In a similar vein, the term "criminality" will be used in the study to refer to any lawbreaking behaviour, i.e., behaviour that breaches the law that is set by the governing authority. A normative view of crime implies that lawbreaking behaviour is deviant from prevailing norms, which are set by legal and cultural standards. However, other terms such as "offence," "deviance," "lawbreaking," "violence," and "aggression" will be used interchangeably with criminality.

<sup>44</sup> Steffensmeier examines crime statistics in the US in three studies (1978, 1979, and 1981) and concludes that violent offences by women did increase over the course of the studies, but only at a similar rate to men's offences. Violence, he suggested, is still a predominantly male domain. Tarling (1993) also found that the ratio of men's crimes to women's crimes decreased from 7:1:1 in 1955 to 5:2:1 in 1975 and remained at the same level until the conclusion of his study in the early 1990s. See also Frodi, Macaulay, and Thome (1977) for a survey on the experimental literature on sex differences in relation to crime.

statistically at least, ‘normal’ for males, they are very unusual for females” (1985: 2). Darrell Steffensmeier and Renee Steffensmeier state that women are “*not* catching up with males in the commission of violent, masculine, or serious crimes” but acknowledge that there is more parity with respect to larceny and white collar crime (1980: 80, original emphasis).<sup>45</sup> Allison Morris points to the fact that statistics in various jurisdictions suggest that recorded crime is “overwhelmingly a male activity” (1987: 19-20); Ann Campbell likewise notes that women’s aggression “takes place less often than men’s” and that the former is often “unrecognized and frequently misunderstood” (1993: 1). Suzanne Swan and David Snow describe as “problematic” the view that women are just as violent as men, calling for the placement of women’s violence within a broad socio-cultural context (2006: 1027). Such analyses of the extent to which criminal behaviour is pursued along gender lines leave open two basic questions: what constitutes women’s crime, and how are the definitions already gendered? One of the significant issues to consider at the outset is the specific context of the studies aimed at investigating this question.<sup>46</sup> Studies that ignore the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which both their subjects and they themselves operate might lead to false or misleading assumptions (Swan and Snow 2006: 1026).

Although criminology is still a male-dominated discipline in both its subject-matter (focusing disproportionately on male crime) and its researchers (who are disproportionately male),<sup>47</sup> feminist criminologists have nonetheless instigated a shift in

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<sup>45</sup> “White collar crime” is a term coined by Sutherland (1949) to refer to crimes or any deviant behaviour committed by persons in the course of their employment in occupations of high socio-economic status. However, the use of the term has been contested by a number of authors. See, for example, Shapiro (1990).

<sup>46</sup> Anthropological studies show that lower levels of aggression amongst women are not a cross-cultural universal. Rather, women seem to adopt different means for expressing aggression than men. Burbank (1987) found that women rarely use physical aggression towards their husbands in some cultures, but she also contends that women are often more aggressive towards other women than towards men.

<sup>47</sup> See Naffine (1997: 1). Björkqvist and Niemela (1992) also suggest that most studies on women’s criminality have been conducted by male criminologists, who tend to design and conduct their investigations in a “male” fashion.

perspectives and methodologies pertaining to the study of women's crime. Despite the general acknowledgment that women commit crimes and perpetrate acts of violence less frequently than men, as explained above, there are a number of criminologists who present a different view of women's criminality. Downplaying the issue of the gender gap, they argue that women are as *capable* of committing crimes as men, and that they are as *culpable* as men in the commission of these acts. In his article entitled "Sex differences in Physical, Verbal and Indirect Aggression," Kaj Björkqvist attempts to refute the view that women are less violent and argues that the idea that men are more aggressive is incorrect, if not nonsensical (1994: 177). Björkqvist questions the differences in aggression between men and women, suggesting that there are factors that should be taken into consideration in the study of this phenomenon, such as the type of conflict (personal, interpersonal), and the type of aggression (physical or verbal) under study.<sup>48</sup> Cathy Young (1999) and Abigail Zuger (2000), whose studies rely mostly on self-reported data about aggression, also conclude that women are as violent as men.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in "Deconstructing the Myth of the Nonaggressive Woman: A Feminist Analysis," Jacquelyn White and Robin Kowalski argue that women have the same potential as men to display violent acts. White and Kowalski examine various factors that have contributed to the construction of women as nonaggressive, which in their estimation, is

a myth perpetuated by sociohistorically rooted cultural attitudes and values, reified by data based on statistical and methodological biases and flaws. Although women are reported to commit fewer crimes than men, this does not imply that they are not aggressive. Rather, because of opportunities, recourses, and socialization pressures, the situations in

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<sup>48</sup> See also Björkqvist and Niemela (1992) and Björkqvist, Osterman, and Lagerspetz (1994).

<sup>49</sup> Young and Zuger's studies of women's criminality, whose results were reported in the popular press, were criticized for not being based on a solid theoretical framework. Their investigations were also called into question for not including any background about the social and cultural context in which they were conducted. See Swan and Snow (2006: 1026-7).

which women will display aggressive behaviors appear to be more circumscribed. (1994: 492)

Although White and Kowalski do not go as far as associating women's criminality with agency, such theorization about the capacity of women to commit criminal acts suggests, especially from a feminist standpoint, an effort to destabilize the construction of the criminal woman as simply "evil" or "bad," and untangle the complex socio-cultural factors that contribute to this construction. In the light of this contention of the social construction of women as nonaggressive, one can say that in hardboiled crime fiction, confining female agency to the negative dimension of criminality may demonstrate that this criminal milieu is the only discursive space which allows women to have such agency. Hence, the criminal space itself becomes a means which gives the writers of this genre the freedom to explore the limits and possibilities of that agency.

Women's culpability in committing acts of violence and how this culpability stands in opposition to the social stereotype of the nonaggressive woman is relevant to my analysis of hardboiled crime fiction. In this genre the criminal woman provides an example of culpability. My focus on the role of women also shifts critical attention to the main concerns that the genre engages, such as race and class, but specifically gender. In this way, the criminal femme fatales are figures who draw attention to anxieties around these issues; moreover, in demonstrating characteristics such as financial and social independence, decision-making, calculated planning and accomplishment of their goals, they also succeed in inviting a reading of agency that resists socio-cultural expectations and established gender norms that define women in terms of passivity and domesticity. This positioning of criminal femme fatales both at the centre of the narrative and at the same time at its circumference, pushing against

generic boundaries to create a space to re-imagine women's roles, is primary to my discussion of the authors in the coming chapters.

### **1.2.2 Victim or agent: Who is the female criminal and what are her motives?**

The aforementioned debates raise a number of salient questions regarding the criminological discourses of women's crime. Who is the female criminal? Who are the victims of her crimes? Why does she commit crimes? Are the crimes she commits different from those perpetrated by men? How and why has the criminal woman become a fixture of hardboiled crime fiction? The very fact and nature of these questions suggest that the patterning of criminal behaviour depends to a very large extent on the sex of the criminal. As Paula Ruth Gilbert argues, gender and cultural stereotypes influence law enforcement policies and colour the way that the issue of women's crime is dealt with. Violent women are consequently judged, especially in the criminal justice system, as "incoherent" or "discontinuous" inasmuch as they fail to conform to normative gender patterns (2002: 1274). That is, criminal women often cross gender boundaries by entering the "masculine" domain of crime, and hence are rendered "discontinuous" by destabilizing the norms of gender roles. The criminal *femme fatales* in hardboiled crime fiction go even further by combining transgressive hyper-feminine sexuality with what are socio-culturally viewed as "masculine" ruthless crimes. The transgression of the criminal women in the narratives may indeed render a so-called "discontinuity" reading possible, especially given the various narrative attempts to control and regulate the woman to make her conform, such as the myriad instances when she is killed or "punished" towards the end of the story. I argue, however, that the position of the woman as "discontinuous" or "other" is in fact

challenged in hardboiled crime fiction. The narratives present images of criminal women who are far from being “other.” This is accomplished in two ways. Firstly, the male detective in the narratives of Chandler and Hammett, for instance, is satirized and ironized, usually by the criminal femme fatales, who undercut his power. The detective is also presented as caught up in a dark world of crime that he is more deeply involved and implicated in than he would like to acknowledge, and which he therefore fails in his attempts to control. Secondly, the narratives reveal a world full of violence and corruption into which the criminal women are *also* fully integrated, and thus they have the opportunity to operate in this criminal world on a par with their male counterparts.

For its part, the discipline of criminology tells us that the “female criminal” is a woman who commits unlawful acts and is reported to the criminal justice system. Criminological literature, especially in the less biased accounts of women’s crime that tend to emanate from a feminist perspective, suggests that women offend mostly in response to abusive treatment by male partners.<sup>50</sup> In general, criminological literature suggests that women tend to commit homicide against family members (husbands, lovers, or relatives), whereas men are inclined to kill strangers or close friends.<sup>51</sup> On the whole, women’s lawbreaking behaviour seems to involve less serious acts such as theft and shoplifting. However, some criminologists have stressed that women commit all kinds of crimes and that it is factually inaccurate to claim that there are “sex-specific” or “masculine” crimes.<sup>52</sup> Darrell Steffensmeier and Emilie Allan discuss patterns of

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<sup>50</sup> Archer (2000) concludes in his study about gender differences in physical abuse that women are slightly more likely to use physical violence against partners. This study has nonetheless been criticized for lacking an adequate theoretical framework for the analysis of women’s crimes. See Swan and Snow (2006: 1026-7).

<sup>51</sup> A more expansive view is offered by Swan and Snow (2006: 1027), who developed a model that aimed to examine the socio-cultural contexts underlying women’s use of violence. They maintain that a comprehensive theory of violence within intimate relationships – which considers factors such as abuse from both sides; the history of the relationship; and the influence of race, class, and gender – is essential to any analysis of women’s violence.

<sup>52</sup> Smart (1977: 77) argues that there are in fact sex-specific crimes. Adler (1975) also describes certain kinds of crime as “masculine.” On a different level, Williams and Best’s (1982) investigation of sex

offending by both men and women in terms of similarities as well as differences (1996: 460). They conclude that while both men and women are less likely to commit serious crimes such as robbery and murder than petty crimes, women offend at even lower rates than men, except for prostitution.<sup>53</sup> Yet while most studies from the 1970s onwards indicate that violent crimes, especially murder in the US, are only rarely perpetrated by women, it may still be the case that “the choice of victim and the modus operandi of the offence” are, as Carol Smart in one of the key texts in feminist criminology, *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique*, argues, “still in keeping with the ‘feminine’ stereotype” (1977: 16).

Interestingly, the crimes committed by women in hardboiled crime fiction do not reflect the picture presented in the criminological data. Women in this genre do not kill abusive partners in a domestic context. Rather, they commit crimes in mostly urban spaces, and they do kill strangers. The images that the hardboiled narratives portray of the criminal women link directly to the question of the femininity/masculinity of the criminal and how women transgress and disrupt gender stereotyping (which views crime as masculine). The fact remains that whilst it is important to examine what the field of criminology has to say about women’s crimes (as the ideas from this discipline provide an insight and a background against which women’s crime in hardboiled crime fiction can be set), it is striking to see how women’s crimes in the narratives depart from the criminological literature. This departure can be partly accounted for by looking at the timeline and context in which hardboiled crime fiction was produced. The genre became popular before feminist criminology, which represented the first real

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stereotyping in thirty countries found aggression to be one of the traits associated with men rather than women (dominance, autonomy, achievement, and endurance were also identified as stereotypically male attributes).

<sup>53</sup> Prostitution has been regarded as an exclusively female offence. See, for example, Pollak (1961) and Davis (1971). Also, for feminist critiques of the treatment of prostitution in the legal system, see Smart’s chapter “Prostitution, Rape and Sexual Politics” (1977). See also Farley and Kelly (2000) for an exhaustive review of the literature on the issue.



breakthrough in the study of women's criminality and did not happen until the 1970s, focusing mainly on the female criminal as a victim. At the same time the popular images of the criminal woman and the discourses on female criminality contemporary to hardboiled crime fiction in the early part of the twentieth century relied, as I argue below, on stereotyped and distorted images of criminal women. Thus, hardboiled crime fiction can be said to carry an oppositional or even transgressive potential as a body of texts that provides socio-cultural and political critique of the dominant ideologies under which medico-legal discourses fall.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, it is this critical function that allows the genre, in Lee Horsley's words, to be a "natural generic home for many different types of protest writing" (2005: 69).<sup>55</sup> Hardboiled crime fiction therefore invites various readings to consider the possibilities of looking at the texts in the light of gender transgression and power dynamics.

As far as the question of the motives for women's crime is concerned, one must weigh the various factors that lead to the commission of a crime, and perhaps also delve into the dynamics of the human psyche to question why people break the law in the first place. Carlen *et al.* (1985) think that women derive the same kind of excitement and pleasure from committing crimes, especially white-collar crimes, as do men. Other criminologists, however, suggest that poverty, rather than psychological satisfaction, may be the principal motivation for women's engagement in theft.<sup>56</sup> Smart describes how women's motives, or more accurately lack of motives, influence their treatment in

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<sup>54</sup> For the links between the criminological discourse and crime fiction see Powers (1976). Powers talks about how J. Edgar Hoover, the first director of the FBI in the 1920s, aimed to promote the image of the FBI agent and ideas of crime control through using crime fiction and the figure of the fictional detective. Hoover's "success in associating his agents with action detective heroes and in turn filling fictional detective stories with F.B.I. characters was prodigious, as evidence from every form of thirties popular entertainment demonstrates" (1976: 224). See also Power (1978 and 1983) for more on Hoover and popular formulas, and O'Reilly (1982) for discourses on crime control during the New Deal in the US.

<sup>55</sup> For more information see Horsley (2005) and McCann (2000). A more detailed account of these readings that contextualize the genre in relation to socio-cultural and political factors will appear in the next chapter.

<sup>56</sup> See Carlen (1988) for a discussion of poverty and women's crime.

the criminal justice system. She notes that when a woman is “unable to offer a seemingly rational or reasonable account for her motivation it may appear that rational motivation is absent and the action is produced by forces beyond the control of the offender” (1977:110). The lack of a “rational account” that conforms to the norms and expectations of existing social control institutions is by no means an indication that the criminal woman does not have a valid explanation for her behaviour.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, in dominant discourses, women’s crimes are often sexualized or distorted, such that their perpetrators are cast as impulsive and lacking control over their own actions.<sup>58</sup>

In a further departure from criminological literature, poverty does not appear as one of the motives behind women’s crime in hardboiled crime fiction. Some of the criminal women in this genre come from a high socio-economic class (for example, some of Raymond Chandler’s female characters), and the motivation for their crimes is related to their implication in a world of gangsters and corruption rather than pressing economic need. Dashiell Hammett’s female characters provide another example of how criminal women function in the underworld. Even more evidently in James Cain’s work, women’s crimes are motivated by a blind ambition to climb the social ladder. Greed, the pursuit of power and involvement in organized crime appear to be the main factors that drive women to criminality. This departure from criminological literature can be explained in two different ways. The first is historical. As mentioned above, the narratives of the genre were written at a time when criminal women were not quite

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<sup>57</sup> In a significant study of the patterns of homicide, Wolfgang (1958) contends that women who murder their aggressors seldom do so with premeditation, and that self-defence or anger is often a key motivation for such crimes. Ward, Jackson, and Ward’s (1969) study differently indicates that 42 percent of the victims of women’s crime were unable to defend themselves (owing to illness, inebriation, being asleep, or infirmity). The latter study is of particular significance here as it suggests that women’s crimes cannot simply be reduced to emotional motivations such as anger, and that there is in fact agency – planning, premeditation and assuming responsibility for such acts.

<sup>58</sup> The section on medical discourses will consider the question of women and rationality in greater detail and how cultural traditions, as well as various scientific efforts, have used biological factors such as hormones to analyze women’s criminality.

visible in the criminological literature; a few studies of traditional theories of female criminality contemporary to the fiction dismissed criminal women as stereotypes. This stands in contrast to the prevalence and visibility of criminal women in hardboiled crime fiction. The narratives, moreover, came at a moment in American history when organized crime and gangsterism were booming in the urban space. Therefore, crime by women became a way to break the social control and policing ideology that became more rooted and pervasive during the Depression, through a re-envisioning of female roles. That is, the narratives of this genre were a platform in popular culture that not only portrayed visible images of the criminal women, but also more generally offered critiques to the ideologies of control and containment of women. The second is related to the agency that the women in this genre show. Women's acts of violence in the narratives utilize the same means and methods available to men; that is to say, women are as implicated in the world of crime as their male counterparts. Therefore, the commission of these crimes with premeditation (rather than as impulsive acts of self defence) gives the women more room to gain power.

Is there, then, a typical female criminal? If one wants to answer the question from a feminist criminological perspective, the answer would be “no,” despite the fact that stereotypes of women criminals clearly exist. Anne Worrall suggests that there are a number of female lawbreakers who defy description and challenge what she calls the “gender contract” according to which criminal women are represented in terms of their domestic, sexual, and pathological characteristics. They are women “on the margins of categories – never sufficiently this or that ... they remain ‘nondescript’ – out of reach and untouchable” (1990: 31). In an effort to respond to this question and see its implications for the representation of women in hardboiled crime fiction, this study stresses the “nondescriptiveness” (32) of women in general and criminal women in

particular, avoiding the stereotyping and narrow categorization of women that is often present in conventional analyses of women's criminality.<sup>59</sup> Socio-culturally, as well as in the medico-legal discourses discussed here, stereotyping of criminal women has been used as a device to control women and confine them to specific roles. On the contrary, I argue that hardboiled crime fiction negotiates this issue by destabilizing stereotypes around the femme fatale as a seductive alluring woman, and also around the criminal woman, who is usually confined to a "mad-bad" dichotomy. Instead, the narratives discussed here are able to present criminal femme fatales who demonstrate power.

### **1.2.3 Do we need to gender criminology? Discourses on gender and crime**

At the heart of the discussion of women's criminality is the question of what it means to be "female." As Pat Carlen and Anne Worrall note, women's experiences of being female are "mediated by their bodies, their minds and their social interaction," as well as the ways in which discourses that inform women's experiences are "constituted by sets of relationships which cluster around notions of domesticity, sexuality and pathology" (1987: 2). Furthermore, femininity is "constructed on the site vacated by masculinity" (3). This absence of masculinity is manifest in two contradictory ways: on the one hand, being female is associated with a mature, caring, and nurturing disposition; on the other hand, it is linked to a lack of control, dependence, and the need for protection.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Carlen *et al* (1985: 10) also argues that the "essential criminal woman" does not exist because women offenders come from different backgrounds and commit crimes for various reasons. Heidensohn (1985:11), on the other hand, sketches a scenario of the "typical female" criminal as a young girl, a first-offender accused of shoplifting for which she would get a non-custodial sentence. Yet, Heidensohn adds that there are of course exceptions to this stereotype, such as women murderers and women who are repeatedly arrested for alcohol-related crimes.

<sup>60</sup> The aetiology of such conceptions can be traced to dominant discourses of domesticity and their attendant sexualization of women's bodies. Such conceptions assume that a "normal" woman is "naturally" a mother, or at least a mother-in-the-making. Moreover, the woman's body is placed at the centre of the domesticity discourse, where it is readily controlled. For more on women and domesticity, see Carlen and Worrall (1987 3-4) and Worrall (1990), chapter 5.

Social stereotypes of criminal women (like those pertaining to domesticity and passivity) have been perpetuated via various channels, including science, the media,<sup>61</sup> and popular culture, as well as through the field of criminology itself. Despite its claims to scientific objectivity and value-neutrality, the existing criminological literature is, as I have already noted, often suffused with the biases of its (predominately male) authors. But because of the rarity of the female offender, women have not been visible in criminological studies, especially before the advent of feminist criminology.<sup>62</sup> Smart's observations on women's criminality establish an important part of the feminist critiques that still circulate today in criminological scholarship. She argues that the accounts of women's criminality are

largely based on the picture presented to us by official statistics and empirical research. Consequently, those studies which have uncritically accepted the available statistical data have treated as given the belief that fewer women than men are involved in criminal behaviour and that the type of offence most frequently committed by women and girls (with the notable exception of shoplifting) is sexual in nature. Additionally there appears to be so few female offenders they are conceived in these studies to be abnormal in both a biological and psychological factors which are held to be peculiar to the female sex. (1977: 18)

If one thus perceives the discipline of criminology as constructed according to certain precepts and assumptions, and takes the opportunity to question and refute its formulations of women's crime, then it is possible to open a space in which to consider women's criminality with a critical eye, and so improve the analytical tools we have at

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<sup>61</sup> For analyses of coverage of women's crimes in the media, see Naylor (1995), Jewkes (2004), and Faludi (1991).

<sup>62</sup> Walklate (2004: 24) argues that "gender-blindness", which refers to the ways in which women have been ignored in criminological studies, has had a significant influence on criminological discourse and has posed challenges for contemporary feminists investigating women's crime. Gender blindness, argues Walklate, can be attributed to the influence of positivism. Positivism was born of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with making scientific experimentation the basis for the accumulation of knowledge. Roshier (1989) describes the influence of positivism on criminology, pointing to three emphases of the former – determinism, differentiation, and pathology – that have been carried over into the latter.

our disposal to read representations of women's crime in other fields, such as popular culture and fiction<sup>63</sup>

Smart's critique of the present body of scholarship on women's criminality reveals the unreliability of the field of criminology and how it both feeds and, at the same time, recreates popular images of the criminal woman as "mad" or "bad." In this context, Etta Anderson, who affirms that the issue of women's criminality has been neglected by the discipline of criminology, notes the construction of the image of the criminal woman through what she calls the "chivalry proposition," which refers to the view, held by a number of criminologists, that women receive a more "lenient" and/or "chivalrous" treatment in the criminal justice system than do their male counterparts (1976: 350). She argues that the chivalry proposition is undergirded by three basic stereotypes of women's criminality: the female as "the instigative offender," "the sexualized offender," and "the protected offender." The notion of chivalry is either explicitly or implicitly presumed in all of these constructions – in each, the man is enjoined to "do the job" for the woman, who is consigned to the role of manipulative seductive instigator. Such iconic images of masculinity and femininity have a long history of dissemination in the media, popular culture, and in the field of criminology itself. Mid-twentieth century criminological studies such as William I. Thomas's (1923/1967) *The Unadjusted Girl* and Otto Pollak's (1950/1961) *The Criminality of Women*, which are considered the most important works about women's crime prior to the modern period of criminological scholarship, present images of manipulative women who use their sexual charms to persuade men to commit crimes. Anderson's

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<sup>63</sup> Gecas (1972) studies the depiction of violence in popular magazines, such as *Argosy*, *Esquire*, *True Confessions*, and *McCall's* from 1925-65. He examines social class and sex as two variables important in the portrayal of violent acts in these magazines, and concludes that women are often shown to express verbal violence and for ethical motives, while men commit more physical acts of violence for utilitarian motives. Using a sociological approach, Gecas's article provides a good account of the scholarship around the depiction of violence in mass media, but it does not do any literary analysis of these popular magazines.

work, as part of the early feminist project to critique the misconceptions about female criminality, draws attention to the stereotyping of the image of the female criminal. One of these stereotypes that Anderson discusses is the “sexualized offender,” whose ambitions are of an entirely sexual nature, that is, desire and lust. Indeed, the “female criminal’s behaviour is explained in sexual terms which include such notions as penis envy, female promiscuity, and the physiological inferiority of women” (Anderson 1976: 352). Finally, the chivalry proposition is manifest in the “protected female offender,” an offender in need of special treatment by the criminal justice system. To Anderson, the conceptualization of women as reliant upon the “chivalrous” protection of the criminal justice system is a myth that has been employed to sexualize women and rob them of agency. Conventional criminological discourses on women’s crime have often bought into such myths, emphasizing the sexualized “femaleness” of criminal women while downplaying or ignoring the economic and socio-cultural factors behind their criminality.

If we trace Anderson’s theorization of chivalry in hardboiled crime fiction, it is clear that some of the types of women identified by Anderson are common in the genre. Both sexualized offenders and female instigators are at the heart of James Cain’s stories, for example, as my fourth chapter will demonstrate. However, hardboiled crime fiction does depart from the taxonomies that Anderson describes. In opposition to the way legal discourses use the sexualized femaleness of the criminal woman to take her agency away, these fictions posit the possibility that the woman’s position as an instigator, or more clearly as a “sexualized” criminal, in fact grants her a more central and powerful role. And although we can find traces of the “protected” female criminal in hardboiled narratives in the representations of the medicalized women who are shown to have a psychological ailment which affects their control, these medicalized women in

hardboiled narratives are not as helpless or powerless as in Anderson's theorization. Therefore Anderson's proposition and critique can be read as a parallel narrative of women's agency alongside the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction. Through the use of their sexual charms to instigate crimes, the criminal femme fatales in hardboiled narratives gain power and control. In other words, these characters' sexuality is key to their control and regulation, yet it simultaneously offers them a means to gain agency and power.

In this context, it is also worth considering the different ways in which men and women evaluate their own violent actions within the criminal justice system, and how this compares to hardboiled crime fiction, which presents a rather different case. Some criminologists suggest that men underestimate the significance of their acts of violence, whereas women overestimate the import and consequences of such behaviour. Campbell supports this contention in *Men, Women and Aggression* (1993). Here, she proposes that while women often interpret their crimes as a failure of self-control, men see their criminality as aimed at imposing control over other people:

For women, the threat comes from within; for men, it comes from others. For women, the aim is a cataclysmic release of accumulated tension; for men, the reward is power over another person, a power that can be used to boost self-esteem or to gain social and material benefits. For women, the interpersonal message is a cry for help born out of desperation; for men, it is an announcement of superiority stemming from a challenge to that position. For women, the fear of aggression is a fear of breaking relationships; for men, it is the fear of failure, of fighting and losing, or of not being man enough to fight at all. I call women's approach to their beliefs about their aggression *expressive*, and men's approach *instrumental*. (1993: 7, original emphasis)

Such disparities in the manner in which men and women psychologically process their criminal actions underscore the need to gender the discipline of criminology, (especially



from a feminist perspective) to highlight the issue of woman's visibility, so that proper attention can be accorded to both men's and women's criminality. But at the same time, these disparities shed light on how hardboiled crime fiction destabilizes the formula of men versus women that Campbell describes. Not only do hardboiled crime narratives provide examples of criminal women who do not show guilt and whose crimes are far from being "expressive"; they also create women who commit crimes not as cries of desperation, but rather with the express intention of asserting their superiority. Along similar lines, Worrall (1990: 84) also calls attention to the "male as public" versus the "female as private" space in the criminal system. Women, she argues, face subordination due to the cultural gender stereotyping to which they are subject. Again, women in hardboiled crime narratives depart from Worrall's "separate spheres" model of the criminal justice system, invading the public urban space of the American city. The criminal femme fatales, though operating in a masculine environment which is dominated by male gangsters and detectives, assert their presence through criminal actions.

The aforementioned analyses raise the question of whether men can in fact be victims.<sup>64</sup> While feminists have focused on the victimization of women, men have rarely been depicted as victims.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, some work has been done on men's victimization. This research shows that men "experience their victimization as a key problem in their understandings of themselves as male" (Walklate 2004: 77). Another issue to consider in this context is women's perpetration of violence against men. Such behaviour entails a reversal of traditional gender roles, often causing men to experience

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<sup>64</sup> In post-World War II era in the US, there was a heightened level of scholarly interest in the relationship between maleness and crime. In 1950s and 1960s, studies focused on male delinquency, while women's criminality was neglected (Dobash, Dobash, and Noaks 1995: 1-2).

<sup>65</sup> In an attempt to render women visible in the field of criminology, feminist criminology has focused on the status of women as victims. On victimology and its connection to criminology, see Walklate (2004), chapters 1 and 2.

an identity crisis, as Kim Etherington (2000) demonstrates in his study of sexually abused men. In such cases, men often report feelings of anger (more so than women), as well as feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability. The issue of men's victimization is a precursor to a larger discussion about the intersecting discourses of control, power, gender, and crime; it also invites us to challenge prevailing socio-cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. These discussions are pertinent to hardboiled crime fiction inasmuch as the narratives of this genre reveal shifts in gender roles where women are the perpetrators and men are often their victims – though, significantly, these two typically oppositional roles are frequently collapsed into one another. In other words, hardboiled crime fiction depicts a world so full of violence and corruption that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the victim's role from the perpetrator's.

#### **1.2.4 Theories of women's criminality**

Numerous theories have attended to the problem of human aggression and crime. These theories vary according to the discipline from which they take their conceptual cues, be it biology, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, or psychology. A brief but necessary overview of the theories that focus on women's criminality is important to an understanding of the terms in which women are represented in areas such as literature and popular culture. In general, theories of women's criminality can be divided into three categories: traditional scientific theories, which are largely based on biology; modern theories, which take their cues from the American sociology of "deviance;" and feminist theories (Heidensohn 1985: 111). I will consider each in turn, and suggest ways in which they converge and diverge with the fictional representations of female criminals at the centre of this study.

The most prominent traditional theories include those of Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero (1895), William I. Thomas (1923/1967), and Otto Pollak (1950/1961), which I discuss here in the light of critiques issued by prominent feminist criminologists such as Smart (1977) and Heidensohn (1985), who thoroughly examined and criticized these traditional criminological texts. The analyses in these texts tend to frame the question of women's criminality in relation to factors such as hormonal imbalance and women's loss of control over their impulses.<sup>66</sup> They thereby situate criminal women as dissenting from the entrenched discourse of domesticity, which conversely portrays women as dependent, passive, and endowed with maternal instincts. The criminal woman nevertheless remains dominated, according to these theories, by her biology, especially her reproductive biology. Indeed, her criminality remains highly sexualized (taking the form, for example, of prostitution) and also pathologized (through characterizations such as "monster" and "evil") (Heidensohn 1985: 112).

Lombroso and Ferrero's *The Female Offender* (1895) was based on two concepts: atavism and Social Darwinism (Smart 1977: 31). The concept of biological determinism was foregrounded prominently in their analyses of criminal behaviour in general and women's criminal behaviour in particular. The perspective of atavism allowed Lombroso and Ferrero to explain criminal behaviour as a return to "an earlier biological ancestry" (Walklate 2004: 27). In accord with the theory of Social Darwinism – which contends that individuals or groups develop traits that enable them to function and survive in a predetermined role (Smart 1977: 31)<sup>67</sup> – women were seen as a "developmental anomaly" (Walklate 2004: 27). Indeed, situated on a lower rung of the

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<sup>66</sup> Feminist criminologists have accused such accounts of complicity in the patriarchal effort to wield the "female" body as a tool of social control. See, for example, Smart and Smart (1978), Edwards (1981), and Heidensohn (2000).

<sup>67</sup> Lombroso believed that evolution had endowed prostitutes with a high degree of physical attractiveness and women murderers with unusual strength.

evolutionary ladder, the criminal woman was viewed as even more “deviant” than her more biologically “advanced” male counterpart.

Lombroso and Ferrero studied pictures of criminal women, examined women’s tattoos, and counted the moles of women prisoners in an attempt to find signs of atavistic degeneration. Their aim was to discover a “natural” criminal “type.” To explain why women offend less than men, Lombroso and Ferrero again appealed to the concept of biological determinism. They argued that women are less evolved than men, and that criminality is in fact antithetical to their biological makeup, which in their view leans on passivity and submissiveness. As we have noted, such nineteenth-century theories have left their mark on ensuing studies of women’s criminality. In fact, their legacy is with us today, circulating, for example, in contemporary criminological discourses on the abnormality and masculinization of female offenders. In the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction, however, the notion of the masculinization of criminal women is challenged by the portrayal of “feminine” criminals. The narratives question the stereotyped images of criminal women as masculine, and at the same time push the boundaries of expectations about feminine roles as passive and bound to the realm of the domestic. The way hardboiled crime narratives negotiate the intersections between femininity and masculinity in relation to women’s criminality will be explored in the following chapters.

Thomas’s theory from 1923 departs from Lombroso and Ferrero’s insofar as it presents criminality through a social, rather than a biological, lens. Smart suggests that Thomas’s work inaugurates a “liberal” turn in the tradition of criminology (1977: 37). Thomas portrays criminals as “undersocialized, as not fully adapted to the social values of society which represent their interests, and ultimately as being ‘sick’ rather than inherently evil or rationally opposed to the dominant values of society” (Smart

1977:37). In *The Unadjusted Girl* (1923/1967), Thomas breaks with the approach he espoused in his earlier work, *Sex and Society* (1907), which drew heavily upon Lombroso and Ferrero's framework of biological determinism. He now adopted a functionalist approach, giving some credence to the "nurture" side of the nature-nurture dichotomy. Thomas nevertheless spoke of the "maternal instinct," which allegedly disposes women to display a nurturing attitude towards children as well as (helpless) adults. In his view, women with an unfulfilled need for love – women who have no outlet for their nurturing instincts – are more likely to be "unadjusted" and hence commit crimes, especially prostitution.

Thomas also views the source of female criminality as sexual in nature; it is a consequence of the disruption of the restraints that situate the woman in a domestic frame, which leads to a failure to conform to traditional gender roles. Thomas promotes the view that the "modern revolt and unrest" of American society in the 1920s made women suffer and become frustrated and thus "unadjusted." Furthermore, female delinquency is essentially conflated with and reduced to sexual delinquency: his case studies of "unadjusted girls" primarily comprised accounts of "promiscuity and adultery" rather than crime. As a remedy for this malaise, Thomas advocates middle-class values, especially family values to impose "a single standard of morality ... on a diverse urban population" (Smart 1977: 43). He pays considerable attention to the disintegration of family values as a consequence of socio-cultural shifts pertaining to gender roles and relations. His emphasis on "adjustment" to social norms (which are, for Thomas, mainly middle-class norms) is related to the study of women's criminality. The way he associates the allegedly non-criminal "nature" of women with traditional female roles implies that any move towards a breaking of traditional gender roles ought to be suppressed in order to contain female criminality. His work can be said to carry

seeds of not only sexism (attributing inferior characteristics to women on the basis of socio-cultural features) but also class bias, which is shown in his dependence on middle-class norms to define different types of behaviours, including criminal activity, thereby completely overlooking working class women. Woman has no intrinsic value for Thomas; in Smart's words, she is "merely a symbol of purity and she becomes valuable only as much as she pleases and enhances others" (1977: 43). Thomas's view that the value of women is dependent on how others perceive her strips her of any agency.

Hardboiled crime fiction seems to challenge Thomas's theory by presenting a different world from that which represents family life as "heaven." This genre instead criticizes the traditional politics of the nuclear family. Rather than deeming the female criminal as "unadjusted," the criminal femme fatales in the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction are presented as the consequence of the criminal women's integration in the underworld. The narratives depict a dark urban space of chaos and crime where women are portrayed outside of the domestic context. The criminal femme fatales in the narratives, who are usually not married or attached, show autonomy and control that equip them to operate in this world. Their transgression from traditional values thus illustrates how the narratives both invert and critique not only the classical formula of home life and family values, but also the institutions that create and support these values, such as the police. In the chapters that follow, accounts of the dynamics of family life and its connection to women's roles as criminals in the narratives will be explored.

Pollak's *The Criminality of Women* (1950/1961) is the only full length study in post-war America that dealt with women's crime in great detail before the 1970s. *The Criminality of Women* combines the biological perspective of Lombroso and Ferrero

and the sociological approach of Thomas. In so doing, Pollak's work reproduces many of the biases and prejudices evident in the analyses of his predecessors. Pollak speaks, for example, of three different ways in which the true nature of women's criminality is "masked": it is underreported; detected less frequently by law enforcement authorities than men's crimes; and subject to more lenient penalties in the courts (Smart 1977: 46-47). Pollak goes on to describe the manipulative nature of women, generally portraying them as instigators, rather than perpetrators, of crime. To support this contention, and the related idea that women are naturally deceitful, Pollak appeals to the biblical story of Eve, among other sources. As Smart observes, he "endows all women with the master-status of liars and deceivers" (1977: 48). Pollak attributes these characteristics to women's ability to use their sexuality to manipulate and deceive men. This account of women's presumed biological nature enabled Pollak to elaborate a highly distorted picture of women's criminality.

Pollak proposes that women are more inherently criminal than men because they are more prone to "revenge desire." This view can be accounted for by the fact that Pollak saw women as automata (Smart 1977: 52). Women, to Pollak, are driven to commit crime by their hormones and their low self-esteem. Indeed women are presented in his theory as a "separate species whose behaviour could be explained in simple 'scientific' terms to which there still cling odours of witchcraft and demonology" (Heidensohn 1985: 121). Nevertheless, Pollak's work remains influential. In a period when criminological studies focused on male crime,<sup>68</sup> Pollak's study drew attention to the neglect of the study of women's criminality. The importance of his work, despite its highly controversial and misogynistic claims, lies not only in pioneering the study of women's criminality at that time, but also in feeding myths about women's crime and

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<sup>68</sup> See for example Cohen (1955) and Kobrin (1951).

giving “folklore a pseudo-scientific status” (Smart 1977: 53). Pollak’s heavy dependence on citations from old European authors and anachronistic data made his work appear far from current. The 1961 paperback edition, for example, showed an illustration of a witch beating a kneeling man. As Heidensohn argues, although Pollak’s work was written and published in the US at a time of extensive criminological scholarship, especially about men’s crime, it seems “not to be part of that time at all” (1985: 118). Invoking stereotyped images of women, Pollak’s work – despite the fact that it was written more than fifty years after Lombroso and Ferrero – should still be considered as part of the same traditional trajectory because “by sharing their specific world-view and basic methodological assumptions, it fails to develop an understanding of female criminality much beyond the level achieved by Lombroso and Ferrero or Thomas” (Smart 1977: 46). Pollak’s use of myth and folklore alongside biological determinism, and the ways in which the assumptions deriving from this approach became entrenched in mainstream cultural perspectives reveal the interrelation between criminological discourse and popular culture, and the ways that both of these discourses *construct* perceptions about women’s crimes in different ways.

Both Thomas’s and Pollak’s work lend substantial weight to the present study as they bracket the period it considers. The fact that *The Unadjusted Girl* and *The Criminality of Women* were republished in the 1960s might indicate how American society was still fighting the change that the feminist movement, which was growing rapidly by the late 1960s, was trying to foment. Both Thomas and Pollak present stereotyped images of women in general and criminal women in particular that depend heavily on domestic and sexual roles. Through the lens of these works, hardboiled crime fiction can be seen as a canon that in fact challenges the notions of domesticity and ideal womanhood by presenting an array of criminal femme fatales. Women in this genre



break away from the constraints of domestic roles to occupy a more expansive urban space where they can act as agents. Nevertheless, one can say that there are some ideas that these two discourses, namely criminology and hardboiled crime fiction, share. The sexualization of the female body, for example, is a strong presence in both criminology and fiction, though for different purposes. In hardboiled crime fiction, women's sexuality is an empowering conduit to agency rather than a destructive source for criminality, as Thomas and Pollak maintain.

On the other hand, modern theories of women's crime, ironically, base their concepts on a methodology that ignores women. The "new" criminology, which started in the 1960s and came as a response to traditional criminological theories discussed above, did not utilize an adequate approach to the study of women's crime. The explanations for this neglect can be partly accounted for in terms of the low rate of crime by women and the lack of official concern (Heidensohn 1985: 125-6).<sup>69</sup> In the US, the mid-twentieth century was an era of extensive research on criminality, largely dominated by the sociological approach. Yet notably, these studies, as Heidensohn argues, gave short shrift to the issue of *women's* crime (1985: 125). A number of trends contributed to this oversight. First, sociologists moved away from regarding criminal behaviour as abnormal and pathological and came to see it as normal and even admirable. Second, the period was marked by the growth of structural approaches to the study of "deviance" such as anomie and Marxist theories (Heidensohn 1985: 127). In the wake of these developments, women became largely invisible in studies of criminality and deviance.

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<sup>69</sup> Feminist scholars shed light on the problem of invisibility of women. For example, Oakley observes that the "concealment of women runs right through sociology. It extends from the classification of subject-areas and the definition of concepts through the topics and methods of empirical research to the construction of models and theory generally" (1974: 3).

The widespread influence of the Chicago School, whose members included Edwin H. Sutherland (1960) and William Foote Whyte (1955), was also a factor in this context. Adopting an ethnographic approach to group deviance, Sutherland departed from traditional theories and interpreted crime as a learned behaviour. Although he insisted that his theory explained all crime, it did not examine women's criminality in detail. The definitive representative of the Chicago School's "male" bias is Whyte. His book *Street Corner Society* (1955) inaugurated a "romantic" turn in the sociological study of the "delinquent male hero" (Heidensohn 1985:132). The absence of women in these studies can be attributed to these sociologists' fascination with, indeed fixation on, the male subjects of their studies. According to Heidensohn, it is not "exaggerating to say that celebrating the young, male delinquent became a consistent theme in the post-war sociology of deviance" (1985: 132). This emphasis on men at the expense of women helped perpetuate a research structure that mirrored society at large, complete with its stereotypical gender roles and its absence of women on many levels.<sup>70</sup> Biological differences were implicitly espoused as the basis for gender differences in criminality; although crucial to the understanding of this issue, gender differences were not studied empirically.

The celebration of the "delinquent male hero" already existed in American popular culture in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the Western genre. Hardboiled crime fiction can also be said to exemplify the "tough guy" crime genre with a cynical city-dwelling male loner – mostly, but not always, a detective who is implicated in a world of violence and disorder and who oscillates between the wealthy elite and the underworld of gangsters and dangerous women. But, there is an equal emphasis on

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<sup>70</sup> An exception to this tendency is Davis's work on prostitution which was published in Merton and Nisbet's *Contemporary Social Problems* (1961), and has been reprinted in the third edition of the collection in 1971.

women, who, I argue, are far from neglected in this genre. In contradistinction to the criminological data of that time, criminal femme fatales play central roles in the narratives and inhabit similar circles of violence. Hence one can say that hardboiled crime fiction provides a critique of the socio-economic and political plights of that particular time in the US. Also, it is worth mentioning that the absence of women from the criminological literature around the mid-twentieth century in the US surprisingly is paralleled by an exceptional proliferation of the representation of criminal women and femme fatales in film noir in the 1940s and 1950s. This gap between the representation of criminal women in popular culture and that in contemporaneous criminological discourses opens up ways to see not only the tensions between the two, but also how women's criminality brings attention to larger debates about, for example, gender roles in American society.

Adopting what must therefore be described as an inherently sexist methodological bias, the sociological studies conducted in post-war US relegated women's criminality to the shadows. Yet, as Heidensohn observes, these "are vital shadows. [Women's] social roles and positions are essential to all these explanations of crime since these depend on assumptions about 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour, on the nature of the family and on women's role in it and even on the Victorian doctrine of spheres of men and women" (1985: 144). Feminist theories developed as reactions to these theories, with the intention of correcting the multiple misconceptions surrounding women's criminality.

In response to the sexism that pervaded the study of mainstream criminology in the US in the mid-twentieth century, a burgeoning body of feminist criminology has

arisen.<sup>71</sup> It aims to examine, among other questions, the motivations of women's crime and the position of criminal women in society. It also works to increase the visibility of women; promote research conducted by women and for women; and encourage the adoption of non-sexist methodologies (Heidensohn 1985: 14). Feminist criminologists criticize traditional criminology not only for neglecting women as victims of crime, for example in the cases of rape and domestic abuse, but also for distorting the reality of women as offenders – prostitution, for example, has often been attributed to sexual “deviance” rather than poverty and other socio-economic factors. What emerges from the literature is that both women who perpetrate crimes and women who have crimes perpetrated against them are similarly regarded – that is, all women (including criminal women) are usually positioned as “victims” in a male-dominated society. Women's crime is regarded as “a consequence of their own victimization experiences – specifically, an act of self-defence against an abusive partner” (Comack and Brickey 2007: 3). As Susan Edwards succinctly puts it: “On the whole most violent crimes committed by women are not an exercise in power but an exercise in helplessness” (1986: 86).<sup>72</sup>

Among the important contributions to the early feminist criminological literature are the studies of Heidensohn (1968), Millman (1975), Klein (1976), and Smart (1977).<sup>73</sup> In fact, since the 1970s, a number of feminist criminologists have continued to publish books and articles that address issues relating to women's crime from

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<sup>71</sup> There is a fair amount of controversy surrounding the term “feminist criminologist.” It is not clear whether it refers to criminologists who are feminist, female criminologists, or criminologists who study women (Morris 1987: 15-16). I will nevertheless apply it to scholars who study the issue of women's criminality and who draw upon research brought forward by the feminist movement in relation to women's rights and equality.

<sup>72</sup> For studies on the battered women who commit crimes see Dobash and Dobash (1992), Straus (1999) and Martinson *et al* (1991).

<sup>73</sup> Other examples of feminist criminological works include Smart and Smart (1978, 1989, and 1995), Leonard (1982), Heidensohn (2000 and 2006), Naffine (1987 and 1997), Carlen and Worrall (1987), Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988), Rafter and Heidensohn (1995), Daly (1997), Pearson (1997), Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2004), Bosworth (1999), and Walklate (2004).

different feminist perspectives, covering topics such as the invisibility and victimization of criminal woman, social control, and the position of women within the criminal justice system. Dorie Klein, for example, examines the aetiology of women's criminality while criticizing the assumptions and biases of traditional criminology. She reviews the perspectives of Lombroso and Ferrero, Thomas, Pollak, and Freud, noting that all of these accounts make unjustified assumptions about the "*inherent nature of women*" (1976: 5, original emphasis). They presume, that is, that women are endowed with innate psychological and physiological characteristics that render them passive but also manipulative and calculating. Klein criticizes Lombroso and Ferrero, Thomas, and Freud for their thoroughgoing ignorance of the economic hardships that motivate women to commit crimes. Just as they gloss over such important factors such as race and class, these approaches subscribe, as Heidensohn suggests, to the myth of the "forever feminine," which disposes them to validate the sexualization of women's crime (1985: 148).

Marcia Millman's (1975) criticisms of post-war theorists such as Daniel Bell (1960) and Howard Becker (1963) are also worth noting in this context. According to Millman, these authors not only ignored women but also glamorized and identified with the male subjects of their research, who were often crime leaders and racketeers. Bell, for example, is accused of portraying "the racketeers and leaders of organized crime as not only loyal and helpful to their ethnic group, but also as brilliant, witty, and personally appealing characters" (Millman 1975: 255). Apparently, scholars like Bell were not immune to the mystique surrounding the urban gangsters who inhabited the socio-cultural landscape of post-war America. Hardboiled crime fiction seems to be in dialogue with the ways that masculinity and femininity have been presented in public discourses. The genre puts the "tough-guy" male character at the centre of the

narratives, but, I would argue, destabilizes the glamour of his “hardboiled” masculinity through the presence of criminal femme fatales as noted above. In this way hardboiled crime fiction articulates aspects of the feminist critique to the traditional views of gender roles, especially in relation to notions of what constitutes normative views on gender roles.

Despite its efforts to make women more visible in criminological research and to encourage the growth of studies focused on women’s criminality, feminist criminology has been criticized on a number of counts. Morris (1985: 17) sums up these objections:

Feminism, however, is not one thing; it is not a unified set of principles and practices .... Nor is criminology a unified set of principles and practices. Thus *a* feminist criminology cannot exist. Feminists who are criminologists reflect the tensions and differences which exist within these perspectives. Some argue that men and women should be dealt with equally in the criminal justice system (for example, Moulds, 1980); others believe that there are differences between men and women which justify differential treatment (for example, Smart and Brophy, 1985). Some reject the notion of fundamental differences between men and women (for example, Adler, 1975); others argue that women’s personality is different from men’s (for example, Gilligan, 1982).<sup>74</sup>

Such criticisms of feminist criminology underscore the need for frameworks that are more comprehensive and thorough. For the purposes of this study, feminist criminology is nonetheless a useful designation, as it signifies a departure from traditional sexist and/or misogynistic approaches to women’s criminality. The concepts of feminist criminology are useful insofar as they permit a reading of women’s criminality in fiction from a different perspective. The critique that this discipline offers to traditional notions of criminality (for example, deconstructing the perception of the criminal woman as “evil” or “mad”), facilitates a feminist interpretation of hardboiled crime texts. And though I disagree to some extent with the over-emphasis of some feminist

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<sup>74</sup> For a detailed analysis of the backlash against feminism, see, for example, Faludi (1991).

ideas on the victimhood of criminal women, this study benefits from basic feminist premises, such as the critiques of the misconceptions and distortions of the image of the female criminal. Therefore I read representations of criminal femme fatales from a feminist perspective, but I do not endorse an all-compassing feminist focus on the victimization of the woman. Instead, I shift attention to female agency and on reading acts of resistance in criminality. By so doing, I would like to balance the emphasis on different aspects of women's crime, notwithstanding issues raised by feminist scholarship regarding social control and the unfair treatment of women in the criminal justice system and society in general. Thus, in the following section, I shed light briefly on another subset of such conventional approaches – namely, medical discourses on women's crime – as tools of repressive ideology to circumscribe and taxonomize the woman, limit her role and feed the stereotyped images of the female criminal. Shedding light on these discourses will allow the development of a rounded portrayal of women in hardboiled crime fiction by exploring the negotiations between regulation and control of women on the one hand, and women's resistance and agency on the other.

### **1.3 Medical Discourses on Women's Criminality**

Thus to understand women's madness, we need to deconstruct the concept of madness itself, and look to these discursive practices which are associated with madness, recognizing the connections between discourses of madness and other discourses such as that [*sic*] of misogyny, power, sexuality or badness. (Ussher 1991: 12)

The association between women and madness is rooted in a long socio-cultural and intellectual tradition, in which women have been constructed as “other” or “outsider.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “Madness” is used here as an umbrella term encompassing myriad cultural meanings. It is in this way distinguished from other scientific categories, such as schizophrenia, depression, and so on. I will nevertheless use the term madness interchangeably with terms such as “mental illness” and “psychological” or “mental disorder.” Further, I will adopt Ussher's understanding of madness as a

As Sylvie Frigon observes, “[w]oman embodies madness. To be a woman is to be, somehow, mad. Madness serves to categorise, censure and disqualify. Madness serves as a signifier” (1995: 20). Indeed, it signifies a misogynistic construction of “womanhood,” one that erases the agency of women and gives it over to supposedly innate attributes such as emotionality, irrationality, and impulsivity. History and literature provide numerous examples of “madwomen” who have been locked up in asylums, mistreated, and classified as “dangerous.” The understanding of medical discourses is valuable to the discussion of criminal femme fatales in the forthcoming chapters. Examining the ways that medical discourses are related to the social control and containment of women will expedite a discussion of the same dynamics in hardboiled crime fiction. I argue that hardboiled crime fiction, notwithstanding its representation of medicalized women, also attempts to give women space to escape the “mad-bad” dichotomy within which the world tries to frame them. In other words, the attempts to contain women’s sexuality and ambition, which usually take the form of restoring order by “punishing” the female character at the end of the story, are more complex than reducing her role to the reassertion of the male character’s masculinity through her defeat.

### **1.3.1 A means for control or agency? The medicalization of the woman’s body**

Medical discourses have portrayed women’s biology in terms that readily allow them to be stigmatized as irrational, prone to uncontrollable urges, and, indeed, mad. While labels such as “witch” or “witchcraft” were once deployed to legitimate the mistreatment and social control of women, the diagnosis of madness has been enlisted

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concept aimed at recognizing “the meaning attached to the perception of illness or dysfunction in the psychological domain—the stigma attached—and to avoid entering into the discourse of experts wherein these different classificatory systems are deemed to exist as entities in themselves, as illnesses which cause the disturbance in function in the first place” (1991: 11).



for such purposes in contemporary times.<sup>76</sup> Sexualizing women's reproductive functions (menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause) has been one way in which medical discourses have been able to link the potential for madness to womanhood.<sup>77</sup> As Kristy Keywood observes, "Bodies matter in medical law. Bodies form the very 'stuff' of actions for negligence, when the sub-standard diagnosis or treatment renders the body 'damaged'; trespass to the person, when the touching of bodies occurs without patient's consent; the exercise of the high court's declaratory jurisdiction to determine the lawfulness or otherwise of treating bodies" (2000: 319). The body of the criminal femme fatale in hardboiled crime fiction has a central role as the site where the contestation over notions of "womanhood" takes place. Indeed, the body of the criminal woman speaks of her femininity and is an object of desire, yet it also operates as a means for the woman to express agency through using bodily charms to perform acts of transgression. In other words, the female body in the narratives has a double function; it is the centre of the male gaze and it is also a means through which the woman gains power. Nevertheless, attempts to contain the woman's body can also be detected in the narratives. The body is seen as a threat, a danger that has to be regulated. Hardboiled crime fiction provides portrayals of medicalized female characters, who represent a facet of the social control exercised against women, but at the same time the narratives demonstrate how these women resist the restraints imposed on them. The dynamics of how agency and control intersect in the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction will be discussed with reference to each individual author in the following chapters.

In addition to the previously noted emphasis on women's hormonal changes and reproductive functions, medical discourses have appealed to numerous theoretical

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<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of women, madness, and witchcraft, see Ussher (1991), chapter 3.

<sup>77</sup> In his account of the history of criminal insanity, Menzies (2002: 379) argues that despite the enormous body of literature on legal and forensic laws, little attention has been given to the lives of the criminally insane.

resources in their attempts to associate women with madness, including psychoanalysis and feminism.<sup>78</sup> In their examination of the feminist literature on mental illness in women, Nicol Wright and Sara Owen (2001: 144) consider two salient tropes: the employment of psychiatry to socially control women, and the medicalization of unhappiness. With regard to the first, they argue that psychiatry has been deployed not simply as a mechanism of women's oppression, but has also been enlisted, in various ways, to aid in the construction of women's madness. With respect to the second, the authors underline medical discourses' interest in putting social and emotional problems, including unhappiness, under clinical lens. Wright and Owen also suggest the literature on madness appears to be divided into two categories, the first being inspired by the work of Elaine Showalter (1987) and the second by that of Phyllis Chesler (1972). Employing a historical approach, Showalter argues that madness is simply the most recent designation utilized by men to control women. According to this view, the labelling of women as "mad" highlights the patriarchal power against the powerlessness of women, who face of a male-dominated medical profession. Showalter discusses the growth of asylums in the nineteenth century as a precursor to men's control over women's mental health, and that madness became inseparable from vice.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, Chesler's work draws on different theoretical resources – namely, the anti-psychiatry school (for example, Szasz 1961) and structural functionalism (for example, Parsons, 1960). According to Chesler, labels of mental illness facilitate the control of both men's and women's behaviour. This view also argues, however, that the female role is undervalued. That is, when women either depart or come close to feminine roles, they become more vulnerable to a diagnosis of mental illness. Women thus are more likely to

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<sup>78</sup> For psychoanalytic accounts on women and mental illness, see Freud's (1933 and reprinted in 1965) lecture on "Femininity," and McGovern's "Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Women in America: An Historical Note" (1984).

<sup>79</sup> See also Ussher (1991) for a historical analysis of the diagnosis and treatment of women with mental illness.

be labelled as mentally ill in whatever role they take on, and they are also more likely to be regulated, exploited, and confined in mental institutions.

### **1.3.2 Medical and legal discourses, interrelated: The construction of the “disordered” criminal woman**

Seen in this light, medical discourses can be understood as tools for the ill-treatment of women in general and criminal women in particular. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these discourses mobilized various psycho-biological accounts of women’s bodies in an effort to lend scientific credibility to traditional beliefs about the “deviance” of criminal women. Significantly, in some contemporary contexts, gender, gender identity, and sexuality are likewise discussed in medical terms. The medicalization of such concepts is manifest in everyday social life as well as in professional arenas, such as law.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, discourses that medicalize women involved in criminal activity are often imbricated with legal discourses. As Hilary Allen notes:

The ‘discourse’ of medicine and law are much more than collections of documents or disembodied exchanges of legal and medical ‘talk’. They are structures of knowledge through which members of professions understand and decide things. They are structures of social relationship which establish different obligations and authorities for different categories of person, such as patient, offenders, doctors, judges, probation officers and so on .... They are historical and political frameworks of social organization, that make some social actions possible while precluding others. (1987: 13-4)

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<sup>80</sup> The term “medicalization” refers to a situation in which the models, metaphors, values, agents, and institutions of “medicine are employed to exercise practical and theoretical authority over particular areas of life.” Medicalization dissociates activities or experiences (for example, crimes, habits, or changes in physical or intellectual ability) from categories such as social deviance and re-consigns them to the dominion of medical expertise (Tiefer 1996: 253).

Feminists have thus been keen to underscore the terms in which the medical profession, and psychiatry in particular, have been deployed to control women and subordinate them to the codes of the dominant social order.<sup>81</sup> Michele Barrett and Helen Roberts highlight some of the techniques the medical profession has mobilized to this end. These include “denying the importance of paid work for women; viewing women’s worries as ‘vague and spurious’ (in other words, psychosomatic rather than genuine); and adopting a decidedly unsympathetic approach towards women’s complaints when they were viewed as stemming from social circumstances” (1978: 45-46). This view brings to mind the contention that medical discourses, like criminological ones, are constructed by predominately male specialists. Socio-cultural factors participate in shaping the positions and attitudes in these discourses, but at the same time medico-legal discourse still maintains a scientific, and therefore allegedly objective, stance.

Clearly, the criminal justice system is a key arena for the deployment of medicalized discourses on womanhood and madness. Here women are twice as likely as men to be psychiatrically evaluated (Allen 1987: xi). Women are also more likely to be found unfit to stand trial or found not guilty by reason of insanity than men, particularly in cases of murder.<sup>82</sup> Women convicted of a crime are also more likely to undergo psychiatric treatment than their male counterparts. In the criminal justice system, medical discourses therefore evince a marked discrepancy in attitudes towards male and female offenders. As Dorothy E. Chunn and Robert J. Menzies remark,

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<sup>81</sup> On women and social control, see Heidensohn (2000) and (1985: 163-195).

<sup>82</sup> The term “psychiatric sexism” is utilized by feminists to characterize a situation in which women are referred more frequently than men for psychiatric evaluation. Typically, such referrals result in women being given a differential diagnosis and prescribed psychotropic drugs. However, this bias may also be explained by the fact that women suffer from higher rates of mental illness than men. For more details on the feminist debate on the position of sexism in the medical profession, see Chan (2001), especially chapter 4.

on the one hand, forensic decision-makers routinely reduce or eliminate the legal guilt of violent female offenders by transforming them into pitiful victims who lack moral guilt and, on the other hand, find their male counterparts doubly culpable. Consequently, men who are described as mentally disordered by clinicians may still end up in prison, while women who are not can actually be returned home to the scene and victim(s) of their offence. (1990: 37)

Chunn and Menzies's account reveals the anxiety that surrounds women's crime. The fear of acknowledging that women are *capable* of committing dangerous crimes is the driving force behind the medicalization of the female criminal that engenders what these two authors perceive as her lenient treatment in the criminal justice system. As noted above, the anxiety about women's crime is a crucial factor dominating the images of the criminal women in hardboiled crime fiction. And although the genre presents some medicalized women whose criminal acts are associated with a psychological illness, the narratives ultimately undercut any totalizing equation between women and madness. As my analysis in the next chapters will elaborate, medicalized women are balanced against the powerful presence of criminalized women who take control and who have agency in the narratives. Hence one can say that the attempts to contain and regulate female characters in hardboiled crime fiction are negotiated through the space the narratives accord to criminal *femme fatales*. This space is part of a larger context of socio-cultural factors that shape not only the images of the criminal woman within American culture, but also the perceptions and constructions pertaining to the medicalized and criminalized women that hardboiled crime fiction features.

Commenting on how prevailing cultural conceptions have affected medical knowledge about women especially in the post-war period, Deborah Findlay notes that during and immediately after World War II, women were regarded as a threat to social stability. She is particularly concerned with the influence of socio-cultural and

normative assumptions on gynaecological and obstetric disciplines in the 1950s. The distinction between normal/abnormal womanhood, Findlay maintains, is made in medical and technical terms. Medical professionals were thus poised to anoint themselves as “guardians of family values and protectors of social order” (1993: 117).

As Findlay explains,

There was, then, a general social trend towards rationalization and normalization in the post-war period in Britain, Canada and the United States, with particular, standardized notions of what constituted normality and pathology in regard to women’s health and gender. Medical, technical definitions of womanhood and particularly what was considered normal for the “female” drew on social concepts of femininity that emphasized women’s reproductive capacities. (1993: 132)

It should at this point be clear that crime by women is assessed and overseen through a complex system of interconnected cultural, social, legal, and medical discourses. This system endeavours to pathologize, sexualize, and medicalize women’s criminality, thereby rendering it “abnormal” and “deviant,” the polar opposite of “ideal” or “pristine” womanhood. The threat that women’s criminality poses to the “masculine” world is thus neutralized and corralled: such behaviour is “not women” nor is it “criminal” (Worrall 1990: 31). In this way, the agency of the criminal woman is negated, as are the motives, circumstances, and background of her crimes. In the context of the criminal justice system, this means that women are denied the right to interrogate the social, economic, and other factors underlying the commission of their crimes. As Worrall comments,

The ideology of normal womanhood is mediated to women not only by powerful agents of significance, who claim to have authoritative knowledge about appropriate feminine behaviour, but also through women’s own material conditions of existence. The essentially normal woman may not exist, but neither does the universally oppressed woman. Class, race, and age all affect the extent to which women can resist the

ideological discourses of femininity and the relative significance of these variables is a question of historical, social and economic specificity, rather than theoretical debate. (1990: 34)

By breaking the binary of good-passive womanhood, hardboiled crime fiction resists the “ideological discourses of femininity” described by Worrall. Although women are sexualized and sometimes medicalized in the narratives, the various depictions of criminal femme fatales demonstrate female empowerment. The narratives present a different perspective on agency of women through their challenge to and destabilization of the medico-legal notions enumerated here.

### **1.3.3 Psychopathy of women: Discourses of madness and badness**

The diagnosis and treatment of psychopathy<sup>83</sup> in criminal women is illustrative of the foregoing points. While there are numerous examples of psychopathy in the historical record and in literature (for example, Aphrodite, Medea, and Hera), little empirical investigation of this disorder has been undertaken until recently. Moreover, women have been assessed for psychopathy on the basis of male criteria, with no regard for the specifically gendered ways in which it is expressed. Women deemed psychopathic have consequently been affected socially (judged as mad) as well as judicially (incarcerated and excluded from treatment) (Forouzan and Cooke 2005: 766). In view of these concerns, Elham Forouzan and David Cooke have questioned the methods used in the diagnosis and study of psychopathy in women ( 2005: 768). They

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<sup>83</sup> Psychopathy is a psychological disorder, specifically a form of personality disorder, which, in psychiatric accounts, is characterized by a number of affective, interpersonal and behavioural features, such as incapacity for empathy and guilt, difficulty in controlling impulses, egocentricity, manipulative behaviour and regular violations of legal, moral and social norms. Scholarship on psychopathy in women in the fields of psychiatry and clinical psychology has been motivated by an interest in how this condition is related to women’s criminality. Psychopathy is of relevance to the current study as I will interrogate and critique the labelling of criminal women, for example, those who commit crimes in cold blood, as psychopaths and look at the ways that this discourse on female psychopaths is relevant to the representations of criminal women in hardboiled crime fiction.

note that these methods fail to recognize that the behavioural patterns of women psychopaths are different from those of their male counterparts. For example, impulsivity, manipulation, and complicity in lawbreaking behaviour tend to characterize the crimes of those who are labelled as “psychopathic” by medical practices, whereas male psychopaths are more likely to perpetrate violent acts. Also, the sexual desire and sexual behaviour of female psychopaths is often motivated by financial or narcissistic gain, whereas mating tends to be the principal aim of sexually motivated male psychopaths (Forouzan and Cooke 2005: 768.). The question that presents itself here is: Are criminal women in hardboiled crime fiction, or at least some of them, psychopaths? Do they show manipulation, difficulty in controlling impulses, and a lack of guilt when they commit crime? Considering the view that the medical discourse itself is biased and male-dominated, these questions appear provocative and raise problems, particularly if one adopts a feminist approach. The textual analysis that follows in the next chapters explores the boundaries and junctures between the criminal behaviour of women in the narratives – why do they kill in cold blood? Why don’t they feel any guilt? – and the medical discourse that taxonomizes this behaviour as “psychopathic.”

A closer consideration of how the dichotomy of the so-called “bad-mad” woman has been mobilized in medical discourses to pathologize criminal women is in order. According to this narrow clinical model, criminal women are to be regarded, above all, as neither rational beings nor as active agents. As Chan contends, women are “portrayed as irrational, their crimes are viewed as an aberrant act unfitting that of ‘normal’ women, and their diagnosis of mental disorder explains their behaviour” (2001: 106-7). The attendant assumption is that when men commit crimes they are “bad” but “normal”; however, when women follow suit, they are “mad” and “abnormal.” As inequitable as this double standard is, it has formed the normative backbone for the judgment,



treatment, and punishment of criminal women in society. In this regard, Chesler in her influential book *Women and Madness* (1972), which examines the terms in which women and madness have been associated in sociological research, maintains that gender is embodied in madness itself and there is a double standard in the treatment of women. She argues that madness is by no means a viable avenue for rebellion, protest, or the self-affirmation of women. However, one can argue that women are able to create a space to resist their confinement within these limited categories. Challenging Chesler's views in an article entitled "A Genealogy of Women's Madness," Frigon discusses women who transgress the boundaries of these medicalized discourses, legally as well as culturally (1995: 22). She traces the genealogy of women as "mad" to iconic representations such as witch, murderess, terrorist, and political protester.<sup>84</sup> Such categories, Frigon argues, are aimed at "disqualifying women's resistance and defiance to (white) masculine hegemonies" (1995:22).<sup>85</sup> These analyses raise the question of how discursive space might be created for women's agency, even if this space is pathologized. I would argue that hardboiled crime fiction does make room for women's resistance, which becomes a means for them to show agency, though I would add that hardboiled crime fiction does not present an either/or situation in which women are *either* completely medicalized *or* endowed with agency and power. Rather, the agency of criminal femme fatales is negotiated within a noir world that incorporates a discourse which oscillates between autonomy and pathologization.

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<sup>84</sup> See Frigon's article for an account of each of the four images, giving a historical account of the representation of women.

<sup>85</sup> Busfield (1996: 6-7), in a study of the relationship between gender and mental illness, notes that in addition to documenting and criticizing the treatment of women in the mental health system, feminists have called attention to the overrepresentation of women among those classified as mentally ill. In addition, she discusses the limitations to feminist scholarship on the issue of women and madness. One of the significant points she raises is that feminist studies, in their attempts to make women visible, have overemphasized women while completely neglecting men.

In summary, two basic issues have emerged from the foregoing discussion of medical discourses on crime and madness. The first concerns the efforts of prevailing medicalized discourses to neutralize the motivations behind the criminal woman's behaviour, reducing the analysis of her actions to the diagnosis that she is "mad." The second is the idea that madness constitutes an alternative to criminal behaviour for women – the claim, that is, that madness "is a form of deviant behaviour appropriate to women, fulfilling for them the same needs or functions as criminal behaviour does for men" (Smart 1977: 147). Thus, while madness is seen as a trigger that leads women to criminal action, it is also paradoxically viewed as a means of denying agency to women when they commit crimes: women are regarded as "mad" and not "criminal."<sup>86</sup> Yet, it is within this double-faceted, even paradoxical, paradigm – which considers madness as the trigger of crime by women and yet in some cases a reason to deny their criminal agency – that hardboiled crime fiction mobilizes the position of medicalized women.

The ways in which medical discourses have helped to shape and construct the experiences of women, particularly criminal women, are still an issue open to discussion. Numerous questions remain about the relationship between gender and mental illness, questions that invite perspectives from a range of scholarly disciplines and literatures. Following the framework that has been established in this chapter, the next chapters will examine the representations of criminal women in American hardboiled crime fiction. The discussion of selected works of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain will be concerned with the construction and representation of women's criminality in the narratives, alongside the sights from the criminological and medical discourses discussed here.

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<sup>86</sup> In this regard, Chesler (1972) notes that behaviours classified as "criminal" and "mentally ill" are sex-stereotyped, and that men and women are conditioned accordingly.

## 2

### Narratives of the Underworld: Violence and Dangerous

#### Femininity in Dashiell Hammett's Labyrinthine Criminal World

##### 2.1 Introduction

Hammett wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street. Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish. (Chandler 1973: 12)<sup>87</sup>

Hammett brought depth of character, realism and literary values unmatched by any other writer to the pages of the *Mask*. (Nolan 1985: 75)

Dashiell Hammett's work redefined crime fiction.<sup>88</sup> His stories, which first appeared in *Black Mask* magazine in the early 1920s, mark an obvious shift from the classical, mostly British,<sup>89</sup> detective story in which the detective is the main crime solver and the events take place in middle-class suburban houses, libraries and drawing rooms, to an urban space in the United States where organized crime, gangsters, and corruption pervade the city. Hammett's work also took detective fiction from the puzzle formula, where the "who" and the "how" of the crime are the main components of the

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<sup>87</sup> Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder," a seminal essay about hardboiled crime fiction, was first published in 1944 in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Unless otherwise stated, I will use throughout this study the reprint of Chandler's essay in *The Second Chandler Omnibus* (1973).

<sup>88</sup> Though Carroll John Daly is perhaps considered the first to publish in the hardboiled tradition and his detective, Race Williams, is the first hardboiled detective, Hammett is still credited for being the founder of the genre.

<sup>89</sup> There are some classic American detective stories, also belonging to what is called "Golden Age" crime fiction. Authors who wrote in this tradition include S. S. Van Dine, Ellery Queen, and John Dickson Carr in the 1920s and 1930s. For a full history of detective fiction see, for example, Symons (1985) and Knight (2004).

rationation with which the detective is preoccupied, to a “hardboiled” formula which proffered a character study of the criminal himself or herself, painted a vivid picture of the Depression-era America that he or she inhabits, and engaged with criminological discourses of the period.<sup>90</sup> Most important for this study, however, is Hammett’s introduction of criminal femme fatales, women who, as suggested in Chapter One, challenge normative gender roles and clear a space for female agency. I argue in this chapter that Hammett’s criminal femme fatales constitute the point of connection between the genre of crime fiction and criminological discourses on crime and policing. I propose in this chapter to examine the components of Hammett’s intervention in these separate but related milieux, which include Hammett’s narrative world that is full of violence and disorder, and the social realities of the Depression, Prohibition, gangsterism, and the attendant shift in policing and criminological discourses in the United States, all of which shape the imagined underworld in which the criminal femme fatales function as active agents.

I will begin with a discussion of *Red Harvest* (1929) to demonstrate how the novel embodies Hammett’s aforementioned two-fold intervention in crime fiction and criminological discourses and establishes a prototype of female agency, which is developed in his later work. However, I do not intend to discuss *Red Harvest* merely focusing on female characters in the light of my argument about female agency as I do with the other works discussed in the chapter. Rather, I want to use this novel to contextualize the hardboiled world which Hammett creates, and how this world affects and shapes his representation of gender. *Red Harvest* helps us understand the context of other novels, where female agency is more apparent and/or takes various other forms.

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<sup>90</sup> Hammett is credited for writing “realistic mystery fiction” (Chandler 1973: 11) that “transformed detective fiction into literature” (Zumoff 2007: 119). According to McGurl, Hammett’s work shows us “both what modernism looks like to mass culture and what mass culture looks like to modernism” (1997: 706).

This contextualization will also be helpful for the chapters that follow in terms of framing the narratives of the genre in general and showing how the criminal femme fatales are positioned in this context. Later in this chapter, I examine the portrayals of criminal femme fatales in two of Hammett's other works, *The Dain Curse* (1929) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1930). These two novels offer different case studies of Hammett's criminal femme fatales who display distinct aspects of woman's criminality. Following on from the medico-legal discourses on female criminality discussed in Chapter One, I argue that Hammett presents two different, yet related treatments of criminal women, which I term "criminalized" and "medicalized." A medicalized woman is a woman who is treated in the narrative as irrational and "mad" through the sexualization of her body and the disavowal of her culpability to commit criminal acts. This medicalized woman, as represented in *The Dain Curse*, stands in contrast to the criminalized woman who appears in a number of Hammett's short stories and, notably, in *The Maltese Falcon*.<sup>91</sup> Unlike her medicalized counterpart, the criminalized woman is a woman who is capable and culpable in committing crimes and is involved in a legal encounter with the criminal justice system.

At first glance, this distinction might not seem easy to draw, as there are gray areas where these types meet and commingle. I argue that it is nevertheless a useful way to understand the treatment of women in hardboiled crime fiction. It shows the variety of representations in the narratives, and hence questions the fixity of the misogyny that is allegedly manifest in Hammett's fiction, and in the genre of hardboiled crime fiction

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<sup>91</sup> Hammett's early fiction, especially his short stories, is full of dangerous women, who use their beauty and sexual charm to commit criminal acts. Examples include "The Girl with the Silver Eyes," "The House in Turk Street" "The Tenth Claw," and "The Golden Horseshoe," which all appeared in *Black Mask* in 1924 (and reprinted later) and have the Op as the detective. For more information about Hammett's short stories see Marling (1983), chapter two. Also see Herman (1994) for the treatment of female characters in the short stories.

more generally.<sup>92</sup> By shedding light on the criminal femme fatales in Hammett's work, my main contention in this chapter is that his oeuvre, although not empty of misogyny, provides a varied depiction of women's agency.

## **2.2 *Red Harvest*: A Snapshot of Hardboiled America**

*Red Harvest*, Hammett's most complex novel (Freeman and Kendrick 1991: 209), is a disturbing depiction of American society in the late 1920s. Written in the same year as the Wall Street Crash, the novel portrays the political, social, and institutional corruption that tainted the US in this period. The analysis of *Red Harvest* here aims to contextualize themes of violence, gangsterism, and the urbanization of the American city, leading to a greater understanding of the factors that precipitated the emergence of hardboiled crime fiction at that particular moment in history, and the ways that the narratives of this genre reposition the female characters as criminal femme fatales. The discussion of *Red Harvest* is not intended as a minutely thorough or in depth textual analysis of the novel. Nor does it specifically look at female roles in detail. Rather it aims at sketching the atmosphere of the text, and delineating the discourses on crime and policing pertinent to the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction with, an eye on the representation of women, not only for the current chapter on Hammett but also for the following chapters on Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain.

Set in an industrial city in the American west, *Red Harvest* epitomizes George Grella's description of the world of hardboiled fiction: "an urban chaos, devoid of spiritual and moral values, pervaded by viciousness and random savagery" (1980: 110). Mining is the main industry in the city of Personville, known by its residents by the more evocative name of "Poisonville." Elihu Willsson is an industrial capitalist who

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<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Herman's reading of Hammett's work (1994).

controls not only this industry but also the city officials and police. Personville had been unionized by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) during World War I, but Elihu, taking advantage of the recession, now wants workers to return to their “pre-war circumstances.” He hires thugs and gangs to suppress the workers’ strike; however, after successfully and brutally breaking the strike, the gangsters refuse to leave and take control of Personville. The Op, a nameless detective who is employed by the Continental Detective Agency in San Francisco, is summoned to the city by Donald Willsson, Elihu’s son and the editor of a newspaper, but never gets to meet his employer as the latter is killed before the Op arrives in the city. In the wake of his son’s death, Elihu puts the Op on a mission to “clean up” Personville. Hammett’s first novel embodies and exemplifies two concurrent shifts: the first pertaining to attitudes towards the study of crime and the second to the literary shift in the canon of crime fiction. The link between the criminological and literary discourses of the time is significant to an understanding of the emergence and development of hardboiled crime fiction, and more particularly the treatment of criminal women in this genre. The criminal femme fatales can be read as transgressive figures of alternative womanhood. Despite the misogyny that is attributed to hardboiled fiction, the genre undermines the stability and the totality of the representation of gender in a masculine genre by opening a space to read criminality not as an act of “deviance” (as the criminological discourse of the time suggests) but as an act of resistance.

*Red Harvest* develops a grim critique of various aspects of American life, through a “realistic” portrayal of what Chandler describes as the “mean streets,” a metaphor that has become shorthand for the whole genre of hardboiled crime fiction

(1973: 14).<sup>93</sup> According to Chandler, Hammett “took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley” (1973: 12). Despite the fact that Chandler’s statement captures the significant change that took place in crime fiction, the issue of how “realistic” Hammett’s fiction is, can be questioned. Is the realism in this work a representation and/or critique of the United States in the 1920s? Or is it an artistic device that Hammett self-consciously uses to create a new genre that breaks from the classical tradition? I agree with Dennis Porter who argues that the “new realism” in Hammett functions “on two fronts simultaneously, that of style as well as content” (1981:130). That is, Hammett’s realism is “a matter of style”, but at the same time it is also rooted in the socio-cultural context his novels expose and, I would argue, critique. It is not that Hammett represented life “more accurately than did Agatha Christie,” Porter maintains, but that he lent “to the genre a new more exciting set of literary conventions better suited to the taste of the time and place” (1981:130).<sup>94</sup> Hammett’s fictional realism, in Cynthia Hamilton’s words, has the effect of “mythologising” the present. Hammett’s work shows his “awareness of the re-formation – the alternation and intensification of meaning – of the ‘real’ detail produced in an arbitrary ordered fictional framework” (1987: 28).

*Red Harvest* can be said to represent a world where everything is going wrong: Hammett delineates more than two dozen murders in a narrative in which criminals, police, aristocratic businessmen, and even the detective are all corrupt. Hammett uses Personville to paint a picture of the “mean streets” – “an ugly city of forty thousand

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<sup>93</sup> Horsley argues that hardboiled fiction reveals “a new responsiveness to altered socio-political circumstances.” She describes *Red Harvest* as among Hammett’s “most directly political” novels (2005: 166). For more details on hardboiled crime fiction as social critique, see Horsley (2005), especially chapters 4-6.

<sup>94</sup> See Chandler’s descriptive definition of what he calls the “realist in murder” in hardboiled crime fiction (1973: 14).



people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains” (*RH*: 3).<sup>95</sup> In Hammett’s hands, Personville becomes an amalgamation of both physical and spiritual decay, and ironically, what sustains Personville economically and what distinguishes it as a city – the mining business – is what makes it a “hellhole” (Gregory 1985: 31). Although Hammett embodies what Cawelti calls a “powerful vision of life” (1976: 163) in this novel, *Red Harvest* also draws a grim picture of “a decade of rapid social change and increasing fragmentation” (Nyman 2000: 77).<sup>96</sup> One of the devices that Hammett utilizes to subvert the “cognitive, ethical, and linguistic unintelligibility” that formulates this world (Malmgren 1999: 382) is the collapsing of the distinctions between appearance and reality – it is this blurring that makes Hammett’s world lack any coherence, and the distinction between appearance and reality becomes difficult to make. Appearance both reveals reality and obscures it, and by so doing, the narrative deconstructs itself “by treating appearances as secondary to reality whilst showing that there is no reality except that of appearance” (Day 1988: 42).<sup>97</sup>

Hammett’s narratives of “amorality and irresolution” comprise a “representation of the conditions of modernity” (McCann 2001: 77). Sean McCann, in his notable book *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* explores the interrelationships between literary production and the political and economic aspects brought about by the New Deal. The book explores how writers of the New Deal period, when Franklin D. Roosevelt increased the federal government’s

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<sup>95</sup> All quotations from Hammett’s *Red Harvest* are from *Hammett: Five Complete Novels* (1980). The abbreviation *RH* will appear before the page number in all quotes from the novel.

<sup>96</sup> Gregory maintains that although the exposure of corruption in *Red Harvest* is more revealing than any other novel of the time, including *The Great Gatsby*, it is still “more than a political or social tract” (1985: 29).

<sup>97</sup> Marcus also provides an insight into this chasm between appearance and reality: “what happens in Hammett is that what is revealed as ‘reality’ is still further fiction making activity” (1975: xxii). That is, Hammett is creating fiction in the real world, and the fiction he creates, like the real world, is “coherent, but not necessarily rational” (xxii). Hamilton also describes how the “gulf” between appearance and reality in Hammett’s work “haunted his [Hammett’s] life and haunts his fiction. It accounts for his sense of the endemic corruption of American society” (1987: 128).

economic control and legal power with the aim of protecting public welfare and fuelling recovery, critique Roosevelt's vision of a society in which faith in individualism has disintegrated and is replaced by increasing social control. Hardboiled crime fiction, departing from classic detective fiction, which champions the maintenance of law and order, criticizes the way power functions in the realm of law and government. McCann also argues that early writers for *Black Mask* magazine, such as Carroll John Daly and Hammett, delineate a critique of what he calls the "Klan" attitude – one that is aligned with government control – toward an American society that is full of corruption. To McCann, *Red Harvest* exemplifies how the "vision of moral reform and orderly community advanced by the Klan and its allies was subjected to the most withering skepticism ever mustered in *Black Mask*" (2001:78). In light of McCann's argument, one can say that *Red Harvest* exemplifies Hammett's critique by expanding the focus from criminality as an individual phenomenon to a larger context that speaks to political and socio-cultural factors that shaped criminality and related issues, such as social control, and racial, gender, and class anxieties.<sup>98</sup> For example, the novel depicts a "disobedient attitude" towards Prohibition (Nyman 2000: 78). The details that permeate the novel about bootlegging and drinking limn a cultural context that is nothing but a "façade behind which almost anything can be placed" (Nyman 2000: 78), a façade that hides "empty modernity, corruption, and death" (Cawelti 1976: 141). This façade obscures an atmosphere of moral disorder and distrust towards any governmental institution, especially those dealing with law and its enforcement, and simultaneously shows how gangsterism and organized crime were an essential part of the 1920s American scene.

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<sup>98</sup> The novel has been read in relation to Hammett's leftist position and his work at the Pinkerton Detective Agency (see, for example, Zumoff 2007). There are a number of critics who advocate a Marxist reading of the book as a "proletarian" (Freeman and Kendrick 1991: 219) or a "pre-Marxist" (Marcus 1975: xxiv) novel. Nyman also describes *Red Harvest* as an "amalgamation or crossroads of different ideologies or world views" (2000: 77).

In his excellent article “‘Going Blood Simple like the Natives’: Contagious Urban Spaces and Modern Power in Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest*”, Thomas Heise (2005) demonstrates how public discourses on crime and policing in America at the time are pertinent to Hammett’s crime fiction. Heise suggests that hardboiled crime fiction emerged in the midst of and in response to changes in the police force and the study of crime.<sup>99</sup> Prior to the mid-1920s, law was enforced by local police departments and detective agencies. It was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s that the US witnessed a shift towards the “scientific” study of crime that was, notably, coincident with the establishment of federal laws.<sup>100</sup> Working class and impoverished urban spaces in the 1920s were the main focus of these new studies of “deviance” and crime that emerged particularly from the Chicago School of the sociological study of crime discussed in my first chapter. In tandem with the scientific study of urban crime came the development of “scientific policing” as J. Edgar Hoover became the first Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1924. The aim of these developments was to understand “deviance” in urban environments and use this expertise to fight crime in the metropolitan centres of the United States. The *Uniform Crime Reporting* manual of 1929 stated that a rise in crime rates precipitated a shift in the study of crime from a Lombrosian (that is, essentially biological) model to a sociologically-oriented approach that focused on the influence of environment on the formation of the criminal (Heise 2005: 488). *Red Harvest* negotiates these shifts and draws on the idiosyncrasies of urban space to explore criminality and violence. To Heise, it also considers the relationship between urbanization and crime: the novel,

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas, who examines the intersections between forensic science and crime fiction, also suggests that the emergence of crime fiction “coincided with the development of modern police force and the creation of the modern bureaucratic state” (1999: 4).

<sup>100</sup> During this period, the attitude towards woman’s crime was also witnessing a shift that incorporated the “scientific” sociological study of female criminality. Thomas’s book *The Unadjusted Girl* (1923/1967), discussed in Chapter One, is a good example of this shift.

embodies the Contagious Urban Spaces and Modern Power explosive aggression that inheres not in crime, but in the operations of law itself, the violent supplement undergirding the scientific study of crime in the period. Hammett details—through the figure of the detective—the methods by which law organizes urban space by suppressing underworld criminality, policing working-class leisure and crushing industrial labor action. While “no longer officially a criminal,” the Op is, Hammett suggests, guilty of transgressions that are startling and manifold. (2005: 489-90)

In this way, *Red Harvest* reveals a trend in Hammett’s fiction and indeed the hardboiled genre as a whole, in which crime is not merely an action but is also indicative of and particular to the setting of the narratives. Hence *Red Harvest* formulates a picture of a specific historical period through the criminalized space of Personville. This space is invaded by the figure of the criminal amplified in the overwhelming presence of bootleggers, thugs, corrupt policemen and businessmen, and the female criminal. The image of the criminal is also presented through the gangs that position themselves as “economic businesses,” “symptom[s] of the all-pervasive business ideology characteristic of the American 1920s” (Nyman 2000: 78).<sup>101</sup> Steven Marcus opines that Hammett’s “obsessive imaginations” were preoccupied by the idea of organized crime and gangs taking over the city. He convincingly describes Hammett’s vision in his work as representative of “Hobbesian” anarchy: “It is a world of universal warfare, the war of each against all, and of all against all” (1975: xxiv). The criminal femme fatale, as part of this world, is also defined by this criminalized urban space which not only allows her to assimilate into this world, but also gives her the freedom to act as an agent.<sup>102</sup> In the light of the historical specificity of *Red Harvest* that I establish here, I contend that the

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<sup>101</sup> Nyman (2000: 78) argues that there is a shift in Hammett’s work from the early short stories to *Red Harvest*. The criminal as an individual now became part of a gang, adding that gangsters are meant to represent organized crime

<sup>102</sup> Logan contends that the “reality of the urban setting” is essential to crime fiction in its challenge of “the traditional American values embodied by the cowboy hero, transmogrified into the private detective” (1992: 89). For more information on urbanization and crime fiction, see also Howell (1998).

criminal femme fatale is a pertinent component in valorizing the crime and corruption that ravished the American scene, and simultaneously challenging the policing and control discourses prevalent in the US at that time.

In *Red Harvest*, Dinah Brand is described by the Chief of Police as a “soiled dove ... a de luxe hustler, a big-league gold digger” who “took her pick of Personville’s men” (*RH*: 16). But as well as being sexually voracious, she is also part of Personville’s corrupt world, an ambitious and greedy woman who makes no effort to hide her nature: “money-mad, all right, but somehow you don’t mind it. She’s so thoroughly mercenary, so frankly greedy, that there’s nothing disagreeable about it” (*RH*: 19). Her “business” as an information broker places her at the heart of the nefarious deals that take place in Personville. Dinah knows what she wants and how to get it: “If a girl got something that’s worth something to somebody, she’s a boob if she doesn’t collect” (*RH*: 24). Before the novel begins, we are told that Dinah took five thousand dollars from Donald Willsson in exchange for information about the Personville gangsters that Donald was hunting down as part of his newspaper campaign to expose local crime. Dinah, knowing that the information actually implicates Donald’s father, deceives him in order to get her pay-off, telling Donald that there is another potential buyer of the information, and demanding cash or certified cheque in order to get the transaction done before he learns about his father’s role and backs out. She is a skilled player when it comes to the dirty games that are part of Personville’s business life, as well as a “superior strategist” (Cooper and Murphy 2000: 151) who plays the stock market and places bets on races.

Although Dinah is “is not what you expect in a heroine” (Dooley 1984: 79), the image she represents throughout the book is that of a woman with agency. Not only is she well integrated into the corrupt world of the city, she also takes every opportunity to acquire money and power. An overtly sexual woman, Dinah is the “erotic center of the

novel, [and] is also a metonym of speculative desire ... Dinah embodies the libidinal intensity driving speculation. Object and subject of desire, Dinah is fully caught up in the circulation of tips and secrets, Personville's hottest commodities" (Cooper and Murphy 2000: 153). While Dinah is the object of men's attraction in the novel, she is also the subject of her own desire. Noticing a run in her stocking, the Op tells Dinah, "Your legs are too big .... They put too much strain on the material" (*RH*: 79). The "run" not only suggests her sensuality and sexual appeal, but, as Carl Freeman and Christopher Kendrick contend, is also a metaphor for her "economic activity" – because "Dinah's sexual labor is itself directly economic" (1991: 213).<sup>103</sup> That is, Dinah's appeal is not purely sexual; rather, she combines the sexual and the economic in ways that locate her agency not in "movie-star beauty" but in "the apparent spontaneity of her actions" and "general ambience of unrepressed openness that she makes her medium" (Freeman and Kendrick 1991: 213). I further suggest that Dinah, empowered by her sexuality and money, places into question the role of the Op and constitutes a threat to his power by placing herself on the same plane as the detective. In the conversation below, Dinah makes fun of the Op and questions his ways of detection. She uses an assertive tone to ridicule him and ultimately makes him admit that all he does is "stirring things up":

"So that's the way you scientific detectives work. My God! for a fat, middle-aged, hard-boiled, pig-headed guy, you've got the vaguest way of doing things I ever heard of."

"Plans are all right sometimes," I said. "And sometimes just stirring things up is all right – if you're tough enough to survive, and keep your eyes open so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top."

"That ought to be good for another drink," she said. (*RH*: 57)

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<sup>103</sup> Freeman and Kendrick (1991) offer a Marxist reading of the text. They suggest that there is an "unwritten" proletarian novel in *Red Harvest*. The four forms of labour that the novel presents – economic (miners and workers), political (gangsters), linguistic (the Op) and sexual (Dinah) – interact and define the milieu of the narrative. Accordingly, Freeman and Kendrick read Dinah as a "high-class whore" (213), whose sexual labour is equated with economic labour, but it is the Op's linguistic labour that finally subsumes other forms of labour in the book.

Indeed, “stirring things up” is an accurate summary of the action in the novel. The boundaries and distinctions between the individual sphere and those pertaining to politics and economics, as well as those between the detective and the criminal, are slippery and continuously destabilized in the narrative. That is, the Op is as enmeshed in the underworld as the criminals around him, and the spreading of the corruption and crime seem to overrule any possibility of law and order. Nonetheless, critics have been divided on the question of whether *Red Harvest* and the genre that it represents advocate, or are critiques of, the dynamics of power. Some critics see the genre as conservative in its assertion of the need for policing, its attempt to establish law and order, and its promotion of a kind of heroic individualism.<sup>104</sup> Heise proposes that *Red Harvest* offers *no* critique of the “violent techniques of power,” instead providing a “narrative of power in action” which operates in

a contested terrain profoundly marked by its discursive moment and by a competing array of social anxieties—over crime, justice, relations and urban life—which it tries to manage. Though entangled with scientific discourses of penality, *Red Harvest* ultimately destabilizes the discursively produced definitions of criminality, while confirming the contention made by official literature on crime that urban criminality is an effect of poor, ethnic, and working class spaces and social relations. (2005: 490)

I would argue that *Red Harvest* is neither conservative in the way that the noted critics suggest, nor is devoid of critique of socio-political institutions as strongholds of corruption. I concur with Andrew Pepper who describes *Red Harvest* as a “provocative, if a little contradictory, articulation of theoretical debates about the nature of political authority in the modern era” (2010: 334). As such, the novel shows the conflicting, even

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<sup>104</sup> Among the critics that perceive conservatism in the genre are Marcus, in his introduction to *The Continental Op* (1975) and Porter (1981). On the theme of individualism in Hammett, see Metress (1994).

ambivalent ideologies of the US political scene.<sup>105</sup> I would add that it also offers a comprehensive view of criminality which is not limited to poor or ethnic space, as Heise maintains. It instead surveys a criminal space where everybody, including the woman, is implicated and nobody is innocent, and where the criminal femme fatale disrupts the detective's quest for power. This critique demonstrates itself in the novel as a tension between the masculinity of the Op and the dangerous femininity of Dinah. Indeed, to answer the question above regarding control and power, I suggest a two-fold analysis which explores the role of the detective amidst discourses of crime and control, on the one hand, and the role of the criminal femme fatale, on the other.

The Op admits that he is "poisoned" by the violence of Personville: "This burg's is getting to me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood-simple like the natives" (*RH*: 102). And despite his attempts to "clean up" Personville and reclaim the city from the gangsters and thugs, essentially by letting them turn against each other, the narrative is "circular" (Cooper and Murphy 2000: 157), that is, it does not establish any resolution or conclusive end to the violence. By the end of the story Personville will be "all nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again" (*RH*: 134). Edward Wheat (1995: 242) states that although the "job" of the detective is to find and expose the "truth" about "what really happened" and then "speak truth to power," he is nonetheless

presented with a version of the truth, a narrative, which he then deconstructs. The crime is committed against a background of social disorder. The crime is not an anomaly but a "normal" occurrence in society. The dick deconstructs the narrative given to him and reconstructs the truth as best he can. Society is not reordered; it remains

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<sup>105</sup> Pepper (2010) provides a Marxist reading of *Red Harvest* in which he suggests that the novel can be understood in the context of the consolidation of the US state power in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Pepper contends that *Red Harvest* "characterizes the state as exploitive and coercive" and also offers a critique to the "provisions of law" (336). Pepper remarkably engages with the critical scholarship (including McCann (2000), Heise (2005), Marcus (1975), and Freeman and Kendrick (1991)) that addresses discourses of power and law, especially other Marxist readings of the novel. For more details see Pepper (2010).



corrupt; but at least there is a momentary stay against confusion. The modernist dick brings a personally constructed order out of social chaos. Call it “justice.” (Wheat 1995: 246)

In a final twist, the Op is accused of killing Dinah after waking up holding the ice pick which is buried in her chest; he becomes a wanted man and runs away to avoid being arrested. Dinah’s murder reveals Hammett’s use of one of the important devices that characterizes his work, namely, irony. Dinah’s death in some ways seems a natural consequence of the escalation of violence in Personville and the risks she takes in selling information and colluding with the gangsters of the city.<sup>106</sup> Dinah is in fact killed by an ex-lover, Reno, who is motivated by jealousy. Dinah could have been killed by any of the gangs that she worked with, but for her to be killed for personal reasons ironizes both the stability of the role of the detective and the discourse of control invoked by the genre. The detective, by the end of the story, becomes hard to distinguish from the gangs and thugs he wanted to “clean up.” Hence, in his involvement with the criminal world, the detective’s sense of control – and therefore masculinity – is threatened, especially by Dinah, who poses a danger to him throughout the novel, even after her death.

Indeed, the masculinity of Hammett’s detective, which is manifest in his tough words and actions, is constructed around, but also jeopardized by, the criminal femme fatale, and this is a recurrent theme not only in Hammett’s work but across the genre. In his book *Hard-boiled Masculinities*, Christopher Breu suggests that the violence and “lethal misogyny” in *Red Harvest* is part of the “cultural fantasy” of the interwar readers of *Black Mask*. The novel succeeds in negotiating the relationship between the

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<sup>106</sup> Another powerful irony of the story (as manifested in the incongruity between actions and their motives), lies in the fact that the murder of Donald Willsson, which triggered the violence and bloodshed in Personville after the Op starts “cleaning up” the town, is not part of the gangsterism and corruption that led the city to the massacre. Rather it is motivated by the jealousy of one of Dinah Brand’s rejected lovers.

construction of hardboiled masculinity and socio-cultural life in the 1920s, but fails to address critically these forms of cultural fantasy. Although I take issue with the way Breu speaks to the representation of women merely as misogynistic constructions, his view about the hardboiled detective in connection to mass culture is insightful. For Breu, the figure of the hardboiled detective

represented a different imaginary solution to the contradiction between the ideology of masculine individualism and the emerging mass and corporatized culture ... he represented a phantasmatic adaptation of this ideology, via the figure of the lone detective or urbanite, to the rationalized, mass-cultural landscape of the modern city ... This new masculinity seemed fully adapted to the rationalized and instrumentalized logic of life in the twenties. (2005: 53)

The arguments around the construction of American masculinity on the pages of pulp magazines are pertinent to the representation of women in this genre. According to one view, the female criminal in Hammett emerged not only as a counterpoint to the “hardboiled” detective but also as an image of what Marc Seals calls “the angular protagonist, the obese villain, the dandy, and the gunsel of uncertain sexuality”<sup>107</sup> – images which “are clearly shaped by (and for) the predominant social attitudes and events of Hammett’s life in the decades preceding the Depression” (2002: 67).<sup>108</sup> Indeed, some critics endorse the view that the masculinity of the detective is constructed as a normative standard against which an “other” is set: “Hard-boiled narratives essentially revolve around demeaning descriptions of these other people, their perverted

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<sup>107</sup> The neologism “gunsel” appears in *The Maltese Falcon*. Spade calls Wilmer Cook, a gunman that works for Casper Gutman in the novel, a “gunsel,” a word that arguably refers to Wilmer as homosexual. Hammett’s use of the word in 1930 has become, as Daniel Linder “something of a legend of hard-boiled detective writing” (2002: 155). Delaney rejects this queer reading of Wilmer and the novel in general. For more details see Linder (2002) and Delaney (1999).

<sup>108</sup> Seals’s argument is that the construction of masculinity in Hammett’s work is based on the events in the author’s life. Seals notes the fact that Hammett worked as a detective for the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and suggests that this job influenced his writing insofar as Hammett learned that the detective occupies “more than just a space between the federal authorities and local law enforcement; he also lives in a gray area between the law and the criminal” (2002: 68). For more information on Hammett and the Pinkerton Agency see Raczkowski (2003), and for Hammett’s biography see Layman (1981), Johnson (1983), and Marling (1983).

psychologies and diseased physiognomies, and later their destroyed bodies.” These “other” people are “non-white men ... women and homosexual or impotent white men” (Ogdon 1992: 76). This view is problematic, however, insofar as it limits the role of the woman as an “other.” I suggest that both the masculinity of the detective and the femininity of the women in hardboiled narratives are multi-layered and complex formations that defy a single limited definition. The masculinity of the detective is compromised by the dangerous femininity of the woman, when he is confronted with and also challenged by the charms of the criminal femme fatale. In a continuum of performances of hyper-masculinity (characterized by toughness and endurance) in the detective and hyper-femininity (the use of sexual charm and cunning) in the criminal femme fatale, there is little room for the masculinity of the detective to prevail and dominate. The criminal femme fatales exemplify the blurring, if not the dissolving, of the boundaries between the law and the criminal in Hammett’s world. There is already blurring between the criminal and the detective (Day 1988: 42), but the criminal femme fatales embody the disappearance of distinction between the two ostensibly discrete worlds of law and crime. Hence with her connections to businessmen and gangsters in Personville on the one hand, and to the Op himself as an apparent representative of the law on the other, Dinah infiltrates both worlds, which are already conflated. Indeed, the accusation of the Op of her murder, for example, illustrates how she questions the role of the detective, even in her death, and thus shows that “there is no difference between him [the Op] and the world he investigates” (Day 1988: 43). Through the criminal femme fatale’s relationship with the detective, the “reality” of the amoral and chaotic world is established. Consequently, the detective’s masculinity is tested according to new criteria in a world where gender norms are disturbed. The woman “is the world by virtue of the fact that she is both transparent and opaque. Thus, as a woman is

unknowable, so too is the world and, moreover, the unknowableness is linked to the way in which she threatens to know the Op” (43).

This “unknowableness” is in itself part of Hammett’s unstable world. Hammett’s work is characterized by variation and his so-called formula of the hardboiled detective is actually not a fixed formula at all. He “does not repeat himself.” Each of Hammett’s works “is a unique product within a logical progression of developing insights” (Hamilton 1987: 129). In the foregoing analysis of *Red Harvest*, I have demonstrated how the novel sets out the context of hardboiled crime fiction, and delineates the world in which the criminal femme fatale functions as an agent. After *Red Harvest*, the title of which refers to the bloodbath that ensues in a world where violence is an everyday reality, one assumes that Hammett could have continued along the same lines of development. In fact, his next book provides a varied image of the underworld developing a puzzle-like story, which incorporates elements of the occult in the form of a family curse. The representation of women in *The Dain Curse* stretches from criminal to victim.

### **2.3 *The Dain Curse*: A Victimized “Heroine” and an Absent/Present Femme Fatale**

The Continental Op of *Red Harvest* reappears in Hammett’s second novel<sup>109</sup> to investigate the disappearance of diamonds from the house of Edgar Leggett, a case that turns out to be far more complicated than the robbery of the gemstones, which are not worth more than a thousand dollars. A series of violent murders that start with Leggett’s death are precipitated by the Op’s investigation. The story focuses on the detective’s relationship with Gabrielle, Leggett’s daughter, who is involved in crime, a mysterious cult and morphine addiction, and seems to be a victim of everyone around her,

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<sup>109</sup> *The Dain Curse* was serialized in four issues of *Black Mask* between November 1928 and February 1929. The book in its entirety was published the following July.

especially her aunt and stepmother, Alice Leggett. The book consists of three parts. Each part ends with an apparent solution to the mystery only to reveal in the next part that the conclusions at which the Op and his friend, novelist Owen Fitzstephan (who turns out to be the villain of the book), arrive are inaccurate. In addition to its central mystery, *The Dain Curse* is a story of “human weaknesses, jealousies, hates, lust, egoism and revenge” which combine to show Hammett to be “a considerable student of human nature” (Dooley 1984: 91).

Regarded as Hammett’s weakest and least analyzed book (Thompson 2007: 70), *The Dain Curse* is criticized as a fragmented novel that lacks coherence and unity.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, its overwrought plot makes it “by far the most complicated of the novels” (Edenbaum 1968: 96). This fragmentation undercuts “traditional notions of literary completeness,” and hence “not only investigates the conventions of detective fiction but the conventions of literature as well” (Catenby 1994: 57). Indeed, *The Dain Curse* adds new elements to Hammett’s formula of the hardboiled chaotic underworld. Though published in the same year as *Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse* adds aspects of mystery and the occult to the violence, corruption and gangsterism in Hammett’s first novel, placing the story in an unintelligible world. While *The Dain Curse* does not lack action or violence, it bears more resemblance to a Gothic story than the Western-influenced style of *Red Harvest*. Commenting on the shift in Hammett’s work, Peter Wolfe opines that *The Dain Curse*

softens the relationship between individuals and society from that put forth by the brawling *Red Harvest*. Less tied to social issues, the Hammett of *Dain Curse* is no highminded prosecuting attorney or social

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<sup>110</sup> Hammett himself calls *The Dain Curse* a “silly story” (qtd. in Nolan 1969: 51). A. Alvarez harshly critiques the novel describing it as “wandering, melodramatic, a bit silly, and, with its supernatural trimmings, not at all typical” (qtd. in Wolfe 1980: 108). On the other hand, Durham (1968: 70) contends that Hammett reached his peak with this novel.

philosopher .... In place of Marxist melodrama, it offers a Gothic extravagance, a sealed room puzzle of sorts, and the related jobs of curing a young widow of morphine addiction while demythologizing a family curse. (1980: 94)

It is this shift that shapes the representation of women in the book and augments Hammett's achievements as a writer of hardboiled fiction. Hammett connects the atmosphere of the book to his characterization, especially of women. While in the urban corruption of *Red Harvest's* Personville, Dinah functions on equal grounds with her male counterparts, this book, which uses the elements of mystery and cult, presents opposing examples of female agency that include both victimization and culpability, as manifested in Gabrielle and Alice, respectively. I argue that the criminal femme fatale, Alice, embodies an absent/present role in this novel: she exceeds the conventional image of the dangerous criminal by assuming a role in which she dominates the action despite making only brief appearances in the book. That is, she is present in her absence.<sup>111</sup> This is underscored by the fact that Alice dies in the first part of the book, and that her femme fatality is shown through her influence and dominance over Gabrielle. The narrative explores the dynamics of the interplay between an absent but powerful criminal femme fatale (Alice), and a present but victimized woman (Gabrielle). It is through these destabilized representations that Hammett succeeds in disrupting the stereotypical image of the femme fatale that is regarded as part of the package of hardboiled crime fiction.

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<sup>111</sup> Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Alfred Hitchcock's rendition of the novel in the 1940 film under the same title are good examples of an absent femme fatale who dominates the narrative despite not appearing in the text/film at all.

According to Sinda Gregory, Gabrielle is the juncture at which the novel's different narratives meet (1985: 75).<sup>112</sup> Gabrielle is far from being a femme fatale, however. She has a "pointed chin," and "of her features only the green-brown eyes were large: forehead, mouth, and teeth were remarkably small" (*DC*: 147).<sup>113</sup> Her lack of conventional beauty means that she holds none of the charm or allure which with Hammett usually endows his female characters. She is also "passive, and helpless to the point of catatonia, unable to control or interpret anything that happens around her" (Gregory 1985: 75); Alice describes her simply as a "child ... of limited mentality" (*DC*: 181). She is involved in a religious cult and believes that a curse in the family blood is the cause of all the troubles and deaths that happen around her. Gabrielle's "criminality" (she killed her mother when she was a child, according to the account provided by Alice) serves to exemplify the triangle of "madness," "evil" and lack of culpability in which the medicalized woman described in Chapter One can become trapped.<sup>114</sup>

Unlike many of the criminal femme fatales of the genre who are portrayed without family ties, Gabrielle is engaged at the start of the story to Eric Collinson, whom she goes on to marry, but who is eventually killed, victim to the supposed curse of the title. In contrast to Alice who uses her family to achieve her goals and then kills her husband (as will be discussed later), the way that Gabrielle is tied to her family, especially through the curse, sets her apart from the persona of the criminal femme fatale, and invites us to draw a contrast between her role and Alice's, despite, or perhaps because of, the latter's absence. Furthermore, in contrast to Dinah Brand who is

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<sup>112</sup> See Catenby (2005: 61) for an opposing view regarding Gabrielle's function in the novel. To Catenby, Gabrielle's role is "not to unify the novel's little narratives nor to be a stereotypical victim." Rather, he argues that Gabrielle hinders the detective's mission to solve the crimes.

<sup>113</sup> All quotations from Hammett's *The Dain Curse* will be from *Hammett: Five complete Novels* (1980), and the abbreviation *DC* will appear before the page number in all quotes from the novel

<sup>114</sup> See, for example, Ussher (1991) and Chesler (1972).

economically independent and sexually active, Gabrielle does not have any of the sexual power wielded by the criminal femme fatales in Hammett's narratives. Gabrielle's medicalization is thus manifested in a variety of interrelated ways: morphine addiction, abnormal childishness, and the pathologization of her body as sexually unattractive. As such, her infantilization – manifested in her lack of independence and the destructive and inexorable heritage of her Dain blood – is related to her representation as sexually inactive, which is in turn affiliated to her drug use. The Op says to her:

“You were a virgin when you married him?”

“Yes, I was, I am, I –”

“It's nothing to get excited about,” I said. “You are, and have the usual silly notions. And you use dope, don't you?”

She nodded. I went on:

“That would cut your own interest in sex to below normal, so that a perfectly natural interest in it on somebody else's part would seem abnormal.” (*DC*: 260)

It is Gabrielle's morphine addiction that most vividly demonstrates her medicalization, while her inability to quit further exemplifies her lack of agency. In what Philip Durham describes as a “knightly campaign” (1968: 69), the Op helps her through a long and painful process of quitting her addiction, in what reads as “an exorcism of the mysticism that has afflicted her” (Marling 1983: 64). Gabrielle's medicalization turns on the fact that she apparently needs to suffer as part of this healing ritual in order to be cured. As Dennis Dooley explains, Gabrielle's treatment for addiction is described

with the clinical eye of one who had, in the employ of Pinkerton's no doubt, known his share of “hopheads” and probably seen at least one kick the habit: the attacks of sneezing, and yawning, the painful sharpening of the senses as the body system throws off its anesthetizing cargo of the poison, followed by the lump in the throat and the aching in the jaws and the hollows behind the knees that signal the approach of the ordeal's end (not to mention the diminished sex drive of an addict, which plays a part in the story). (1984: 93)



This medicalization does not position Gabrielle on equal grounds with the Op, because Gabrielle is not attractive to him and thus, by extension, not dangerous. Because Hammett in many cases equates dangerous femininity with agency, Gabrielle shows an example of how the absence of dangerous femininity also places her agency in question. When Gabrielle asks the Op about why he went through all the trouble of curing her in her “revolting, disgusting” state, he replies “I’m twice your age, sister; an old man. I’m damned if I’ll make a chump of myself by telling you why I did it, why it was neither revolting nor disgusting” (*DC*: 282). The Op’s sympathetic words make Gabrielle think he is romantically interested in her:

“You mean –?”

“I don’t mean anything that I’ll admit,” I said; “and if you’re going to parade around with that robe hanging open you’re going to get yourself some bronchitis. You ex-hopheads have to be careful about catching cold.” (*DC*: 282)

This encounter, which takes place after Gabrielle gets through the initial stage of quitting the morphine, shows the relationship between the Op and Gabrielle as more of a father-daughter relationship, or perhaps one can say a doctor-patient relationship. And although the Op helps Gabrielle in her addiction, he nonetheless treats her as a “madwoman” who needs to be cured, and hence tries to take her agency away.<sup>115</sup>

Within the critical scholarship that addresses *The Dain Curse* there is a broad agreement about Gabrielle’s victimization. Gregory describes her as “the stereotypical female victim” (1985: 75); William Marling calls her a “traditional damsel in distress” (1983: 57); Wolfe states that the only certainty of the book is the identity of the *victim* – Gabrielle (1980: 100). Although I do not dismiss these readings of Gabrielle’s

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<sup>115</sup> The analogy of women and animals is part of the misogyny that can be detected in Hammett’s early work. See Herman (1994: 210).

victimization, I suggest that her role can be profitably read in relation firstly to the detective's failure to assert control, and secondly in the context of the gothic atmosphere of the novel. Gabrielle's role can be seen in relation to the Op because, as Bruce Catenby suggests, the latter defines his role as a detective according to the crimes that occur in the book. Gabrielle disrupts this by "avert[ing] the Op's masculine analytic ability as capable of solving these crimes." The Op's abilities are "effaced by the very lack of truth which she [Gabrielle] embodies" (Catenby 2005: 61).<sup>116</sup> Gabrielle's victimhood is additionally bound up in what Cawelti describes as the "eerie atmosphere of family curses, drugs, strange cults, and twisted motives" that resembles that in a gothic novel (1976: 162). Therefore Gabrielle's positioning as a "damsel in distress" is of a piece with this gothic atmosphere and necessarily deviates from the kind of characters associated with and engendered by the "mean streets" of *Red Harvest*.

Even more importantly than these functions, however, is Gabrielle's role as a foil to the criminal femme fatales in the book, Alice Leggett, and to lesser degree, Aaronia Haldorn. Alice, as noted above, does not have the overwhelming presence of many of Hammett's criminal femme fatales, but in this case it is in this very absence that Hammett locates her power. She controls events in particular through her powerful influence on Gabrielle. This power is reflected in her predatory physique: the Op describes her as "a blonde woman whose body was rounded, not with the plumpness of contented, well-cared-for early middle age, but with the cushioned, soft-sheathed muscles of the hunting cats, whether in jungle or alley" (DC:180). She is clearly

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<sup>116</sup> Catenby bases his argument on Jacques Derrida's account of women as "the untruth of the truth" and Derrida's critique of the linkage between presence, truth and woman. As Derrida states, "woman averts, she is averted of herself," and this is the present truth of woman. The question that is at the crux of the argument here is the possibility of truth as averted-absence. Derrida in *Spurs* critiques traditional methods of understanding truth as solely a "presence" and suggests through an analysis of the understanding of the truth of woman as an absence that absence can function as truth. For more on Derrida's account on woman and truth see *Spurs* (1979).

capable of committing crimes: first she kills the detective Harry Ruppert, whom she originally hired to find her husband, Edgar Leggett, when Ruppert starts blackmailing her. Then she kills her husband when he tries to run away leaving a letter that Alice claims as a suicide note. The Op confronts her: “You killed him ... He was going away. He wrote this statement, shouldering your crimes ... so you murdered him – murdered him because you thought his confession and death would hush up the whole business, keep us from poking into it any further” (*DC*: 179).

Alice’s influence on Gabrielle and the way she planned everything about her own and Gabrielle’s lives are the threads that pull the narrative together. Alice is a woman of steel will and a ruthless determination to achieve her goals. When Edgar Leggett marries her sister (Gabrielle’s mother) Lily, Alice becomes envious and decides to kill Lily in order to usurp her as Edgar’s wife. Chillingly, she plans to use five-year-old Gabrielle to carry out the murder. Through a “little game,” Alice teaches Gabrielle to use a gun:

I would lie on Lily’s bed, pretending to sleep. The child would push a chair to the chiffonier, climb up on it, take the pistol from the drawer, creep over to the bed, put the muzzle of the pistol to my head, and press the trigger. (*DC*: 182)<sup>117</sup>

Alice thus exhibits persistence and autonomy in carefully carrying out her plan to kill her sister and marry Edgar, and does not hesitate to exploit the vulnerable Gabrielle’s devotion to her to achieve this. These characteristics endow her with a form of power that I suggest is part of the persona of the criminal femme fatale that Hammett presents in his work. In both the exploitation of her niece and the pursuit of her sister’s man, Alice transgresses not only social but also, even more importantly, familial norms: “The

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<sup>117</sup> Alice’s plan to kill her sister goes awry when Edgar arrives to see his daughter pull the trigger; he takes the blame and is sentenced to prison. After he escapes from prison and goes to the US, Alice hires a private investigator who successfully tracks him down. Alice and Edgar are married shortly after.

day he married Lily I swore I would take him from her,” she declares. “And I did. And I hope that my dear sister in hell knows it” (*DC*: 182). Alice’s persona stands in contrast to Gabrielle’s helplessness and vulnerability – a victimizer versus a victim. The contrast between the two women is no clearer than in the confrontation at the end of the first part of the book where Alice, before she is killed while trying to escape, plays on Gabrielle’s strange beliefs by intoning a “curse” against her. In this scene we see Alice use the cult and family curse as weapons to hurt Gabrielle, and the former’s power are contrasted against the latter’s helplessness:

and you are cursed by the same black soul and rotten blood that she [Lily Dain] and I and all the Dains have had; and you’re cursed with your mother’s blood on your hands in babyhood; and with the twisted mind and the need for drugs that are my gifts to you; and your life will be black as your mother’s and mine were black; and the lives of those you touch will be black as Maurice’s was black; and your– (*DC*: 183)

Gabrielle is victimized not only by her aunt but also by other people around her, including the novel’s secondary femme fatale, Aaronia Haldorn, who is involved in a fraud perpetrated by the Temple of the Holy Grail cult that ensnares Gabrielle. Aaronia, angry at Gabrielle because her husband is attracted to the young girl, plans to kill her but is intercepted by the Op; in the third part of the book, she makes another thwarted murder attempt, this time against the Op himself, who allows her to walk away unpunished. Greed, hatred, and jealousy are the same three elements that motivate Alice, and the power that the two criminal femme fatales exhibit between them becomes the counterpoint against which Gabrielle’s victimization is set.

Although, unlike Alice, Aaronia does not succeed in her plans, her role in the cult is important as the connective tissue between the gothic tropes specific to this novel and the criminal underworld that underpins all of Hammett’s work. While the Temple

of the Holy Grail underscores the “reality” of the divide between the victimization of Gabrielle and the cunning tricks played on her by Aaronia and Alice, it is also part of what John Scaggs calls the “fakery and artifice that characterise the modern city of hard-boiled fiction [which] drive a wedge between what is seen and what is known” (2005: 72). As Marling proposes, the cult “leads the reader to a discovery about evil that approximates an intuition confirmed: appearances are deceptive” (1983: 66). This dichotomy is further extended to the dynamics between the detective’s relentless but useless attempts to solve the mystery and assert control, and the role of women in the novel. I agree with Catenby in this regard, who maintains that it is “women who continually present the Op with the opportunity to solve the mystery of the curse; and yet he is never able to do so because through their confession of the ‘truth’ they continually deflect him away from the concept of a stable truth” (2005: 61). Every time the Op comes to a rational conclusion about what has happened he is proven wrong, which makes his efforts to restore order futile. It seems that *The Dain Curse*’s combination of “flat realism” and “wild fantasy” originates, according to Cawelti, in Hammett’s vision of life: “the vision of irrational cosmos, in which all the rules, all the seeming solidity of matter, routine, and custom can be overturned in a moment” (1976: 166).<sup>118</sup> And it is in this “irrational cosmos” that the tension between Alice’s effective absence and the victimization of Gabrielle is played out, a tension that invites a multiple-layered reading of the role of women based a continuum of criminalization and medicalization.

Whilst this vision of Hammett’s “irrational cosmos” is not very different from the one in *Red Harvest*, which places Dinah at the heart of the chaotic criminal underworld, *The Dain Curse* renders the conflict between Gabrielle and Alice and, to a

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<sup>118</sup> Gregory suggests that *The Dain Curse* is concerned with imposing order “in our lives and in our literature” (1985: 61).

lesser degree, Gabrielle and Aaronia, as the driving force that precipitates the crimes. The detective's role is ironized when Owen Fitzstephan – motivated by his Dain blood and his attraction to Gabrielle – turns out to be the mastermind behind the crimes, having successfully deceived the Op.<sup>119</sup> Here Hammett does not make Alice the only criminal in the novel. Rather, he complicates the narrative by making Fitzstephan the villain. Fitzstephan, who has a “Watson-like association with the detective” (Cawelti 1976: 147), ultimately undercuts the detective's authority and power when the former's criminal acts are revealed in the denouement.<sup>120</sup> Marling contends that by locating the crimes in a “mystic world” and making Fitzstephan, the “insane villain,” responsible, Hammett made the Op “not only the semidivine agent of justice but the arbiter of reality” (1983: 63). I contend differently that Hammett embeds irony in the friendship between the Op and Fitzstephan by conflating the role of the detective as a law-enforcer with that of the criminal. The Op loses the upper hand once everything in the book transpires to be the doing of his friend. Fitzstephan is moreover shown to be insane at the end: “if he was a lunatic who, ignorant of his craziness, thought he was pretending to be a lunatic, then the joke ... was on him” (*DC*: 286), and thus can be said to question male agency in relation to criminality in the narrative. Fitzstephan's criminality is different from that of Alice's; although he plans and commits crimes, at the end he is shown to be out of control as a medicalized model of male criminality. To the contrary, Alice's role, though totally absent from the ending of the book, can be read in terms of her power of control that we have seen through her influence on Gabrielle. This destabilization of roles (of both Fitzstephan as a villain and that of the detective as the

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<sup>119</sup> For more on the relationship between the Op and Fitzstephan see McGurl (1997: 709-711).

<sup>120</sup> Cawelti states the criminal in hardboiled fiction, in contrast to classical detective fiction, is a central figure throughout the story. *The Dain Curse*, however, seems to follow the steps of classical detective fiction revealing the identity of the criminal, who is often the person least expected to commit the crimes, at the very end of the story. Wolfe suggests that Fitzstephan functions as a foil to the Op and it is Fitzstephan who “supplies an intellectual and analytical thrust missing from *Red Harvest*,” thus making him a “quasi-Watson” (1980: 106).

one who is deceived by the former), I would argue, deflects attention from both the detective and Fitzstephan, to spotlight the power of the criminal femme fatale, Alice. Indeed the ending of the novel emphasizes the detective's compromised power but at the same time reminds us of the role of Alice as a criminal femme fatale. Fitzstephan's account (which we hear through the detective's narration in the last chapter of the book) that she "had done the killing herself [of her sister] and had lied to hurt Gabrielle" (*DC*: 291), is another testimony to how Alice's absence is imbued with power.

In this way, Hammett departs from his earlier criminal femme fatales of the short stories and *Red Harvest* and presents a model of a medicalized woman against an absent/present criminal femme fatale. Ironically, Gabrielle's victimization is brought about by another woman, Alice, who is empowered by her dominant position as a victimizer of her niece, even after she dies. Hammett's work, like his underworld, is characterized by shifts and instabilities, and these are clearly realized in the dynamics between the detective and the criminal femme fatale. Thus, in the novel that succeeded *The Dain Curse*, Hammett gives further space to the criminal femme fatale by replacing the "outgrown" (Dooley 1984: 97) Op detective with Sam Spade, who is pitted against a *hardboiled* criminal femme fatale, Brigid O'Shaughnessy.

#### **2.4 *The Maltese Falcon*: A Hardboiled Criminal Femme Fatale**

It's the first thing I've done that was – regardless of its faults – the best work that I was capable of at the time I was doing it. (Hammett 2001: 53)

*The Maltese Falcon* (1930) is one of the most well-known novels in the whole genre of hardboiled crime fiction, one that has been acclaimed by both readers and critics.<sup>121</sup> In

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<sup>121</sup> Edenbaum describes the book as the most important novel in the private-eye tradition (1968: 81); Irwin calls it "a work so intelligent, with dialogue so witty and a view of life so worldly-wise, presented with such formal economy and flawless pacing, and yet such fun to read" (2000: 341). It is a "compact,

comparison to *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon* has a simple plot, revolving around the search for the falcon of the title, a precious statue that dates to the sixteenth century, and the relationship between the detective and the criminal femme fatale. The novel begins with a beautiful woman named Miss Wonderly going to the Spade and Archer Detective Agency, with the request that a man called Floyd Thursby be followed after he ran away with her sister. Spade's partner, Miles Archer, is killed and Spade soon discovers that the real name of the woman who visited him is Brigid O'Shaughnessy, who tells him that Thursby may have been his partner's killer. From here the story focuses on the relationship between Spade and Brigid and the intersecting story of the search for the black bird, which was in fact stolen by Brigid and two male accomplices, Joel Cairo and Casper Gutman.<sup>122</sup> I will argue that the novel presents the detective Sam Spade and the criminal femme fatale Brigid O'Shaughnessy, whose roles achieved iconic status in the decades that followed, as exemplars of the new trend of gender representation in Depression-era hardboiled crime fiction. I will also argue that Brigid's implication, indeed integration in the underworld of the narrative, is key to her agency as a criminal femme fatale, which ultimately proves that she has the upper hand over the detective, Sam Spade.

Brigid is not only beautiful and seductive but also clever and dangerous, thus exemplifying the agency of the femme fatale who is equally murderous. Her introduction on the first page of the novel reveals her extraordinary beauty and charm:

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intimate work. Yet it is arguably Hammett's densest, most complex novel in terms of character, themes and technique" (Gregory 1985: 88). In contrast, Wilson harshly criticized the novel as being "not much above those newspaper picture-strips in which you follow from day to day the ups and downs of a strong-jawed hero and a hardboiled but beautiful adventuress" (1944: 58). Moss rates the book as Hammett's worst novel, "full of insipid dialogue" (qtd. in Metress 2005: 68). Metress (2005: 66) points out that it was not until 1949 that Hammett's work "was the subject of a sustained critical essay" (by David T. Bazelon), while *The Maltese Falcon* had to wait for another twenty years. For a review of the scholarship on *The Maltese Falcon*, see Metress (2005).

<sup>122</sup> Departing from Hammett's first person narratives, *The Maltese Falcon* is narrated in the third person. The third person narration enables the author, as Dooley suggests, to have a neutral narrator, "an objective, totally impartial voice that betrays not the slightest hint of affection or adulation concerning the detective hero" (1984: 102).



a young woman came through the doorway. She advanced slowly, with tentative steps, looking at Spade with cobalt-blue eyes that were both shy and probing.

She was tall and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere. Her body was erect and high-breasted, her legs long, her hands and feet narrow. She wore two shades of blue that had been selected because of her eyes. (*MF*: 295)<sup>123</sup>

Her initial appearance as a shy, polite young woman conceals a very different character. We soon discover that Brigid is on the contrary a duplicitous woman with several identities: in the words of Spade, “she’s got too many names” (*MF*: 321). She also possesses a number of skills that allow her not only to survive in, but master, the tough world in which she moves. Her most important skill is her ability to seduce men into doing things for her, which enables her to get away with what she herself commits.

In a reading of *The Maltese Falcon* as a romance, Jasmine Yong Hall describes Brigid as a “romance heroine who must constantly rely on disguises, tricks, and lying” (1994: 81), but who departs from this model in her use of tricks to protect her identity as a murderess, rather than her virginity as is typical in romances:

Far from preserving her virginity, [Brigid] uses her body to try to obscure her connection with that other body—the corpse ... in *The Maltese Falcon*, the important body is the corpse, which is uncovered with the revelation of the woman’s identity as a murderer. (Hall 1994: 81)

Brigid forges a connection between sexuality and criminality in a way that endows her with agency. She uses her sexuality to lure Archer into a dark street, where she murders him in cold blood and then blames her accomplice, Floyd Thursby. In a conversation

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<sup>123</sup> All quotations from *The Maltese Falcon* are from *Hammett: Five Complete Novels* (1980). The abbreviation *MF* appears before the page number in all quotes from the novel.

with Spade the next day she convinces him of her sorrow and sympathy, despite her revelation that her story about her sister was confected:

“Mr. Spade, tell me the truth.” Her voice quivered on the verge of hysteria. Her face had become haggard around desperate eyes. “Am I to blame for –for last night?”

Spade shook his head. “Not unless there are things I don’t know about,” he said. “You warned us that Thursby was dangerous .... He shrugged his sloping shoulders. “I wouldn’t say it was your fault.”

She said “Thank you,” very softly, and then moved her head from side to side. “But I will always blame myself.” She put a hand to her throat. “Mr. Archer was so–so alive yesterday afternoon, so solid and hearty and– ”

“Stop it,” Spade commanded. “He knew what he was doing. They’re the chances we take.” (MF: 315)

It is interesting to remark that in the scene above there is a suggestion of medicalizing Brigid: “Her voice quivered on the verge of *hysteria*” (my emphasis), and this medicalization comes when Spade tries to take culpability away from Brigid: “I wouldn’t say it was your fault.” The narrative thus gestures toward the medicalization of Brigid at the exact point when Spade asserts that she is not responsible for Archer’s death. The fact that she *did* kill Archer, withheld until the end of the novel, imbues the conversation with irony, indicating an aporia between words and their underlying meaning. This is further exemplified in the play-acting and one-upmanship in which both characters engage, withholding information as part of a game of power that is nonetheless ironic: Brigid hides the fact that she killed Miles while Spade hides the fact that he knew this from the beginning, and yet they continue to role-play. Significantly, it is amid the contradictions that the ironies of Hammett’s world create that the criminal femme fatale becomes capable of exhibiting agency. The fact that Brigid functions efficiently in Hammett’s underworld is testament to this. She commits crimes neither because she is “evil” nor because she wants to lead men to their doom; rather, her

reasons (aspirations to gain money and power) are rooted in this underworld, which is an open battlefield for criminals and gangsters and thus gives Brigid the opportunity to pursue her goals. Hence, to cite misogyny as the only explanation for the characterization of Brigid as dangerous and criminal does not do justice to the complicated picture, revolving around the transgressive criminal femme fatale and the ironized detective, that Hammett registers about gender relations in this book.<sup>124</sup> An example of a reading that argues for Brigid's lack of power is offered by Robert Edenbaum, whose article in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (1968) is described by Christopher Metress (2005: 68) as the "most influential early essay on that novel."

Edenbaum surmises:

Hammett is less concerned with the intricacies of the detective story plot than with the combat between a villain(ess) who is a woman of sentiment, and who thrives on sentiment of others, and a hero who has none and survives because he has none. As a result of that combat itself, the novel is concerned with the definition of the private-eye's "daemonic" virtue – with his invulnerability and his power – *and* with a critique of that definition. (1968: 81, original emphasis)

Edenbaum goes on to explain, however, that this does not mean that the villainess is the one who holds all the cards with the detective as her victim. Rather, he proposes that "though Spade is no murderer, Brigid O'Shaughnessy is his victim" (82). The fact that Spade knows from the beginning Brigid's identity as the murderer of his partner, places her in the position of "the manipulated, the deceived, the predictable, finally in a very real sense, the victim" (82). I argue to the contrary that the fact that Spade knows this from the beginning in fact ironizes and satirizes his role as a detective by pointing up the instability of the "truth" that he is supposed to reveal. The Flitcraft parable Spade tells to Brigid, about a man who escapes death by a falling beam and decides to leave

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<sup>124</sup> See, for example, Herman's (1994) reading on misogyny in Hammett's work, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

his life behind only to go to another town and exactly replicate his previous life, emblemizes Hammett's underworld as nothing but a circular cosmos of chaos and lies in which everyone is consumed by masquerade and role-playing. In the context of the Flitcraft fable, then, Brigid is not the victim of Spade's prior knowledge; rather Spade himself, like the protagonist of the parable, is the victim of an unstable and meaningless world in which he is doomed to loop back to the starting point.

Despite (and because of) the fact that Brigid is criminalized, through the crimes she commits and in her encounter with the criminal justice system when Spade finally turns her over to the police, she shows remarkable agency. In opposition to the criminological discourse discussed in Chapter One, which maintains that women kill or inflict harm on an abusive partner in a domestic context, Brigid kills not in self-defence but for a material interest; she is motivated by greed and the desire to gain power. Unlike Gabrielle in *The Dain Curse*, Brigid is not a victimized woman. She is at ease in the urban environment where the story takes place, and seems to be equal to her male counterparts in their efforts to find the falcon. More than that, she uses her beauty and seductiveness to get what she wants. Even Spade tells her "You won't need much of anybody's help. You're good. You're very good. It's chiefly your eyes, I think, and that throb you get into your voice when you say things like 'Be generous, Mr. Spade'" (*MF*: 317). Like Dinah in *Red Harvest*, Brigid is compatible with the underworld of gangsterism and violence, and it is in this criminal space that she becomes a criminal herself. Crucially, this criminalization allows her to take responsibility for her actions; for example, she admits to Spade that she killed his partner, Miles, when he confronts her at the end of the book. Spade asks her: "you'd be rid of him. That it?" She replies "S-something like that" (*MF*: 435). At the same time she remains relentless and shows no guilt or regret for her actions even in the final confrontation with the detective.

One question we might ask here is why does Hammett choose to represent women's agency through a criminal lens? Why does he establish an image of a woman who is powerful but dangerous, even murderous? The interrelation between violence and sexual power is pertinent in this regard. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett presents Brigid's sexuality as a deadly weapon that literally leads men to their demise. In Hammett's world, masculinity is symbolized by pistols (Herman 1994: 206); women, meanwhile, are equipped with another kind of weapon with which to confront the exceedingly violent masculine world: hyper-femininity. It is this feminine sexuality that posits the biggest threat to the masculinity of the detective. As David Herman puts it, violence becomes "a tenor of the metaphoric equation between sexuality and aggression... sexuality itself reduces to some sort of battle of predominately violent energy" (1994: 206). Drawing on Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*, Herman contends that women in Hammett's work hold an ambivalent position; they are fetishized and objectified but also acquire the power of "the alien, the inassimilable." According to Herman, the "misogynistic axioms" that Hammett uses in his representation of gender positively "ascribe limitless duplicity and cruelty to women; negatively, the laws imply that there cannot be, in the world as it is, a woman who has the detective's best interests at heart or who maintains indifference towards him" (1994: 215). Although Herman's reading of women is interesting as it addresses the question of women's power alongside that of misogyny, especially in relation to Hammett's development as a writer,<sup>125</sup> it still falls within the sphere of the containment readings with which I take issue, as it reduces women to the

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<sup>125</sup> Herman maintains that the "necessity of violence between the sexes" is undercut by androgyny in which "the masculine and the feminine mirror or replicate one another." In this novel, "misogyny gives way to androgyny" and Hammett's texts "parody the misogynistic vision that simultaneously shapes and informs them" (1994: 216). Androgyny diminishes in Hammett's later work, however, which undergoes a shift where "the absence of androgyny in the later works represents not an increased conservatism about gender, but rather an interpretive code according to which gender itself becomes multiple and complex" (210).

status of “other.” I suggest differently that Hammett’s positioning of the criminal femme fatales in the underworld, Brigid is a good example here, destabilizes readings that focus on misogyny and containment. The criminal femme fatale challenges not only the role of the detective as a male protagonist, but also his role as law-enforcer, as she presents “obstacles to and ultimate resources for the detective’s inquisitive/acquisitive will-to-know” (Cooper 1989: 23).<sup>126</sup>

In line with Herman’s argument, Josiane Peltier also reads the position of women in *The Maltese Falcon* as ambiguous: they are “agents in the modern economy” but also “objected goods” that are valued “on the basis of their physical assets” (2005: 24). While Peltier’s reading of women in Hammett is rather dichotomized, it does open a new perspective on the role of women, one that is concerned with their economic capital and which, I would add, is essential to the question of agency that this study addresses.<sup>127</sup> In this modern world where everybody and everything has a value,

[s]incerity, intimacy, spontaneity, classy sex appeal, the promise of love, and respite from the “dog eat dog” world are all behaviors valued by men that Brigid O’Shaughnessy impersonates successfully to compete with her male counterparts. The narrative shapes her in such a way that she is made to use the trust she elicits in men to kill them. (Peltier 2005: 24)

Peltier moreover points to the transgressive nature of women who become “even more dangerous as they act as if they still embedded traditional feminine values projected onto them by unguarded men, the proverbial ‘saps’ from whom Spade repeatedly defends himself at the end of the novel” (2005:24).

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<sup>126</sup> Although the essay deals primarily with films, Cooper’s “Sex/Knowledge/Power in the Detective Genre” (1989) provides valuable insights. Cooper argues that the main concern of detective fiction in general is with the inquisitive male desire to solve a mystery. The detective’s search for facts (knowledge), which implies his wish for power, is interrupted and disrupted by the woman through her sexual appeal.

<sup>127</sup> Peltier (2005:23) establishes a link between *The Maltese Falcon* and economic discourse of the time, suggesting that the book is pervaded by a discourse of value as a “sort of historical unconscious” as far as the value of the falcon itself and the instability of the characters’ attitudes towards value are concerned.

Brigid's status as a criminal femme fatale is also revealed by the different forms of femininity that are exemplified by other, minor female characters in the novel. Iva Archer and Effie Ferine embody aspects of femininity that mirror the main focus of the novel, namely, the relationship between Brigid and Spade. In Iva, we see an alluring but harmless femininity. She is an example of the unfaithful wife who has an affair with Spade before her husband is killed, and who thinks that Spade killed Archer to marry her. She desperately wants to seduce Spade and is motivated by jealousy – she even sends the police to Spade's apartment – but she is not murderous like Brigid. The ending of the novel, which raises the possibility of a reunion between Spade and Iva, (when she goes to his office at the very final scene in the book), reinforces the vision of Hammett's underworld as repetitious, random, and utterly chaotic. Considering the contempt that Spade shows to Iva, this relationship is arguably as fake and doomed to failure as everything else in Hammett's underworld (including the recovery of the Maltese falcon itself). In this way, the ending echoes the Flitcraft story with its connotation of disorder and meaningless repetition.

Effie, Spade's secretary, on the other hand, represents a "masculine" femininity with her "boyish face" and the masculine language used to describe her: "You're a damned good man, sister," (*MF*: 401) as Spade tells her. One way of reading this construction of masculine femininity is over and against the "ideal of heroic manhood" – Spade impugns "femininity in general implying that strength of character is a masculine trait" (Seal 2002: 77). Spade wants to affirm his masculine power through identifying with Effie. But this model of masculine femininity stands contrary to Brigid's hyper but dangerous femininity, and we can read this contrast between Effie and Brigid in relation to Spade. That is, Effie represents a safe place for Spade, who describes her in masculine words, as mentioned above. To the contrary, it is Brigid with her overt

sexuality that threatens Spade's control and power. This contrast thus illuminates the dynamics between sexuality, criminality, and power in a way that shows Spade's vulnerability and susceptibility to Brigid.

Indeed, Spade's toughness is ridiculed through the power that Brigid exhibits in the context of their relationship. Spade does after all fall in love with her but is emotionally incapable of acknowledging his feelings. Before he turns her over to the police, Brigid says to Spade:

“now you are lying. You are lying if you say you don't know in your heart that, in spite of anything I've done, I love you.”

Spade made a short abrupt bow. His eyes were becoming bloodshot, but there was no other change in his damp and yellowish fixedly smiling face. “Maybe I do,” he said. “What of it? I should trust you? ... You who knocked off Miles, a man you had nothing against, in cold blood, just like swatting a fly, for the sake of double-crossing Thursby” (*MF*: 437)

As the “most intense arrogant-vindictive neurotic of Hammett's heroes” (Maxfield 1985: 116), Spade makes sure that he only gets involved with women whom he does not respect, so that he feels justified when he treats them with arrogance. He thus needs all of “his cynical equanimity” to face the treachery that lurks behind Brigid's “facade of beauty and romance” (Cawelti 1976: 167). Brigid constitutes a threat to Spade that he tries to avert and disavow by recourse to toughness, detachment, and cynicism. This is evident in the scene when he turns her over to the police. Some critics interpret Spade's action in the light of the code of honour that he adheres to as a detective, taking him at his word when he states: “Don't be so sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be” (*MF*: 439).<sup>128</sup> Spade's justification is ostensibly pragmatic and related to detective business:

When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it...  
He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it. Then

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<sup>128</sup> For example, in his book on the moral vision of Hammett, Thompson suggests that Spade maintains ethical behaviour despite his involvement with Brigid (2007: 94).



it happens we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed, it's bad business to let the killer get away with it. It's bad all around – bad for that one organization, bad for every detective everywhere. (*MF*: 438)

However, one can go beyond Spade's behavioural code to what William Ruehlmann calls "inverted chivalry" – "never perform out of sentiment, be a sucker for nobody" (1984: 75). *The Maltese Falcon*, according to this reading, explores the meaning of "consequences for a man who has nothing else":

Spade's defeat of O'Shaughnessy is not the triumph of a morally superior man over a sentimental villainess –it is the empty gesture of an empty man whose occupation is the only thing of value for him – an item, like the falcon, that Hammett shows to be devoid of either warmth or pity. (1984: 75)

Although much has been said about why Spade turns Brigid over to the police, in the context of my analysis of agency the scene reveals Brigid as a criminalized woman, and at the same time shows how this criminalization, and the negotiations and tensions between her criminality and discourses of control and punishment, invite us to trace potential spaces in which female agency might operate. If we are to see the relationship between Spade and Brigid as essentially competitive, I would argue that Brigid is not defeated by Spade; rather, she represents a threat to his power, as is confirmed by the fact that he views her as a weakness that he must resist. Spade's repeated use of the word "sap" towards the end, in lines such as "I won't play the sap for you" (*MF*: 438), reveals his desire to confirm to himself his ability to resist the danger that Brigid epitomizes by cauterizing his emotions completely. With his "rejection of sentiment" (Edenbaum 1968: 88), we realize that the narrative presents an inverted dynamics of power, in which a woman, despite having been handed over to the police, is actually more dangerous and threatening than the detective who sends her away. Spade tells

Brigid that he cannot save her “because all of me wants to – wants to say to hell with the consequences and do it – and because – God damn you – you’ve counted on that with me the same as you counted on that with the others” (*MF*: 439). The detective’s code is put to the test in Spade’s relationship with Brigid as she compromises his shield of professionalism. He knows from the beginning that Brigid has murdered his partner, and yet he becomes romantically and sexually involved with her. If he were to act according to the code of honour, he would have revealed the identity of the murderer the moment he knew, right when he saw Archer’s body.

Thus, when Spade’s vulnerability towards Brigid and his fear of losing control ultimately question his mastery, it is Brigid who acquires this surplus of power for herself. Hence Spade’s turning of Brigid over to the police does not exclude her agency. She remains an agent who feels no remorse or regret nor displays any weakness, and who also continues to seduce Spade even when she knows that she is going to face a trial and prison:

“Don’t– don’t talk to me like that, Sam! You know I didn’t! You know–”

“Stop it.” He looked at the watch on his wrist. “The police will be blowing in any minute now and you’re sitting on dynamite. Talk!”

She put the back of a hand on her forehead. “Oh, why do you accuse me of such a terrible–?”...

She twisted her wrists out of Spade’s fingers and put her hands up around the back of his neck, pulling his head down until his mouth all but touched hers. Her body was flat against his from knees to chest. He put his arms around her, holding her tight to him. Her dark-lashed lids were half down over velvet eyes.” (*MF*: 435)

Here Brigid tries to use her sexual charms to make Spade change his mind about his decision to hand her over to the police. Although she does not succeed to do that, the image that we see in the long scene at the end of the book is that of a relentless woman, who shows no apologies for her actions and continues to play the game of seduction and

persuasion with Spade. This scene also reveals the detective fighting his vulnerability and his uncertainty by reminding himself that he needs to hand Brigid to the police in order to save himself: “I’m sunk if I haven’t got you to hand over to the police when they come. That’s the only thing that can keep me from going down with the others” (*MF*: 438).

Moreover, the ending of the novel is marked by irony. The “ironic contrast” between fantasy and violence that Cawelti (1976: 166) suggests permeates *The Maltese Falcon* equally colours the dynamics between Spade and Brigid and the intersections between gender dynamics and crime that the novel negotiates. That is, the detective, as a representative of the law appears to be tough but is in fact vulnerable, while the woman who appears to be weak and controlled at the end is the one who reveals the detective’s vulnerability and by so doing destabilizes the authority of law and order. This irony finds a strong echo in the intradiegetical Flitcraft parable, which, in my view, is a frame within which the narrative, particularly the Brigid-Spade relationship, can be viewed.<sup>129</sup> The fact that the Flitcraft parable makes sense only at the end of the novel, when we realize that Spade knew all along that Brigid killed his partner, is interpreted by Edenbaum as a warning to Brigid that her appeal to Spade’s “sense of honor, his nobility, his integrity, and finally his love” cannot be effective (1968: 82). John T. Irwin, in a similar line, suggests that Brigid’s “inability to grasp the meaning of Flitcraft’s story is somehow gender-related” (2000: 244), referring to the fact that Brigid, like Mrs. Flitcraft, cannot understand the wider significance of the story. However, rather than appealing to Spade’s code, I suggest that the connection between the Flitcraft parable and the ending can be seen in the light of the unpredictability and

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<sup>129</sup> The Flitcraft parable has been the subject of numerous interpretations; almost every critic of Hammett comments upon it. See Miller (1996), for an account on critical scholarship on the Flitcraft’s parable. See also Harris (2006), Marling (1995), Irwin (2000), Hamilton (1987) and Marcus (1975). However, the Flitcraft story has been oddly excluded from Huston’s 1941 film rendition of *The Maltese Falcon* (Marcus 1975: xvi).

the randomness of Hammett's underworld that defines not only its lawlessness but also the volatility of the discourse of controlling Brigid. The Flitcraft parable, a story that Marcus describes as an existential drama about "the ethical irrationality of existence, the ethical unintelligibility of the world" (1975: xviii), captures the vision that Hammett initiated in *Red Harvest* and expands in this novel – a vision which endorses the underworld as a space where criminals, gangsters and even the detective are all enmeshed together.

If we are to see Brigid not only as part of Hammett's underworld but also in her socio-cultural and political contexts, then *The Maltese Falcon* can be understood as a precursor to Hammett's social vision. Hammett succeeds in infusing a critique of issues of criminality and policing (especially female crime) into a tight plot line of a dangerous criminal pitted against a detective struggling to assert control. As Paul Abraham points out, in creating a character like Spade, Hammett "mock[s] bourgeois pretensions of law, order, and progress, which inspired the rhetoric of international relations during that decade" (1995: 97).<sup>130</sup> I thus align my reading of the novel with those of critics such as Abraham (1995) and Richard Shulman (1985), who view the work through a political lens and thus depart from the ahistorical approach to Hammett taken by other critics.<sup>131</sup> My reading augments those aforementioned, however, in that I also contend that this political lens is inseparable from the gender relations that the narrative fleshes out. *The Maltese Falcon*, in other words, is able to "undercut traditional values of heroism, quest, and romance" (Malin 1968: 106), by presenting the image of the criminal woman as a woman with agency, and hence the narrative critiques dominant discourses on crime

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<sup>130</sup> Abrahams (1995) provides a comprehensive account of the American political and diplomatic scene in the 1920s. He reads the novel in the light of Hammett's background as an "anarchist and anti-fascist." He contends that Hammett contemplated "lessons" of World War I and their relevance to American society of the 1920s.

<sup>131</sup> Such critics include Gregory (1985) and Thompson (2007).

and punishment. Hammett's granddaughter Julie Rivett sums up the position of *The Maltese Falcon* within the development of Hammett's career as a writer:

*Falcon* is an ambitious, careful work, a purposeful effort to move beyond the traditional confines of crime fiction and the pulps. Hammett's introduction of Sam Spade, a more sophisticated leading man than the Continental Op, allowed him to develop a correspondingly more sophisticated type of mystery story. *The Maltese Falcon* is a far more nuanced book than either *Red Harvest*, dense with violence, or *The Dain Curse*, which, while it demonstrates strengths that foreshadow *the Falcon* and *The Glass Key*, is the least significant of my grandfather's novels. *The Falcon* is an ingenious amalgamation: truth and lies interleaved, history and fantasy fused, latent philosophy, wry subtleties, murder, theft, detection, lust, and, maybe, love. (2005: 13)<sup>132</sup>

Hammett, the writer whose works were born of, and eloquently speak to, interwar disillusionment, Prohibition, and the Depression, is also embroiled in his leftist views. *The Maltese Falcon* can be seen as the culmination of Hammett's tough-guy hardboiled school that departed from the classical detective fiction. Yet Hammett's "mystery" is that he wrote his five novels between 1929 and 1934, eventually entering a phase of silence that reveals much about his leftist political position.<sup>133</sup> I will conclude this chapter by briefly discussing Hammett's later work, especially his final novel *The Thin Man* (1934) to shed light on his development of the criminal femme fatale. This conclusion is not meant to discuss *The Thin Man* in detail; rather the aim here is to show how Hammett's work developed his gender representations through to his last novel.

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<sup>132</sup> Rivett (2005) reads parallels between Hammett's life and Spade's, claiming that "the evidence that connects their lives is substantial."

<sup>133</sup> Hammett supported the Communist Party from the 1930s until his death. During McCarthy's anti-communist campaign, Hammett was fined and jailed. Haut (1995: 3) suggests that the meeting between Hammett and McCarthy is significant to the "development of pulp culture, for it highlights on the one hand the political potential of hardboiled writing and, on the other, the creation of mass readership."

## 2.5 Conclusion: The Female Detective in *The Thin Man*

Hammett's later work shows a shift especially in his treatment of gender relations. In his last novel, *The Thin Man*, Hammett offers another take on female agency. The focal point of the novel is the relationship between Nick, a retired detective and his wife Nora, who are "in love and in competition at the same time; they are more nearly equal than any couple in American fiction since those of Kate Chopin" (Marling 1983: 106). Set in Prohibition-era New York, the novel deals with the couple's attempts to solve the mysterious disappearance of Clyde Wynant.<sup>134</sup> It is Nora, a wealthy socialite, who convinces her reluctant husband to take the case and starts investigating with him. Hammett employs witty dialogue between Nora and Nick, interweaving mystery with comedy. *The Thin Man*, as Gregory puts it, "works successfully on a lighter level, and we can be amused by the eccentricities of the Wynant family and the social life of the wealthy" (1985: 177).<sup>135</sup>

*The Thin Man*, Hammett's "most controlled work" (Gregory 1985: 177), is criticized for lacking a tough hero. Hammett appears to "domesticate" his hardboiled detective: Nick Charles is "what happens to the Op/Spade when he gives up his role as an ascetic demi-god to become husband, man of leisure" (Edenbaum 1968: 101). Yet I suggest that the disappearance of the tough detective in fact accounts for the appearance of Nora, a new kind of female character in Hammett's oeuvre. Smart, rich, and married to the detective protagonist, Nora exhibits agency, but in a different way from Hammett's earlier criminal femme fatales. The agency that Nora shows does not operate within the transgressive criminal space that Alice and Brigid occupy. Combining criminality with seductive femininity is what distinguishes Hammett's criminal femme

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<sup>134</sup> Gray (2008: 768) contends that Hammett in this novel formulates a parody of the "armchair crime solving" through his marginalization of "the cerebral: sweet reasoning is rendered as suite reasoning."

<sup>135</sup> Thompson (2007: 189), however, argues that *The Thin Man* is the darkest and bleakest of Hammett's novels, suggesting the "total alienation" of the modern man.

fatales and it is this combination that lies at the heart of the agency that these female characters show. Nora is neither a criminal nor a femme fatale – rather, her agency is bound up with her role as the “detective wife”<sup>136</sup> whose skills of observation and ability to interpret events and facts in order to solve the crime render her role crucial. Through the questions she asks and the clues that she gathers, the mystery of Clyde Wynant is unraveled. Nora also shows durability and strength even when threatened at gunpoint, and in this way she disrupts the notion that the job of detective in hardboiled crime fiction even in Hammett is exclusively masculine.

Herman describes Hammett’s treatment of women in his later work, such as *The Glass Key* and *The Thin Man*, as “deliberately fragmentary and particularized” (1994: 219). According to this view, Hammett’s later work breaks from the misogyny of his early work and begins to “disassociate strength and seriousness from masculinity, and by extension to undo the whole nexus of assumptions according to which certain attributes remain invariably gender-specific” (1994: 222).<sup>137</sup> Along these lines, Nora is described as

the happy culmination of a long artistic evolution on Hammett’s part. In early work he dealt only in female stereotypes, but his female characters increased in complexity until, in Janet Henry of *The Glass Key*, he found a woman tough enough to suit his disenchanting detective. The archetypal attraction of the hero for the succubus is transmuted into a sustaining interpersonal tension [between Nora and Nick] (Marling 1983: 106)

I suggest that rather than only moving away from misogyny in his later work, Hammett in fact challenges the stereotype of the femme fatale and the containment of this figure throughout his work. Although the insight that both Herman and Marling provide is

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<sup>136</sup> Herman (1994: 222) contends that *The Thin Man* “domesticates” the genre of hardboiled crime fiction “produces startling and unresolved tensions between sexist individualism and a sort of comic marital harmony.”

<sup>137</sup> The presence of Clyde’s ex-wife Mimi in *The Thin Man*, a pathological liar who beats her daughter Dorothy in public, may be regarded as a misogynistic construction that stands in contrast to Nora. She is a good example of Hammett’s varied representation of women even in his later work.

helpful, the term “succubus” is too extreme: even in his early work, Hammett’s female characters are far from being mere stereotypes. As I have illustrated, the criminal femme fatales that populate his short stories, as well as Alice of *The Dain Curse* and Brigid of *The Maltese Falcon*, contest any fixed scheme of gender such as that instituted through misogyny. By employing medicalization and criminalization, Hammett does not portray the criminal femme fatales merely a male fantasy; rather, his work stretches the boundaries of gender and normative sexuality to create images of women who are sexually attractive and extremely dangerous, but who also have agency.

Hammett’s later novels, however, push this challenge in a different direction whereby the woman takes on the role of the detective, exhibiting the same characteristics that criminal femme fatales show – intelligence, determination, control, and autonomy – but without the dimension of dangerous femininity that is part of the persona of the criminal femme fatale. Hence, Nora *literally* becomes an agent, positioning her as a predecessor to such female detectives as, for example, V. I. Warshawski, Sara Paretsky’s hardboiled female detective creation of the 1980s and Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone. In this way, Hammett’s later work provides a prototype of the agency that female characters show in the feminist detective fiction of the 1970s onward. This variety of representations by Hammett opens up the genre of hardboiled crime fiction to different possibilities regarding the representations of criminal femme fatales, some of which have been taken up by the writers that followed Hammett, as will be discussed in the following chapters.



# 3

## Narratives of Detection: Femme Fatality and the Detective “Hero” in Raymond Chandler’s Fiction

### 3.1 Introduction

Raymond Chandler, who began publishing around the time that Hammett stopped writing, takes a different course from his predecessor regarding the representation of women. While Hammett begins with a formula of sentimentality and medicalization in *The Dain Curse*, before adopting a criminalization model in *The Maltese Falcon*, and finally presenting a less misogynistic portrayal of women through the female detective of later works, Chandler consistently depicts lethal women whose representations are nonetheless interconnected to his detective Philip Marlowe, who occupies the central position in Chandler’s fiction.<sup>138</sup> I will argue that while Chandler’s criminal femme fatales stand as foils to Marlowe in his professional and moral capacity, they do not do so simply to undergird the detective’s power and “heroic” qualities. Rather, the criminal femme fatales destabilize the status of the detective as “hero” and question his mastery.<sup>139</sup> The narratives achieve this through the representational dynamics that Chandler uses to portray his criminal femme fatales. They are not always visible in the sense that they do not dominate the narratives with an overpowering presence and we do not see them commit criminal acts. Their agency is located,

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<sup>138</sup> All of Chandler’s novels except one – his last finished novel *Playback* (1958) – contain criminal women, although *The High Window* (1942) and *The Little Sister* (1949) do not present their female protagonists as seductively threatening femme fatales.

<sup>139</sup> Durham describes Chandler’s detective as “passionately ethical” (1963: 86), and asserts that Chandler adheres to the characteristics of the “hero,” which include “courage, physical strength, indestructibility, indifference to danger and death, a knightly attitude, celibacy, a measure of violence, and a sense of justice” (81). See also Lid (1989: 42) for a reading of Marlowe as a hero.

however, in what I will call (in)visible roles. That is, despite or because of indirect avenues through which female power is mobilized (whether through absence, accessory roles, prospective or retrospective readings of this power, which I will explain in this chapter), the narratives invite us to infer the criminal femme fatales' agency through their interactions with Marlowe which ultimately prove that he is vulnerable to the power that these female characters demonstrate. I propose to trouble the criminological premise that considers the invisibility of women merely as a site for neglect and lack of female power. To the contrary, I contend here that absence and a complicated interplay between visibility and invisibility of the criminal femme fatales, as shown in Chandler's narratives, can operate as a vehicle for identifying female agency.

Chandler also plays with the reader's expectations of the role of women as criminals; his narratives interrogate the ways in which female characters appear, and in many cases do *not* appear, and negotiate their agency as criminal femme fatales against varying degrees of visibility. Chandler hence picks up and extends Hammett's formula in *The Dain Curse* which places Alice in an absent/present role. Whereas Hammett exposes an underworld where women work as counterparts to gangsters, however, Chandler's narratives place the criminal femme fatales in wealthy corrupt families, and they represent a threat to the detective and others around them. Chandler also allows his female characters to be culpable in the crimes they commit, despite the fact that the reader does not see them commit the acts that point to their culpability.<sup>140</sup> This chapter will therefore address the (in)visibility of women's agency in relation to Marlowe through an examination of Chandler's use of the medicalization and criminalization discourses that I have foregrounded in this study.

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<sup>140</sup> Comparing the worlds of Hammett and Chandler, Horsley argues that the latter is characterized by "a much more consistent lightness of tone. Chandler combines witty detachment with an underlying sentimentality" (2001: 35). Chandler's world is also less corrupt than Hammett's. Elliot also argues that Hammett's vision is of a society so corrupt that it poisons human relationships; while Chandler limns "a world no less violent, ugly, unjust, or loveless ... yet it is not extremely corrupt" (1989: 68).

Because of the significant role of Marlowe in relation to the characterization of these criminal femme fatales, a brief account of Marlowe's character is necessary, through which I will examine how the notion of the detective's masculinity is constructed against notions of dangerous femininity. Marlowe is described by both his creator and some critics using superlative adjectives that endow him with "knightly" and "heroic" qualities. Chandler describes his creation as "a man of honour ... the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world" (1973: 14).<sup>141</sup> But Marlowe does not succeed in rescuing the "heroine," however, primarily because the women in the stories do not need to be rescued. Chandler's mission statement for detective fiction is a search for "hidden truth" (1973: 15), yet his detective fails in solving the mystery or restoring order; Chandler's fictional world thus remains highly fragmentary. I question the reading of Marlowe as a "hero," and suggest that the detective's missions always face challenges posed by criminal women that ultimately place him out of control and arguably question his agency. I also argue that Marlowe's detective's shield and his morality as a "man of ideals that, although antiquated, continues to rule his behaviour" (Abbott 2002: 48), are merely a mask behind which he hides his susceptibility to women in particular. The anxiety that Marlowe displays towards women is not only sexual, but also relates to power. The detective, facing constant threats including death, "undergoes trials which in fact subvert the stereotypical image of male mastery ... his tough image seems more like a reflex of fear" (Horsley 2005: 73). I will show how Marlowe's vulnerability and his fear of losing agency function as a mirror that reflects and reinforces women's agency, although the visibility of that agency varies considerably throughout Chandler's writing career.

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<sup>141</sup> There is a massive amount of critical scholarship about Philip Marlowe as a "knight" and/or a "hero." See, for example, Knight (1988: 80), Skenazy (1982:37-38), Durham (1963: 32), Lid (1989: 42), and Marling (1986: 81-83).

A notable aspect of Chandler's characterization of Marlowe, somewhat in contrast to Hammett's detectives, is his infusion of sentimentality into the hardboiled formula.<sup>142</sup> Chandler's detective, who has become a "template" for the hardboiled detective (Haut 1995: 71), is "tended with an affection that Hammett's detachment would never allow. And yet, despite or perhaps because of his sentiment towards Philip Marlowe, Chandler fretted against the limitation of formula fiction" (Humm 1988: 33). Marlowe is not as tough as Sam Spade, but neither is he as genteel as, for example, Sherlock Holmes.<sup>143</sup> He is a complex character: "intensely sensitive, yet carries a shield of cynical apathy; he is disturbed to a point of near-hysteria by the moral decay he encounters, yet always affects a wise guy coolness and wit; he is bitter, exasperated, and lonely, behind a veneer of taut self-control, sarcasm, and indifference" (Cawelti 1976: 176). Marlowe's balancing of "sentimental romanticism with tough cynicism" (Hamilton 1987: 155) is key to understanding the portrayal of women as criminal femme fatales in Chandler's fiction, and vice versa. Following on from Hamilton's perspective on Marlowe's character – what I will call Marlowe's "cynical sentimentality," a blend of sentimentality with tough cynicism – it is possible to trace his distrustful relations with women and how these shape the gender representation in Chandler's narratives. The proportions of sentiment and cynicism that constitute this "cynical sentimentality" shift as Chandler's writing develops, setting a tough and

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<sup>142</sup> Despite the potential problems that the term "sentimentality" brings, given that it inherently contradicts the very premise of the "hardboiled" genre, I would like to propose it here as part of my argument in this chapter, a quality in Marlowe, indeed Chandler's fiction, that exists alongside and in interrelation with toughness. I will use the term "sentimentality" here partly to refer to indulgence in emotion, but mainly in the sense of its opposition to toughness and control in the context of Marlowe's gender relations.

<sup>143</sup> Hiney (1997: 102) suggests that Marlowe shows a combination of Chandler himself and the traditional pulp hero. The detective is lonely and unsociable, and self-persecuting as was Chandler; but beneath this there was a sense of humour and honour in addition to sensitivity. Lid (1989: 42) also states that Marlowe, who is an idealist hiding under the guise of cynicism, is a projection of Chandler's romantic ego. It is also interesting to see Chandler's own perspective on his hero; in a letter to his publisher Hamish Hamilton in 1959 Chandler says: "I am supposed to be a hard-boiled writer, but that means nothing. It is merely a method of projection. Personally I am sensitive and even diffident. At times I am extremely caustic and pugnacious; at other times very sentimental" (qtd. in Ruhm 1968: 175).

cynical early Marlowe apart from his later, more sentimental, persona. This development is commensurate with similar changes in his representation of women. In the early works where Marlowe maintains a tough persona, he is challenged by a medicalized woman, whose criminal acts are related to a psychological ailment which negates her culpability and agency. But as Marlowe grows more sentimental and loses his toughness, Chandler's female characters become more dangerous and threatening. While Marlowe struggles to assert his position as a detective, the unsettling (in)visibility of the criminal femme fatales poses a challenge to his authority and clears a space for these female characters to assert power.

Through a close reading of Chandler's narratives, Marlowe's masculinity can be seen in terms of an ambivalence that pertains to both his sexual relations and power dynamics with the criminal femme fatales. I agree with Gill Plain's contention that Marlowe's masculinity ultimately transcends the "parameters of patriarchal prescription" and destabilizes the gender norms that "hard-boiled detection" works to enforce. Thus, although Marlowe's toughness acts as a "symptom for and an index of masculinity," Chandler's tropes of hardboiled masculinity "exceed the simple signification of male power" (Plain 2001: 59).<sup>144</sup> In this context, Marlowe veers away from "control, strength, heterosexual pursuit, and self-mastery – and instead finds himself dissembling, hysterical, fragmented" (Abbott 2003: 307).<sup>145</sup> My reading thus

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<sup>144</sup> Plain (2001: 60-1) also contends that Chandler's fictions pay close attention to the male body, and that Marlowe tries to assert his masculinity through the "protection of the weak, both male and female, and through a sentimental, paternalistic romanticism that stands in stark contrast to the isolated existentialism of the tough guy persona." Women in Chandler's writing, according to this view, are by contrast devoid of sensuality and are "harsh and unforgiving, delineat[ing] female sexuality that is perceived as threatening even as it attracts" (61). See also Forter (2000), for an interesting examination of hardboiled masculinity, especially in the context of masochistic pleasure.

<sup>145</sup> It is notable that Abbott (2003: 307) makes the distinction between Marlowe in Chandler's novel and Humphrey Bogart's famous performance of the detective in the big screen, suggesting that Bogart's performance as Marlowe has altered what she calls "Chandleresque masculinity" that "revolve[s] around toughness, honor, incorruptibility and slick, street-smart charm." My reading of the role of the femme fatale differs from Abbot's view that Marlowe seeks to "eradicate or at least contain these lethal women" and that "hard-boiled masculinity relies on the defeat of the femme fatale for its own existence" (307).

extends beyond recognition of masculine narratives through the assertion of the detective's toughness or superiority, to a more sustained reading of women's agency.

I start this chapter with a reading of *The Lady in the Lake* (1943). Although the novel has received less critical attention than Chandler's other works, and it falls in the middle of his writing career (I do not follow a chronological examination of Chandler's works in this chapter), *The Lady in the Lake* is vital to my argument here, and it is helpful to start with this novel as it captures best my argument of the (in)visible female roles. The woman in this novel commits crimes with full culpability, but is barely visible. I will read the agency of the criminal femme fatale by contrasting her to both the detective and another dangerous female character in the novel. After discussing *The Lady in the Lake*, I will then move to Chandler's canonical works – *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953) – to show how the treatment of women in *The Lady in the Lake* helps reveal the forms of female agency embedded in the negotiations of the visibility of the criminal femme fatales in relation to their empowerment in the body of Chandler's work.

### 3.2 The “small blondes”: (In)visible Female Agency in *The Lady in the Lake*

[T]hese small blondes are so much of a pattern that a change of clothes or light or makeup makes them all alike or all different. (*LL*: 97)<sup>146</sup>

*The Lady in the Lake* is a story that focuses on the disappearance of women – women who are neither clearly present nor vividly visible. The book begins with wealthy businessman Derace Kingsley asking Marlowe to find his estranged wife, Crystal, who has sent a telegram declaring that she plans to marry Chris Lavery, her gigolo boyfriend. As Marlowe works the case, he becomes involved with the disappearance of

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<sup>146</sup> All citations from *The Lady in the Lake* will be from Raymond Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake* (1959). The abbreviation *LL* appears before the page number in all quotes from the novel.

another woman, Muriel Chess, and Chandler delineates a parallel plot based on a second absent woman. Marlowe discovers a body in Lake Fawn believed to be Muriel's, but it is only at the end of the novel that we learn that the lady in the lake is in fact Crystal, who was killed by Muriel. We also learn that Muriel's real name is Mildred and that she has changed her name and identity several times without Marlowe or the reader realizing that what appear to be different characters are, in fact, all one woman.<sup>147</sup> Mildred thus turns out to be the criminal femme fatale of the book, a dangerous murderess who is finally killed by her ex-husband, cop Al Degarmo, who is himself killed by the police in the novel's final scene.<sup>148</sup>

What distinguishes *The Lady in the Lake* from Chandler's other novels is its narrative complexity, established through the use of parallel settings, Bay City and Lake Fawn, with crimes occurring in both places; and the interplay of identities between the two women (Dove 1995: 104). Chandler sketches the criminal femme fatale through the dichotomy of absence/presence and false identities. Mildred's evasion of justice by changing her name and moving to a different place, and the fact that we do not see her as Mildred in the book, endow her with the capacity to act freely (and criminally) without facing any consequences. The novel thus demonstrates a distinct imaging of the (in)visible female agency that constitutes a running theme in Chandler's fiction.<sup>149</sup> The power that the criminal femme fatale exhibits is not direct in the sense that the reader can identify it immediately. Rather, it may only be identified retrospectively, in a

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<sup>147</sup> Given the confusion around identities and names of the women in the book, I will use "Mildred," instead of Muriel (one of the fake names she assumes) unless in quotes or otherwise needed.

<sup>148</sup> Hiney (1997: 88) shows how Chandler based *The Lady in the Lake* on a real crime that took place in Santa Monica involving a doctor named George Daley, who faced a murder trial five years after his wife allegedly committed suicide. Chandler takes the details from a front page story that claims that Daley drugged his wife and placed her in his car with the engine running to make it appear that she died from inhaling exhaust fumes. Daley, however, was acquitted as no evidence was found to convict him.

<sup>149</sup> *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), Chandler's second book, follows a similar pattern of faked identity and absent/present agency. For critical scholarship on *Farewell, My Lovely*, see Abbott (2002: 49-55), Plain (2001, chapter 2), and Knight (1980: 138-65).

second reading of the book or with the realization at the end of the narrative that it was Mildred who committed the crimes and was able to deceive everybody around her including the detective and the reader. Although the two women in the book end up dead, Chandler develops a narrative that situates the women's power in their absence. As Carl Malmgren explains:

*The Lady in the Lake* is a novel filled with wives who stray, literally or figuratively, then turn up missing. All of the wives— Crystal Kingsley, Florence Almore, Muriel Chess, Mildred Haviland— are marked and remarked as being departed, as remarkable only in their absence. (2001: 95)

The role of the detective, who is threatened by these unseen scheming women, is also important to consider in relation to the portrayal of the criminal femme fatale. As noted earlier, Marlowe battles to define and assert his masculinity and struggles to impose control. In this regard, Anthony Hoefler contends, Chandler offers a “fraught understanding of masculinity and sexual morality” as Marlowe seeks to reaffirm “a static formulation of masculinity and ascribes the status of deviance to anything outside its boundaries” (2008: 50). The absence of the woman and the power with which that absence is invested is set against the detective's thwarted attempts to solve the crime and make sense of the world. His original mission to find Crystal Kingsley, who turns out to be dead even before Marlowe starts his investigation, is an abject failure. Marlowe's efforts to untangle the mystery of two women prove futile, and the end of the book establishes an image of a powerless detective.

One device that Chandler employs to demonstrate the dynamics of the women's effective absence in relation to the detective's struggle for power is the interplay and blurring of identities. Jerry Speir suggests that “mistaken identity” is an old trick in the genre of crime fiction, but is cleverly used by Chandler so that the reader is “aghast at



his own willingness to be duped.” Chandler thus maintains the “illusion, and even to mock what he is doing, without the reader being wiser until the very end” (1981: 51). Chandler’s narratives consistently present disguised women in a “series of murderous masquerades” (Knight 2004: 120). This disguise not only adds duplicity to the qualities of the criminal femme fatale, but also extends complexity through multiple layers of identities (and, concomitantly, possible readings).<sup>150</sup> In the novel’s quest for an answer to the titular question – who is the lady in the lake? – Chandler appears to delineate something more akin to the classical detective story, where the search for the missing person is central to the plot.<sup>151</sup> However, I argue that Chandler problematizes the classical formula by negating his detective’s effort to assert power, which is an important element in classical detective fiction. The criminalization of the femme fatale also works to countermand the classical formula whereby the dynamic of the detective’s power turns on the woman’s lack of it. Hence, the two factors that capture the criminalization of woman in *The Lady in the Lake*, besides the fact that she commits murder, are the detective’s loss of power and control and the absence that in fact marks her agency. Instead of putting Mildred before the criminal justice system, as in the case of Brigid in *The Maltese Falcon*, Chandler has her killed by Degarmo, a representative of the law, though for personal reasons rather than for her crimes. The narrative therefore places the criminal femme fatale on an equal footing with her killer, as both end up dead, while also inviting a questioning of the efficacy of law and order, established with an image of an absent murderous woman that is set against a powerless detective and a dead policeman.

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<sup>150</sup> Knight (2004:120) discusses the motif of women’s disguise in relation to misogyny and the view that Chandler’s treacherous women reveal “a deep gendered set of evaluations at the core of his novels” and that the “sexist violence” of his fiction is “euphemised by the wit and vitality of the texts.”

<sup>151</sup> In this regard, Dove (1995: 104) proposes that if detective stories are to be judged in terms of their ability to mystify, *The Lady in the Lake* is Chandler’s most successful example.

Mildred is not the only woman who is absent in the novel. Crystal is another dangerous woman, although not a murderess, who is positioned as a foil to Mildred. Though we do not meet Crystal, we learn of her character through the narrations of her husband and Marlowe. Marlowe surmises “that she is young, pretty, reckless and wild. That she drinks and does dangerous things when she drinks. That she is a sucker for the men and might take up with a stranger who might turn out to be a crook” (*LL*: 13). She also enjoys financial independence: Derace Kingsley tells Marlowe that “she has her own money and plenty of it” (*LL*: 11). Her fortune, which comes from a corporation with “valuable oil leases in Texas,” establishes money as a corrupting force, a theme that runs through Chandler’s work. What is most significant here, however, is that money is what gives women in this novel the power to do what they want. Crystal “plays around” and Lavery, her boyfriend, is only one of the “playmates” that Kingsley describes. In the dysfunctional relationship between Crystal and her husband, the novel delineates the disintegration of family values by positioning the woman outside of the feminine domestic sphere.

When Bill Chess confesses that he slept with Crystal, the narrative builds the expectation of Crystal as villainess, only to discover that she was killed by another woman. Bill paints a picture of Crystal as a seductress, in contrast to his “good” wife:

she [Crystal] comes to the back door of the cabin in peekaboo pajamas so thin you can see the pink of her nipples against the cloth. And she says in her lazy, no-good voice: ‘Have a drink, Bill ... And then I take another [drink] and then I take another and then I’m in the house. And the closer I get to her the more bedroom her eyes are. (*LL*: 31-2)

At the end of the book, Bill’s confession to Marlowe reads differently – with a palpable irony – when we discover that Mildred/Muriel is the villainess who killed Crystal: thus, whereas Bill’s confession portrays Crystal as the victimizer and Mildred/Muriel as the

victim, the conclusion of the novel reveals the converse to be true. This reversal of roles between the two women sheds light on the (in)visible agency of Mildred as a criminal who is also able to deceive everybody around her. At the same time, this reversal also underpins the power of women in a narrative that interplays with identities.

This confusion in identities, moreover, blurs the boundaries between victimhood and criminality, thus opening ways to see female agency in the book through the dynamics of faked identities. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the two women apart in a physical sense: “[Crystal] is blonde like Muriel, same size, and weight, same type, almost the same colour eyes. But, brother, how different from almost then on in.” (LL: 31). The narrative intensifies this conflation by making both women threatening; Chandler makes Crystal *look like* a scheming criminal femme fatale from the outset, only to surprise his readers with her murder by another woman, the similarly dangerous Mildred. However, although Crystal is killed by Mildred, the former does not acquire the status of helpless victim. It can be argued that Crystal is a femme fatale of sorts, but not a criminal one – this role is occupied by Mildred. It is also notable that Chandler provides a “masculine good” female character who embodies an alternative to the dangerous femininity of Crystal and Mildred. Like Effie in *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Lady in the Lake*’s Adrienne Fromsett, Kingsley’s secretary, is “a neat little blonde” who wears a “steel-grey business suit ... and a man’s tie” (LL: 1). She reveals a robust moral code in her refusal of gifts from Kingsley and describes Florence Almore as “one of these slinky glittering females who laugh too much and sprawl all over their chairs, showing a great deal of leg” (LL: 94). Marlowe describes her as “no office cutie”; rather, “[s]he has brains and style.” (LL: 164). I argue that the model of harmless, “masculine” femininity that Fromsett represents exaggerates the femme fatality of Mildred and points up the transgression exemplified in the latter’s

criminal acts and her threatening hyper-femininity. The contrast between the marginal role of Fromsett and the central roles of the dangerous women (Mildred and Crystal) invites a reading of female power as a criminal femme fatale. This power seems to operate almost exclusively in the space of criminality. That is, Chandler pushes the formula of the powerful hyper-feminine criminal woman, which is also found evidently in Hammett's work, even further by making these women (in)visible in this work.

The faked identities and obfuscated lines between criminal and victim in the book ultimately point up not only "the multiplicity of evil-doers" in the novel (Rabinowitz 1995: 129), but also their shared gender. Mildred's ability to manipulate people, especially men, is closely associated with the faked identities she assumes, and ultimately permits and constitutes her criminality (we later learn from Marlowe that Mildred has in fact killed before). As Marlowe testifies, "If Muriel Chess impersonated Crystal Kingsley, she murdered her. That's elementary" (*LL*: 183). The narrative invites us to locate Mildred's agency in her unfixed identity, which gives her the liberty to act as she pleases without repercussions. Importantly, however, the reader does not apprehend this role as the action develops, because the changes in her identity occur outside of the narrative; it is only at end of the book, and via Marlowe's narration, that more about the criminal femme fatale is revealed. As Malmgren elaborates,

She [Mildred] is of course the missing link, the sole element tying together the various missing women in the novel. She in effect makes women both appear and disappear, the former by inventing them (Mrs. Fallbrook), by simply doing away with them (Mildred Haviland), or by murdering them and then replacing them (Muriel Chess, Crystal Kingsley) ....The object of Marlowe's quest is thus always absent, *unrecoverable* until she has been converted into actual object, naked and dead in the lake (Crystal Kingsley) or naked and dead on the bed (Muriel Chess). (2001: 96, my emphasis)<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Malmgren (2001: 93) examines the genre's adherence to romance through the motif of quest. This discourse is related to the treatment of Marlowe as "knight" and women as "heroines." From its very title, Malmgren maintains that *The Lady in the Lake* suggests that the detective's job is to search for and rescue

For Malmgren, Mildred does not become an “actual object” until she is a dead body. I argue, however, that it is precisely this “unrecoverable” absence that authorizes Mildred’s power. It is also important to note that Chandler builds a story that is devoid of gangsters, instead making women the principal source of threat. At the end of the story, Marlowe narrates:

She [Mildred] was a nurse, she knew how to handle things like bodies. She knew how to swim – we have it from Bill that she was a fine swimmer. And a drowned body will sink. All she had to do was guide it down into the deep water where she wanted it. There is nothing in all this beyond the powers of one woman who could swim. She did it, she dressed in Crystal Kingsley’s clothes, packed what else of hers she wanted, got into Crystal Kingsley’s car and departed. And at San Bernardino she ran into her first snag, Lavery. (*LL*: 184)

At the point when Marlowe is in a position to narrate and analyze what happened, Mildred is dead. That “[s]he did it” reveals how the detective stands in a compromised position, unable to achieve his mission to find Crystal. Because of Mildred’s (in)visibility, Marlowe is powerless in the face of the threat that she poses. Whilst the reader knows little about Mildred and does not even see her, the detective’s final narration is essentially an impotent one as he is now unable to exert any control over the actions of the criminal woman. His role is undermined, and the criminal femme fatale acquires a more powerful presence through a form of retrospective agency.

Mildred/Muriel’s absence from the novel *as herself* is important in other respects, too. She appears twice in the novel, but both times in disguise: once pretending to be Mrs. Fallbrook, Lavery’s landlady, and again at the end when she faces Marlowe as Crystal, and Marlowe confronts her with her real identity. In a key scene when Marlowe meets Mildred in Lavery’s house, both play a game with names and identities;

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a missing “heroine,” Crystal Kingsley, but the search is rendered a failure. Murder becomes meaningless, “less an act than a reaction, unmotivated and incalculable,” while the knight, Marlowe, “serves mainly to discover the bodies produced by his own quest for the truth” (95).

Marlowe introduces himself as a bill collector, while Mildred pretends to be the landlady. Marlowe's description of his interlocutor as "a slender woman of uncertain age, with untidy brown hair, a scarlet mess of a mouth, too much rouge on her cheekbones, shadowed eyes" (*LL*: 77) suggests that Mildred has indeed successfully deceived Marlowe. She also maintains an admirable level of cool collectedness given that, only moments before, she killed Lavery and left his body in the bathroom. Mildred's determination and fearlessness are contrasted against Marlowe's discredited position. This scene suggests that the language used by Chandler to describe his detective in the novel itself is at odds with his illustration in "The Simple art of Murder," where he claims that Marlowe is "the hero, he is everything" (1973: 14). Rather, the dialogue positions the woman as the dominant and in control:

Her left hand wore the brown glove I had seen on the railing. The right hand glove that matched it was wrapped around the butt of a small automatic ...

I kept on looking at the gun and not screaming.

The woman came close. When she was close enough to be confidential she pointed the gun at my stomach and said:

"All I wanted was my rent. The place seems well taken care of. Nothing broken. He has always been a good tidy careful tenant. I just didn't want him to get too far behind in the rent."

A fellow with a kind of strained and unhappy voice said politely: "How far behind is he?" (*LL*: 77-8)

When Mildred pulls the gun on Marlowe he is disempowered and helpless. She invades his space when she comes "close enough" to him and addresses him in an assertive tone, as well as adopting a position of authority as the landlady. Marlowe's meek response – as he talks about himself in the third person and seems separated from himself – exemplifies the detective's lack of mastery, which further underscores Mildred's power. His departure from the typical hardboiled persona, his "cynical

sentimentality,” is evident here and is intrinsically associated with the role of the criminal femme fatale whose authority finally trumps his own.

Mildred’s second disguised appearance, as Crystal, occurs near the end of the novel. As in the first instance, Marlowe has also assumed a false identity, this time of Derace Kingsley. On the first reading of the novel, we assume that the woman is Crystal and her apparent villainy is reinforced. On a second reading, however, the exchange between the criminal femme fatale and the detective appears highly ironic because the position and expectations of the reader shift having learned that the woman is not only not Crystal, but is indeed her murderer. When the detective recognizes that the woman before him is a con artist and confronts her, he admits that he did not do his job as a detective and that he himself was wrong about his judgments:

“You do this character very well,” I said. “This confused innocence with an undertone of hardness and bitterness. People have made a bad mistake about you. They have been thinking of you as a reckless little idiot with no brains and no control. They have been very wrong.” (*LL*: 148-9)

Marlowe’s acknowledgment that Mildred is not “a reckless little idiot” and people “have been very wrong” about her is a testimony to her power. Her response is similarly revealing: “She stared at me, lifting her eyebrows. She said nothing. Then a small smile lifted the corners of her mouth” (*LL*: 149). In this final confrontation between Marlowe and Mildred, the criminal femme fatale challenges Marlowe’s hardboiled toughness, whilst remaining uncontrollable and criminalized:

“And just what are you going to do about it?”

“You’re a cold-blooded little bitch if I ever saw one,” I said. “Do about it? Turn you over to the police naturally. It will be a pleasure.”

“I don’t think so.” She threw the words out, almost with a lilt. “You wondered why I gave you the empty gun. Why not? I had another one in my bag. Like this.” ...

I grinned. It may not have been the heartiest grin in the world, but it was a grin. (*LL*: 149-50)

Mildred jeopardizes the detective's power with her gun: he is threatened physically and his masculinity suffers under this threat. Marlowe's powerlessness is further reinforced at the end when Degarmo interferes and hits Marlowe with a blackjack; the latter wakes up to find Mildred dead. Marlowe vividly describes losing control over his body: "The gin was in my hair and eyebrows, on my chin and under my chin .... My coat was off and I was lying flat on my back beside the davenport on somebody's carpet and I was looking at a framed picture" (*LL*: 152). This image of Marlowe is important as it mirrors Mildred's dead body:

I groaned, and made a grunt out of the groan, from professional pride – what was left of it ...

Something always happens. Who had I said that to? A girl with a gun. A girl with a clear empty face and dark brown hair that had been blonde.

I looked around for her. She was still there. She was lying on the pulled-down twin bed. (*LL*: 152-3)

Mildred's naked dead body is paralleled by the vivid description of Marlowe's immobility and his lack of control. Chandler does not give his detective the upper hand even here. Mildred is dead and lying on the floor, whilst he is alive but powerless.<sup>153</sup> The "big sleep" – death – at the finale of this novel manifests the sexual signification of the woman's body. Mildred "was wearing a pair of tan stockings and nothing else. Her hair was tumbled. There were dark bruises on her throat. Her mouth was open and a swollen tongue filled it to over-flowing" (*LL*: 153). The sexual nature of Mildred's murder indicates that Marlowe treats femininity as a source of threat, and that her death is connected to her dangerous femininity: "Across her naked belly four angry scratches leered crimson red against the whiteness of flesh. Deep angry scratches, gouged out by

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<sup>153</sup> Hiney (1997: 131) describes Marlowe in this novel as "overshadowing other characters too much, and caring too little." This story therefore lacks tension because Marlowe is so disengaged and cynical that the outcome seems barely relevant to him. Merrill (1999: 9) also contends that the lack of engagement in this story accounts for its reception as one of Chandler's weaker works.



four bitter fingernails” (*LL*: 153). Chandler’s description of Mildred’s body sexualizes her even in death, the descriptions of her “naked belly” and “angry scratches” alluding to the sexual nature of the crime perpetrated against her. However, that the way her death is presented alongside Marlowe’s powerlessness problematizes a simple reading that focuses merely on the containment of the woman’s body.<sup>154</sup> Mildred’s death places her out of Marlowe’s reach and thus endows her with power even in her total absence from the scene. She is thus neither controlled nor contained.

The ending of the novel also unsettles the normative stability of law and order through the death of the corrupt cop, whose authoritative agency is transferred to Mildred through her criminalization. Indeed, *The Lady in the Lake* draws a parallel between the corrupt policeman and Mildred’s femme fatality. In this regard, David H. Richter contends that *The Lady in the Lake* departs from the pattern established in Chandler’s works after *The Big Sleep*, whereby the “grey villain has a grey counterpart on the ‘right’ side of the law” (1994: 35).<sup>155</sup> Richter asserts that Chandler’s criminal milieu is “merely the underside of the legitimate world, and that there is ultimately no real difference between them” (1994: 35). Others read the novel’s ending as imparting a “sense of Justice” (Speir 1981: 86), as Marlowe and the “disciplined, professional” police cops look down at the corrupt Degarmo’s body. To McCann, the denouement suggests that “Marlowe’s body is not crushed, that he remains a man, rather than falling amid corrupt confederated and evil women, he became part of a fellowship of decent men” (2000: 141). My reading instead focuses on Marlowe’s despondent realization of his powerlessness in the face of a corrupt world. The death of Degarmo does not enact

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<sup>154</sup> For example, Marling (1986: 102) makes the argument that sexual promiscuity is the source of all troubles in Chandler’s work, a danger that must be contained and suppressed.

<sup>155</sup> Richter suggests that this is because *The Lady in the Lake* contains no underworld gangsters and the main criminal is a policeman. Richter is correct in pointing out to the absence of gangsters in this work, yet his view neglects the fact that Degarmo is not the only criminal. Mildred’s criminality, I suggest, surpasses that of Degarmo.

justice; the final scene simply depicts a dishonest cop (Degarmo) and a dangerous woman (Mildred) united in death. This union serves to further underscore the criminalization of Mildred and in turn reinforces her power in this role.

From here, we might also note how Chandler's use of parallels, in the post-mortem unification of Degarmo and Mildred as well as the exchanging of the female characters' identities discussed above, provide a critique of legal and medical institutions.<sup>156</sup> The interrelationship between legal and medical discourses is delineated in this novel through the dubious relations between a corrupt cop, a murderous nurse and a "dope doctor." At the beginning of the novel when Marlowe tries to interview Crystal's lover, Lavery, the detective arouses the suspicions of Dr. Almore who lives opposite, and is warned off by Degarmo. The novel thus shows a corrupt policeman colluding with a crooked "dope doctor who plies the 'needle trade'" (Howe 2006: 23). The novel's criticism, through Almore's corruption, of medical discourse suggests that "the profession labors for the disease rather than cure – in other words, psychiatric medicine remains a corrupt racket like any other" (Howe 2006: 23).<sup>157</sup> It is in the context of this critique that Chandler makes his villainess, Mildred, a nurse; her first crime is killing Mrs. Almore (the doctor's wife) with an overdose of drugs. Mildred transgresses not only the medical profession, but also the boundaries of the traditional female role (that is, as carer and life-giver). This transgression, opposite to what we find in the way medical discourses are used by criminology to question the culpability of the "real" criminal women, endows the criminal femme fatale with agency. Mildred merely uses her feminine role as a nurse as a convenient gateway to the masculine realm of crime, while nevertheless maintaining her sexual appeal as a femme fatale. The use of

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<sup>156</sup> Durham (1963: 94-5) is the first to draw attention to the importance of parallels in this book, focusing particularly on its urban and rural settings. He suggests the criminalized city police are contrasted with the mountain police who "represented goodness of nature" (95).

<sup>157</sup> Richter (1994: 34) notes the recurrent motif of "dope doctors" in Chandler's fiction, beginning in *Farewell, My Lovely* and continuing in *The Lady in the Lake*, *The Long Goodbye*, and *The Little Sister*.

medical discourse in this book does not serve, therefore, to mitigate female agency as it might in other contexts, which I have explained in Chapter One. Rather than being medicalized herself, Mildred appropriates medical practice in order to commit criminal acts. The representation of medical discourse here is consistent with popular representations of the period:

Specifically we see here a profession, medicine, working against itself: providing illness instead of health, creating a lingering disease (addiction) to which it possesses the only palliatives. It may be worth mentioning that Chandler is working here in the face of the 'noble doctor' cultural imperative we see in so many popular works of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* and A. J. Cronin's *The Citadel*, plays like *Yellow Jack*, and the Doctor Kildare movies. (Richter 1994: 34).

In its critique of the medical profession, Chandler's narrative carries a transgressive potential, personified in the figure of the criminal femme fatale and manifest in the collusion of legal and medical discourses, but in a different way from the facts of medico-legal discourses that shows the use of medical knowledge to take away the criminal woman's agency, as I have also discussed in Chapter One. He thus depicts a doctor, a cop, and a nurse who are united in and by their corruption.

*The Lady in the Lake* reflects wartime disillusionment with a thoroughly corrupt system. Frank MacShane, one of Chandler's prominent biographers, correctly describes the novel as "a somber book because it concentrates on those who are caught up in the system of Southern California instead of those who direct it .... What Chandler shows us is a society of men and women trying to keep their lives together, but always under pressure and therefore susceptible to violence" (1976: 102). As we have noted above, Chandler's fourth book limns a corrupt and meaningless world which renders useless Marlowe's efforts to find the absent wife Crystal. Whilst his investigation leads him to pursue another mystery, that of Muriel/Mildred, his mission ultimately precipitates

more violence. Chandler's achievement not only lies in his corrupt world of Los Angeles, however, but also in his portrayal of gender relations. The present/absent woman is a model that Chandler tests in *Farewell, My Lovely* but masters in *The Lady in the Lake*. It is a story in which the "who" is an intriguing, but ultimately not the main, question; rather, it is the compelling interplay of the complex human motives that are outlined via dangerous and powerfully absent femininities and Marlowe's relentless but useless attempts to assert his role as a detective.

Surveying Chandler's works as an oeuvre, however, it is apparent that he provides a varied treatment of his criminal femme fatales. That is, despite the consistency of their presence in his work, Chandler plays with the visibility of women in relation to criminalization and medicalization. In the next section, I will discuss Chandler's first work *The Big Sleep* (1939). I will read the portrayal of the criminal femme fatale in *The Big Sleep* through the lens of the notion of (in)visible female agency that I have established in *The Lady in the Lake*. *The Big Sleep* manifests female agency through the narrative of two sisters: the younger Carmen is a medicalized murderess, while the older Vivian is a scheming accomplice in her sister's crimes. The book also focuses on Marlowe's relationship to a male patriarch, while the detective tries and struggles to maintain his toughness in the face of dangerous women. Examining Chandler's early novel in the following section will allow me to trace the varied imaging of Chandler's criminal femme fatales in relation to the detective.

### **3.3 "Both pretty and both wild": Accessory Agency in *The Big Sleep***

In this book, Chandler brings the criminal femme fatale to the fore, with a lot of gangsters in the background. *The Big Sleep* sees Marlowe investigate a blackmail case in the Sternwood family. He then becomes involved in the disappearance of Regan,

Vivian Sternwood's husband, who we finally learn has been killed by Carmen, Vivian's sister. The case takes complicated turns as Marlowe finds himself embroiled in the corrupt world of the General's two daughters, a world characterized by seduction, gangsters, pornography, and murder.<sup>158</sup> Both Carmen and Vivian are fully immersed in this environment. Their father, General Sternwood, describes his own daughters in damning terms that also implicate him: "Vivian is spoiled, exacting, smart and quite ruthless. Carmen is a child who likes to pull wings off flies. Neither of them has any more moral sense than a cat. Neither have I. No Sternwood ever had" (BS: 10).<sup>159</sup> The General's words establish a sense of grim anticipation about the Sternwood family which foreshadows the murders that ensue.

The novel thus presents two models of women: Carmen is a medicalized woman, an epileptic and infantile murderess who is taken away at the end of the novel, while Vivian is a powerful woman who covers for her sister's crimes and ultimately walks away with her family's money and power. The narrative fleshes out how women's agency is mobilized in relation to notions of sexual appeal and visibility. I argue that this agency is bound up in the tension between the medicalization of Carmen and the accessory role of Vivian, and the dynamics of their relationship with the detective. Although Carmen is a criminal, she does not embody the image of the criminal femme fatale. Rather, it is Vivian who manifests what I will call "accessory agency" in her role as an accomplice. *The Big Sleep* also carries the seeds of the (in)visible female agency that features compellingly in *The Lady in the Lake* through the interplay between varying degrees of women's visibility in relation their power. I will show that Vivian's accessory agency, which is positioned against Carmen's

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<sup>158</sup> Chandler published his first novel *The Big Sleep* in 1939 by developing two of his earlier short stories, "Killer in the Rain" (1935) and "The Curtain" (1936). Chandler called the process of transforming the short stories into books, which he did often, "cannibalizing." See Symons (1977: 27-29).

<sup>159</sup> All citations from *The Big Sleep* are from *The Big Sleep and Other Novels* (2000). The abbreviation BS appears before the page number in all quotes from the novel.

medicalization, is but a facet of the (in)visible female roles that Chandler delineates in his fiction.

*The Big Sleep* is set in 1930s California. The world it depicts, in Speir's words, contains "a mixed bag of corrupt cops, smug aristocrats, penny-ante grifters, rackets bosses, conceited parents, rebellious children, naïve lovers, and related narcissists—all set amidst the blasé decadence of Hollywood and California" (1981: 136).<sup>160</sup> Unlike *The Lady in the Lake* which does not feature gangsters, *The Big Sleep* is full of them. Yet Chandler's criminal femme fatales, unlike Hammett's women who are placed on a par with gangsters in his underworld, overreach and outdo the gangsters, to the extent that the source of the corruption in the novel is more clearly rooted in the Sternwood family than in the underworld around them. *The Big Sleep*, as Richter (1994: 31) suggests, is unique among Chandler's stories in terms of its plot. The multiplicity of criminals, the complicated events and the lack of a single villain are abandoned in the subsequent novels in favour of a central villain, a woman, who ends up dead by the end of the book.<sup>161</sup> The focus on the family in relation to the detective introduces, as Leonard Cassuto suggests, a sentimental element to the hardboiled novel. Marlowe is "attracted to domesticity—to families rather than detached and dangerous single women" (2009: 82).

Hence, although Chandler presents his detective in a "male fellowship" (McCann 2000: 140), Marlowe is drawn to the company of men (General Sternwood in this case), his work infuses a sentimental element into the persona of his detective that

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<sup>160</sup> Horsley (2001:37) argues that Chandler muffles his critique of American society, mainly through the use of a first person narrator, which renders Chandler's work more homogeneous than Hammett's. For more on Chandler's world, especially his interest in Los Angeles, see Lid (1989), Reck (1995), and Fine (1989/1990: 196-201). For more on the use of the first person narrator, see Phillips (2000: 19) and Lid (1989: 44-45).

<sup>161</sup> Richter's account of the plot in *The Big Sleep* is a response to Rabinowitz (1995). The latter argues that there are two aspects in *The Big Sleep* that have not been fully investigated: the "multiplicity of the evil-doers" and the central role of Eddie Mars, the main villain who goes unpunished at the end of the story.

ultimately troubles the boundaries of Marlowe's job as a detective, and highlights the threat posed to his masculinity by the dangerous women around him. Carmen can be said to embody contradictory facets of a convoluted triangle of criminality, infantilization and medicalization, challenging the boundaries between culpability (as a murderess) and victimhood (as a sufferer of epilepsy). Carmen is thus presented as epileptic, immature, and of limited education; but also as playfully flirtatious; and, in a further contrast to both of these positions, an unrepentant murderess. The second set of qualities is manifested in her first meeting with Marlowe: "When her head was against my chest she screwed it around and giggled at me. 'You're cute,' she giggled. 'I'm cute, too'" (*BS*: 5). Daniel Linder suggests that Marlowe's repeated use of the words "cute" and "giggle" "create a brutal linguistic irony that lasts in the reader's mind long after putting down the novel" (2001: 140).<sup>162</sup> Carmen's ignorance reaches comedic proportions in her failure to understand even the most commonplace cultural references:

"You came in through the key hole, just like Peter Pan?"

"Who's he?"

"Oh, just a fellow I used to know around the poolroom." (*BS*: 110)

Marlowe's relationship with Carmen can be interpreted as that of a "surrogate father," a role that implies "an incestuous overtone" (Irwin 2001: 226), which is underscored by her attempt to kill Marlowe for the very same reason that she kills her brother-in-law: he rejects her sexual advances. Irwin is correct to place Carmen's behaviour in a larger context of family corruption: "whether the sexual liaison Carmen had sought was with a brother-in-law or a father-surrogate, both bespeak that familial corruption Marlowe sensed on his first visit to the mansion and of which he has to steer clear if he is to do his job" (2001: 226). The commingling of infantility and sexuality is apparent in the

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<sup>162</sup> Linder (2001) argues that classical definitions of irony focus on dramatic rather than linguistic forms, such as when the audience knows more than the character. Linguistic irony, as advanced by Leech (1969), implies that the author is leading the reader to apprehend a textual anomaly that requires interpretation. It is this form of irony that permeates Chandler's fiction including *The Big Sleep*.

following exchange, when Carmen pulls on Marlowe a gun that he knows is loaded with blanks:

“My, but you’re cute.” [Carmen faints but soon regains consciousness]

“What happened?” she gasped.

“Nothing. Why?”

“Oh, yes, it did,” she giggled. “I wet myself.”

“They always do,” I said.

She looked at me with a sudden sick speculation and began to moan.

(*BS*: 156-7)

Carmen’s immaturity is inseparable from her criminality, but is also one of the manifestations of her medicalization, for it is used to question her culpability in the crimes she commits. In the conversation above, the use of the “childish word” “giggle” (Linder 2001:139), the fact that Carmen wets herself, and that she pulls the trigger while having an epileptic seizure demonstrate that her infantilization, criminality and medicalization are all interconnected.<sup>163</sup> The synthesis of epilepsy and immaturity not only undermines Carmen’s culpability as a murderess (reiterated by the fact that she is taken away at the end of the novel), but also underscores that her criminal acts are also presented as a manifestation of her epilepsy. Additionally, Carmen is frequently depicted sucking her thumb, a behaviour associated with children but also an invitation to sexual play, though Marlowe seems cognizant of neither of these connotations. Such oral and digital references and the erotic significance they carry “suggest [the] disorder, decay, degeneration” associated with the Sternwood family (Simpson 1991: 87).

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<sup>163</sup> Animalization is another device, besides thumb sucking and epilepsy, which is utilized to medicalize Carmen and make her sexuality even more dangerous. She is described as having “little sharp predatory teeth as white as fresh orange pith and as shiny as porcelain” and “slate-grey eyes.” Also her “hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated, become animal” (*BS*: 156). According to Marling, Carmen unites the two stereotypes common to popular fiction. She is “the blonde, a favorite sexual provocateur of American melodrama” and the “succubus” from medieval lore who is “marked by physical deformity and limited mentality” (1986: 86-87). Spinks also maintains that this animalization “exists not just beyond the boundaries of sexual propriety; her sexual ‘excess,’ which is constantly represented in her discourse, her dress, and her propensity to appear naked in strange men’s apartments, takes her in turn beyond the boundaries of the human. She is described from the earliest moments as the hybrid of an animal and an erotic automaton” (Spinks 2008: 133).



Despite her childish behaviour, Carmen is a dangerous woman who poses a serious threat to the men around her, killing Regan, shooting at her former lover Joe Brody, and attempting to kill Marlowe. At the same time, Carmen's medicalization is not as debilitating as that of Gabrielle in *The Dain Curse* – she is not merely a “naked damsel in distress” (Speir 1981: 30). The medicalized woman, an important figure in Chandler's early writing, is replaced by more lethal and dangerous women in his later works. Whereas *The Lady in the Lake* presents medical discourse via a murderous nurse who exploits her medical training to perfect her murder technique, *The Big Sleep* links Carmen's medicalization to the socio-cultural wealth and corruption of the Sternwoods, and to Marlowe's position in relation to Carmen. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Carmen's seizures always occur in Marlowe's presence, thus raising the question of whether her epilepsy is merely a misogynistic device to reveal the interrelation between medical and criminological discourses, as discussed in Chapter One.

If this is the case, how does it relate to the gender representations in the book? Chandler indulges in an “unconvincing and unprofessional seizure description” in which the fit causes Carmen to become dangerous, suggesting that Chandler's “problematic” treatment of epilepsy has been “influenced by preconceived ideas rather than facts” (Wolfe 1995: S14). The changes induced in Carmen by the seizures bring to mind some of the arguments raised in my first chapter, which show how medical discourse demonizes women through an appeal to the figure of the “madwoman.” As a credible motive for murder, then, Carmen's epilepsy does not convince, but one can say that Chandler uses epilepsy to negotiate her culpability to act with free will, especially when this act is murder.<sup>164</sup> Moreover, the argument that a woman's mental condition

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<sup>164</sup> In medical literature of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, epilepsy is treated as an aspect of mental illness. For example, Lombroso (1895), who I discuss in Chapter One, contends that epilepsy is the disease of the criminal degenerate, and that all crime is related in one way or another to

“on the verge of breakdown makes it an unsuitable site for erotic interest within the text” (Plain 2001: 62), is related to the paradoxical representation of Carmen’s agency in relation to the detective. In one respect, Carmen’s epilepsy can be taken as the means that renders her an unfit candidate for Marlowe’s desires. Yet epilepsy is also figured as an “internal monster” that unleashes sexual as well as violent excess: “Andromeda becomes Medusa” (Fontana 1995: 160). Despite the obvious misogyny that is delineated through this medicalization, Carmen still jeopardizes Marlowe’s position as a “modern knight.” As Ernest Fontana puts it: “The epileptic monster within Carmen survives, unvanquished, to darken the sun and to develop Los Angeles with intimations of death and decay, of *The Big Sleep*, which the knight’s solution of the mystery of Regan’s disappearance cannot dispel” (1995: 162). Carmen’s sexuality, along with her gun, represents a threat to the detective who can only negotiate this threat by rejecting Carmen’s advances.

Described by critics as a “nymphomaniac” (Whitley 1981: 27) and an “archetypal ‘foreign whore’” (Marling 1995: 207), Carmen is a seductress who attempts to use her sexual appeal to manipulate men, going, for example, to Marlowe’s house waiting naked for him in his bed. Marlowe uses one of his strongest weapons, tough cynicism, to reject her, telling her sarcastically that he is “the guy that keeps finding” her “without any clothes on” (*BS*: 111). Yet something else underlies Marlowe’s cynicism here. After forcing Carmen to get dressed and leave, he “savagely” tears the sheets: “The imprint of her head was still in the pillow, of her small corrupt body still on the sheets. I put my empty glass down and tore the bed to pieces savagely” (*BS*: 113). His next words are revealing: “You can have a hangover from other things than alcohol. I had one from women. *Women made me sick*” (*BS*: 113, my emphasis). A

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epilepsy. For literature from the early twentieth century on Lombroso’s theorization of epilepsy see Ellwood (1911/1912) and Harding (1918).

number of critics describe Marlowe as a misogynist, a view that might account for the representation of Carmen, and Chandler's female characters more generally, as dangerous criminals.<sup>165</sup> I argue, however, that Marlowe's vulnerability – and his realization of it – is the main motive behind the tearing of the sheets, rather than “woman-hating” as such. As Gabrielle Robinson contends, Marlowe disavows his attraction to Carmen by calling her “dope,” revealing

Marlowe's need to defuse and sanitize her surrender with the sensationalism with which he makes Carmen into a psychotic and a murderess. He does this to create a righteous and rejecting stance ... Having sensationalized Carmen, Marlowe—or is it Chandler? —refuses to consider her further. (2000: 114-5)<sup>166</sup>

Robinson's informative account of this scene is most interested in Marlowe's actions and motivations, yet if we shift our gaze to Carmen, it can be argued that she, even with her medicalization, is presented as a strong-willed woman who poses a potent challenge to the detective, and whose threat to Marlowe is manifested in the effort it takes him to maintain his toughness and keep his defences intact.

Vivian, the older daughter, is set as a foil to Carmen. Unlike Alice in *The Dain Curse*, Vivian has a noticeable presence in the book, and more significantly is an ally to Carmen, rather than, as Alice is to Gabrielle, her victimizer.<sup>167</sup> As Speir puts it, conflict between two women is a recurrent device in Chandler's work (1981: 137). Chandler presents a conflict between the two sisters on the one hand, and between them and Marlowe on the other. And because Carmen is a medicalized criminal, Vivian is

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<sup>165</sup> For example, Hartman contends that Marlowe exhibits “conventional woman-hating” (1983: 227).

<sup>166</sup> Robinson argues that the detective assumes a mediating position between desire and law, interpreting Marlowe's attack on the sheets as displaying “an equally extreme example of male hesitation as instantaneous, primitive, savage” (2000:115).

<sup>167</sup> Vivian is presented as less of a scheming and dangerous woman in Hawkes's film of *The Big Sleep* (1946) than in the book. The film also insinuates an incipient romantic relationship between Vivian and Marlowe. Willett describes this variation as a “conventional celebration of heterosexuality and all-American values” (1992: 17-8).

established as an able accomplice in the crimes her sister commits, and Vivian's agency is thus realized not only in her accessory role but also in the prospective space she occupies at the end of the narrative as a potential heir of her father. In her first interaction with Marlowe, Vivian adopts a sarcastic and condescending tone. When she tells Marlowe that she does not like his manners, he responds with detached, rather playful cynicism: "I don't mind if you don't like my manners. They're pretty bad" (*BS*: 14). In this exchange and others, Vivian is positioned as an equal to Marlowe, challenging his role as a detective as she tries to extract information from him about his business with the Sternwood family. It also displays Vivian's confidence and her ability to role-play with him whilst keeping the identity of Regan's murderer – her sister – a secret.

Vivian is no less implicated in the murders than her sister. Her decision to cover up for Carmen contributes to the four murders that consequently take place.<sup>168</sup> Vivian's decision, as Speir argues, is not born simply out of concern for her father's reputation.<sup>169</sup> Her motives conceivably also include jealousy, considering that the General showed more affection and attachment to his son-in-law, Regan, than to her, his own daughter. Moreover, Vivian wants to protect her interests in the rich family's fortune.<sup>170</sup> Her eyes remain focused on the family's money and power; thus, by keeping the family's name clean by concealing the scandal involving her sister, Vivian tries to protect her status as a prospective heir. In any case, Vivian shows composure and

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<sup>168</sup> The series of crimes in the book are: Owen Taylor, the Sternwoods' chauffeur kills Geiger out of jealousy in retaliation for the naked pictures of Carmen that Geiger had taken; Carol Lundgern, Geiger's homosexual lover, kills Joe Brody thinking that Brody killed Geiger; Canino, Eddie Mars's tough guy kills Hary Jones; and Marlowe kills Canino in self-defence.

<sup>169</sup> Vivian tells Marlowe at the end of the novel that she wants to "protect what little pride a broken and a sick man has left in his blood ... and that although his two little girls are a trifle wild ...they are not perverts or killers" (*BS*: 162).

<sup>170</sup> Hamilton suggests that while in Hammett's world, wealth corrupts relationships, in Chandler's work, it is not wealth that corrupts people but people who abuse wealth. In Chandler's world, the "means to wealth are a further reflection on the wealthy: they are dirty, demeaning or downright dishonest" (1987: 159-160).

determination as the consequences of her decision unfold. To achieve her goals and to divert Marlowe from finding Regan, Vivian resorts to her sexual appeal. Showing Marlowe some nude photos of Carmen that have been used in a blackmail ploy, she remarks: “She has a beautiful little body, hasn’t she? .... You ought to see mine” (*BS*: 44). Although Marlowe rejects Vivian’s advances as he did those of her sister, she puts Marlowe’s fortitude to the test and he seems afraid of losing control. The threat that Vivian poses to Marlowe and her awareness of the effect that she has on him reinforce her agency. Marlowe thus manifests what Robinson calls the “collision of utter surrender and brutal rejection and Marlowe’s resultant double bind of desperately wanting and not wanting, of being under the spell of an absolute opportunity and an equally absolute prohibition” (2000: 116). Ultimately, however, it is Vivian’s capacity to be Marlowe’s equal as a tough, enduring, hardboiled woman that challenges Marlowe’s authority.

Hence, one can argue that Vivian, who is implicated in all the wrongdoing that occurs in the novel while never committing a murder herself, exhibits what I have called “accessory agency.” She can also be distinguished as a prototype for Chandler’s later criminal femme fatales. That is to say, Chandler’s first work depicts two visible sisters, the medicalized Carmen is presented alongside Vivian as an accessory agent. Vivian, though not a murderess, demonstrates agency by the end of the narrative when she walks with money and power. In works that follow, such as *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Lady in the Lake*, the women are barely visible, yet the narratives invite us to read their agency through an (in)visibility that allows them not only to commit murder but thereafter to manipulate the detective and undermine his quest for knowledge. Despite this shift in Chandler’s work, one consistent component is the dangerous sexual power of criminal femme fatales and the threat that this power poses to the detective. Indeed,

*The Big Sleep* proposes an affinity between female sexual power and female criminality. The representation of the women's sexual power in this work is not only envisaged in the image of epileptic, promiscuous Carmen who poses naked for pornographic photos, but also in the scheming, intelligent female agent that is Vivian. Carmen kills when men do not meet her sexual demands; Vivian's advances towards Marlowe are also sexual. At the same time, the construction of women's sexual power in the novel is delineated within the larger context of a rich, corrupt American family in the 1930s.<sup>171</sup> The sisters' privileged background is pertinent to the way Vivian in particular demonstrates agency. The link between sexuality, criminality and family wealth in the representation of women in *The Big Sleep*, highlights women's capacity to act independently, even though, or perhaps only when, the actions that they take transgress legal and social norms. The detective's position in relation to that of the women is also significant. Commenting on Stephen Knight's contention that Marlowe rejects others to protect himself,<sup>172</sup> Robinson suggests that

the connection between women, murder, and detection is even more bewildering and problematic than Knight allows. It hints at disturbing slippages between desire and murder, which suggest that the murder of desire itself lies at the heart of Chandler's crime fiction. Detecting murder turns into a defense against desire and a justification for rejection, protecting the detective from himself becoming the victim. (2000:113)

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<sup>171</sup> Charles J. Rzepka (2000) provides a different perspective on the question of sexuality in the novel. In his remarkable article "I'm in The Business Too": Gothic Chivalry, Private Eyes, and Proxy Sex and Violence in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*" Rzepka argues that the novel shows two kinds of violence – mass cultural and commodifiable – which are indicative of chivalry: "violence of war and violence of sexual coercion" and both kinds of violence take a proxy or second hand form as in the stained-glass which ultimately make everybody take part in a "debased form of chivalric relationship" (698). Rzepka points to the fact that Chandler provides a critique of the chivalric code that keeps women tied in a stained glass window: "it is what the code has become in twentieth-century America, not the code itself" (697). And this critique of the chivalric code is part of the larger critique of the commodification of desire in a capitalistic society.

<sup>172</sup> In *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Knight (1980: 147) contends that the formulaic treatment of the hero involves anxiety about other characters, and that the creation of female and homosexual characters in Chandler neutralizes the "disturbing force" that these characters have, whilst Marlowe primarily protects himself by rejecting others.

This perspective on Marlowe's "murder of desire," which can be understood in terms of his fear of losing agency, allows us to think in turn about female agency in the book. Indeed, both Vivian and Carmen embody a threat to Marlowe's masculinity, but Chandler does not merely execute a re-masculinized denouement by taking away the murderous Carmen at the end.<sup>173</sup> What is more significant is the fact that the narrative allows Vivian to walk free without any legal consequences, despite the fact that she has a hand in both the crimes and in covering up for Carmen. As well as having accessory agency, therefore, Chandler also locates Vivian's power in the open-ended finale of the book where she is left as the prospective inheritor of her father's fortune. It is a kind of absent, (in)visible agency as far as the narrative is concerned, because we can only infer and imagine it, rather than know it directly and certainly. Vivian's power at the end of the book can be said to supersede Marlowe's detective code and his legal obligation to hand both sisters over to the police.

The fact that Marlowe does not report Carmen to the police is telling. Marlowe's proposal that Carmen be sent away comes in the form of a question, addressed to Vivian, rather than a statement: "Will you take her away? Somewhere far off from here where they can handle her type, where they keep guns and knives and fancy drinks away from her? Hell, she might get herself cured, you know. It's been done" (*BS*: 162). The most obvious, yet cursory, reading here is that which sees Carmen's dangerous sexuality as being finally contained behind the closed doors of the asylum. Alexander Howe, who suggests that the containment of the woman is typical in classical detective stories, contends that Carmen's "inhuman characterization—she remains either animal or succubus" thwarts the scepticism that Marlowe (and Chandler) shows towards the

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<sup>173</sup> It is interesting to mention that Humphrey Bogart's performance as Marlowe foregrounds his toughness while denying any vulnerability. For a comparison of Marlowe in Chandler's books versus that in the film adaptations, see Abbot (2003).

validity of any psychiatric practice. That she is “beyond his [Marlowe’s] diagnostic capabilities—and, apparently, those of contemporary medicine” necessitates “contain[ing] [her] safely elsewhere” (2006: 20). Although Howe’s reading is interesting insofar as it sheds light on the medical discourse surrounding Carmen, it fails to acknowledge the more complex dynamic between Marlowe and Vivian. Carmen’s exile creates space for Vivian and underscores the detective’s anxiety. For Marlowe to ask Vivian to take this decision places Vivian in a position of power, but also reveals that Carmen represents a threat to him that must be negated. Thus one can argue that Marlowe’s reasoning here goes beyond loyalty to the General to his own fearful reluctance to acknowledge Carmen’s power and her ability to kill.<sup>174</sup> The “isolated knightly superiority” of Marlowe, in Horsley’s words, is a “hedge against his own neurotic unease. His inner-directed, intellectualizing defensiveness in such a reading acts as a compensation for paranoid fear and inadequacy” (2001: 39). For Vivian, Carmen’s removal is the perfect means to empower herself further. With the reader’s realization at the end of the book that Vivian’s cover-up is a success, Vivian becomes even more dangerous as she walks free. A kind of prospective agency is also established for Vivian, which is negotiated through the speculative space she enters after the book ends.

The end of Chandler’s first book renders a world in which everybody is tainted, a testament, in Speir’s words, to the “failure of romance.”<sup>175</sup> The final scene sounds a note of despondency as Marlowe addresses the dead Regan in a bitterly sardonic

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<sup>174</sup> Contrary to my reading, Smith (1995: 187) attests to Marlowe’s morality and purity despite the detective’s acknowledgement that he has been infected by the Sternwoods’ “nastiness.” Smith further contends that Marlowe reconstructs his status as a knight through his relationship with the General by protecting the latter from the truth that his daughter killed Regan.

<sup>175</sup> See also Fontana (1995: 164-5) for the subversion of romance in *The Big Sleep*. Fontana points to the book as an ironic or failed irony where Marlowe achieves only textual victory.



account of the reality of death and its temptation as a way out from the “nastiness” of life:

You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that ... You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. Far more a part of it than Rusty Regan was. (*BS*: 163-4)

*The Big Sleep* thus shows Marlowe battling, and ultimately failing, to maintain his toughness and knightly persona. Dangerous women thwart the journey of the detective. He is called to save the General’s childish epileptic daughter, Carmen, but he finds out that she is in fact the perpetrator, whilst her complicit sister remains free to enjoy the family’s money and power. The only comfort Marlowe can glean from the whole affair is that Regan is safe in his “big sleep”; the novel thus shows the descent of Marlowe from “moderately optimistic knighthood to a despairing recognition of his own impotence” (Rabinowitz 1995: 125). This prevailing disillusionment is particularly entrenched in Chandler’s later novels, as we have seen in the earlier discussion of *The Lady in the Lake*.

*The Big Sleep* can thus be read as an early, partially-formed incarnation of the recipe of (in)visible agency that is more fully developed in Chandler’s wartime novels. The subsequent discussion of *The Long Goodbye* (1953), with which I conclude this chapter, will show how Chandler revisits the two-woman motif while also reworking the model of (in)visible female roles in relation to Marlowe’s loss of toughness and growing sentiment. The significance of *The Long Goodbye* for my argument lies not only in its relationship to Chandler’s first work, *The Big Sleep* (the two works have much in common, as my discussion will show), but also in its unfolding of a combination of female visibility and agency in a way that demonstrates a shift in Chandler’s treatment of women in relation to his detective. Although *The Long*

*Goodbye*, is a post-World War II novel, I wish to briefly discuss it by way of conclusion, in order to trace Chandler's development in terms of gender representation and shed light on another facet of his criminal femme fatales.

### 3.4 Conclusion: "Seen close up she was almost paralyzing": *The Long Goodbye*

Although the similarities between *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye* are striking, there is a noticeable shift in the way Chandler represents women. Thematically, the novel also intersects with *The Lady in the Lake*, which I have argued realizes most clearly the theme of (in)visible female agency in Chandler's novels. The pattern, established in *The Big Sleep*, of the old patriarch with two daughters reappears in his 1953 story, with Marlowe still striving to define and defend his position against dangerous femininities. The shift in Chandler's writing is notable in the criminal femme fatale's acquisition of greater visibility while at the same time becoming more dangerous. Her agency, however, can be read only retrospectively as the expectations of the reader are reversed through the conflation of female criminality (the question of who is the killer) and visibility (how the criminal woman *appears* in the narrative). The detective, meanwhile, displays more ambivalent (bi)sexual tendencies; Marlowe starts to manifest sentimental feelings for a male character, but goes to bed with Linda Loring, whom he marries in Chandler's last and unfinished novel *The Poodle Spring* (1959).<sup>176</sup>

The story starts with Sylvia, the wild daughter, having been murdered. Occupying the role of (in)visible woman, Sylvia dominates the narrative despite her total absence from the events, as Terry, her husband, tries to avoid being accused of her

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<sup>176</sup> Simpson comments on Marlowe's detachment and the fact that he cannot maintain long term relationships with anyone, men or women, suggesting that it is not only his distrust of women that holds him back, but also "his own vision of what a man must be –and getting intimate with another man can never be a part of that vision" (1994: 41). Simpson further argues that Marlowe is a "man of mingled sexual impulses" (47), a view that I adopt in my understanding of Marlowe's ambivalent gender relations.

murder. The other daughter, Linda, who is described as having a “fine-drawn, intense look that is sometimes neurotic, sometimes sex-hungry” (*LG*: 490)<sup>177</sup> is a married woman but cheats on her husband with Marlowe, proposing marriage to him at the end of novel – an offer he turns down. Chandler’s sixth book also presents yet another criminal femme fatale, Eileen Wade, Sylvia’s killer.<sup>178</sup> Chandler thus increases the presence of women in *The Long Goodbye* to three characters (the sisters Sylvia and Linda, and the criminal femme fatale Eileen). The criminal femme fatale in *The Long Goodbye*, unlike in Chandler’s first book, is positioned outside the circle of the two daughters. The story also departs from earlier formulas by depicting a growing bond between Marlowe and a male character, Terry Lennox, who turns out to be Eileen’s first husband. The shift in the representation of women in Chandler’s works, in terms of (in)visibility and agency, can be read in parallel to the changes that occur in Marlowe in respect to his “cynical sentimentality.” In 1939, while he was still trying to maintain his toughness and cynicism, he describes himself: as “neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn’t care who knew it” (*BS*: 3), while in 1953 he becomes more sentimental and sees himself as “a romantic ... I hear voice crying in the night and I go see what’s the matter. You don’t make a dime that way” (*LG*: 583). This shift in Marlowe affects not only the proportions between his cynicism and sentimentality (he is more vulnerable in *The Long Goodbye*), but also changes the dynamics of his interaction with women in a way that secures more power for the criminal femme fatale.

Eileen’s calculating intelligence and manipulative powers surpass those of the two sisters. She kills Sylvia brutally when the latter has an affair with Eileen’s second husband, Roger, though her identity as the murderess is not revealed until the end.

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<sup>177</sup> All references from *The Long Goodbye* are from Raymond Chandler, *Three Novels* (1993). The abbreviation *LG* appears before the page number in all quotes from the novel.

<sup>178</sup> Eileen is the first wife of Sylvia’s husband, Terry Lennox. She later kills her own second husband, Roger, who turns out to be Sylvia’s lover.

Sylvia is found “as naked as a mermaid on the bed and let me tell you he don’t recognize her by her face. She practically ain’t got one. Beat to pieces with a bronze statuette of a monkey” (LG: 397). Both the brutality of the murder and the intense suspicion aimed at Terry in the book lead us to think of the murderer as a male. The revelation of the identity of the murderer at the novel’s denouement adds a retrospective dimension to Eileen’s brutal power particularly on a second reading of the book. Yet Sylvia is not a helpless victim; she is a rich and reckless woman who has “been married five times, not including me [Terry]. Any one of them would go back at the crook of her finger. And not just for a million bucks” (LG: 391). Reminiscent of Crystal and Mildred in *The Lady in the Lake*, Chandler takes the notion of presenting a criminal femme fatale in a struggle for power with a non-criminal femme fatale even further in this book. The threat that the criminal femme fatale poses is so serious that nobody seems capable of escaping it. But it is Eileen’s *visibility* in the novel that adds another twist to the earlier formula. This visibility, however, is different from that of Carmen, the medicalized woman whom we see shooting her gun. Indeed, although we *see* Eileen in the narrative, her agency can be read only in an indirect – that is to say, retrospective – way, when the reader finally realizes that it is she who murdered Sylvia, and that she also killed her own husband, Roger. Her femme fatality and ability to deceive and manipulate are therefore not visible until the very end of the book. Moreover, Chandler changes the faked and swapped identities of *The Lady in the Lake* by making Eileen *appear* as a caring and loving wife. Hence, the fact that Sylvia, herself a femme fatale, is killed by Eileen gives the latter an even greater empowerment: as with Crystal and Mildred, the way Chandler places a criminal femme fatale (Eileen) in opposition to a non-criminal femme fatale (Sylvia) magnifies the former’s power.

As a “study of conflicting loyalties” (Ruhm 1968: 181), *The Long Goodbye* contains two plots: the first focuses on Terry Lennox and his murdered wife, Sylvia, while the second contemplates alcoholic writer Roger Wade. Eileen functions as the link between the two plots and the two men, and as such is the pivot around which the story turns. She is, moreover, a threat to Marlowe’s self-control. He kisses her once, and she invites him to sleep with her in a scene reminiscent of Carmen’s attempt at seduction by appearing naked in Marlowe’s bed. The encounter between Marlowe and Eileen is significant in revealing the sexual dynamics between the two in a way that shows a shift in Chandler’s work from his first novel in 1939 in which he rejects Carmen and resists her temptation. Yet, this shift is clearer in the light of my reading of *The Lady in the Lake*, which makes the case for how the criminal femme fatale proves the detective powerless. In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe faces Eileen’s seductive beauty and cannot resist: “When I faced her she was already falling towards me. So I caught her. I damn well had to. She pressed herself hard against me and her hair brushed my face. Her mouth came up to be kissed” (LG: 530). He admits her powerful effect on him: “Then she thrashed about and moaned. This was *murder*. I was as erotic as a stallion. I was losing control” (LG: 530, my emphasis). Marlowe thus encounters another “murder of desire,” only to be “saved” by the butler peeking in at the door. Marlowe is vulnerable here and, importantly, the woman in the later novel is not the epileptic child whom Marlowe can kick out of his bed. Hence, I take issue with Robinson’s straightforward analogization of Eileen and Carmen: “[l]ike Carmen, Eileen [is] a composite of ‘paralyzing’ beauty, psychosis, and murderousness” (2000: 123). Eileen is not medicalized like Carmen and shows far more control and determination, placing Marlowe’s self-discipline in real jeopardy. Indeed, the novel showcases the

sexual dynamics between the detective and women in a way that posits the vulnerability of the detective against the power of women.

Moreover, the narrative invites the reader to identify Eileen's agency in her eroticism. That is, her danger as a criminal femme fatale here is closely related to her beauty and her sexual allure; her eroticism gives her the means to pose a threat to those around her, including the detective. Eileen therefore has a scheming, murderous character similar to Mildred's in *The Lady in the Lake*, but is crucially far more visible. Her "paralyzing" effect is underscored by Marlowe, who also loses control: "I pulled myself together. I had been standing there off balance with my mouth open .... Seen close up she was almost paralyzing" (LG: 440).<sup>179</sup> Marlowe's vulnerability is at its most striking in this novel, and appears to operate in inverse proportion to the power of the women. Marlowe faces threats to his fortitude and composure from both Eileen and Linda. When Marlowe goes to bed with the latter, he tears at the sheets just as he did in *The Big Sleep*: "I went back up the steps and into the bedroom and pulled the bed to pieces and remade it" (LG: 648).<sup>180</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that although he is threatened by his desire, Linda "is not so much an object of paralyzing beauty, as an attractive equal, almost a tough-guy pal, an alter ego of Marlowe's friend Terry" (Robinson 2000: 124), and in this way she represents a less threatening femininity than Eileen's, and becomes more associated with the sentiment that Marlowe exhibits towards Terry,<sup>181</sup> whilst female agency is located in the dangerous femininity of Eileen,

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<sup>179</sup> Robinson suggests that Eileen "does not fit into any of Marlowe's deprecating and ironic categories of blondes" (2000:123).

<sup>180</sup> Mason (1977: 92) emphasizes the lack of eroticism in the scene in which Marlowe sleeps with Linda. Mason proposes that *The Long Goodbye* is more overtly a novel of "homosexual feeling than any of the others."

<sup>181</sup> Using Eve Sedgwick's work, Smith argues that Marlowe's "insistent heterosexuality might seem to clarify the line between homosocial and homosexual desire" (1995:185), and it is this insistence that shows Chandler's anxiety about the reception of Marlowe's male relationship as homosexual rather than homosocial. According to this reading, women have to be dangerous and threatening, and thus "homosocial commitments then become professionally sound" (186).

a murderess and a false romantic who is, in large part, responsible for the dilemmas facing Wade and Lennox. Her eroticism becomes linked to her capacity to betray. The lack of eroticism in the later encounter between Marlowe and Linda is balanced by a genuine tenderness, by the statement that, having remade the bed: ‘there was a lump of lead at the tip of my stomach’ [LG: 648]; and by the concluding remark of that chapter: ‘To say goodbye is to die a little’ [LG: 649]. (Whitley 1981: 28)

Critical scholarship on *The Long Goodbye* tackles in detail the issue of sentimentality in the book, especially as it is manifested in Marlowe’s character. For example, Jameson (1995: 72) says that sentimentality, which is visible only occasionally in the early works, is perhaps strongest in this book.<sup>182</sup> Richter also points out that if *The Long Goodbye* “has struck many readers as sentimental more than tragic, that may be because Marlowe’s emotional investment in Terry Lennox seems wilful rather than inevitable, a mistake he didn’t really have to make” (1994: 38). Marlowe, who is “supposed to be tough but there was something about the guy [Terry] that got to me” (LG: 373), reveals an ambivalence about his relationships with men in this book.<sup>183</sup> With the reader’s attention diverted to his relationship with Terry, Eileen’s role in the crimes can be seen from a different perspective at the end of the book, when Marlowe narrates what she did. In the confrontation between Marlowe and Eileen – in which he reveals that she was married to Terry (whose real name is Paul) and that she knew Roger had an affair with Sylvia, Terry’s wife – the latter remains strong-willed and implacable. She also proves her resolution and independence in rejecting Terry/Paul and refusing to go back

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<sup>182</sup> Jameson (1995: 72) significantly defines sentiment in Chandler as “the reverse and complement of this vision, [in which the honesty of the detective allows him to revise the world around him] a momentary relief from it, a compensation for it: where everything is seen in a single light, there is not much possibility of subtlety of variety of feelings to develop, there is available only the ground tonality and its opposite.”

<sup>183</sup> Some critical scholarship has proposed queer readings of Marlowe. Mason (1977) and Legman (1963) provide rather flat views of Marlowe’s sexuality, in comparison to more sophisticated studies on masculinity and hardboiled fiction, such as those of Abbott (2002 and 2003); Forter (2000); Krutnik (1991); Breu (2005) and Nyman (1997). It is important, however, to take into consideration the timing of Mason’s and Legman’s articles, both coming before the development of queer studies in later part of the twentieth century.

to him: “You ask me why I didn’t leave Roger and go back to Paul. After he had been in her arms and Roger had been in those same willing arms? No thank you. I need a little more inspiration than that” (LG: 603).

Eileen shows no shame or regret when she confesses that she spied on Roger and Sylvia: “I spied on them. I should be ashamed of that. One has to say these things. I am ashamed of nothing” (LG: 605). Eileen is in many respects, then, a consummate criminal femme fatale. Facing Marlowe, she assumes the persona of a victim; she invents a story in which Roger killed Sylvia, and in which she, as a loyal wife, tried to protect him; she puts on a convincing act that dupes the detective; and when Marlowe confronts her with the facts and details of the murders – only indirectly identifying her as the murderess of both Sylvia and Roger – she turns the accusations against him and calmly walks away:

She curled her lip at me contemptuously. “I suppose you were there,” she said scornfully.

Then she went away from us.

We watched her go. She went up the stairs slowly, moving with calm elegance. She disappeared into her room and the door closed softly but firmly behind her. Silence. (LG: 609)

Eileen’s demeanour here, in her last appearance in the novel, gives her an overt power that is contrasted against the two men letting a murderess go free as Marlowe and Roger’s literary agent, Spencer watch helplessly. The dramatic, even theatrical narration of her “disappear[ance]” into her room and the final “silence” recalls the kind of (in)visible agency with which Chandler endows some of his other criminal femme fatales. This agency can be identified, usually at the end of the book, with the shocking realization that it was she who committed the crimes and yet is permitted even greater freedom, an imagined space to elude justice and consequence. As in *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe does not hand her in to the police, as Roger’s literary agent suggests to him,



and in this case she is not “sent away” like Carmen. Even Eileen’s suicide is not very effective in terms of containment, as it is narrated by Marlowe, who we now perceive in terms of his loss of control and power. This is to say, the fact that Marlowe is the one who recounts Eileen’s suicide only brings to mind her agency against the detective’s lack of it. If anything, her final fate maintains her status as an agent: she chooses to take her own life, instead of letting others take control of her.

Chandler who makes substantial use of the femme fatale figure (Horsley 2001: 40), fluctuates on the matter of how much space he affords his female characters in relation to their agency. He starts in his first novel with visible women – Carmen is medicalized while Vivian embodies “accessory agency” – and he returns to this visibility in *The Long Goodbye*. Both *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye* focus more on Marlowe’s relationship to a male figure, General Sternwood in the former, and Terry in the latter. And although the woman in the post-war novel enjoys more agency than in Chandler’s first novel – Eileen is more treacherous than both sisters in Chandler’s first book – it is *The Lady in the Lake* that best captures Chandler’s criminalization of women and indeed the unique element of his representation, in the (in)visible female agency that grants power to the criminal femme fatale through absence and a retrospective reading of that agency. According to Woody Haut, the progression in Chandler’s work as far as his representation of gender and the dynamic of Marlowe’s relationship to women are concerned, can be understood in light of Chandler’s developing craft as a writer. I question Haut’s proposition that when Chandler grows “less complex and self-conscious” and shows more control over his narrative in his later work (1995: 78), his narratives reach “heights of cliché and misogyny” (79). To the contrary, my reading of the criminal femme fatale has shifted attention away from misogyny to a space for female power.

Indeed, I have argued in this chapter that Chandler's female characters, particularly in their (in)visible roles, are not just embodiments of misogyny. Rather, their agency is set against that of the detective, which proves these women to be truly threatening and dangerous. This trajectory that can be detected in Chandler's work also complicates the medico-legal discourses on women's criminality insofar as considering invisibility of women as equivalent to lack of power. As I have explained in Chapter One, one of the aims of feminist criminologists is to shed light on, and make women visible in, the research on women's criminality. This chapter, however, has shown that women's (in)visibility, in the sense of absence or indirectness of reading their power, can also operate as a space for female control. Moreover, Chandler's texts also do not provide masculinist narratives in the sense of asserting the detective's power and mastery at the end. Although the presence of the detective is substantial, Chandler also situates female agency in complicated relationships, faked identities, foils, and double plots. His female characters are complex creations that stretch the genre's typical stereotypes and clichés to reveal a space in which power can operate. In the following chapter on James M. Cain, I will trace another aspect of female agency, one that is located in economic power and "forbidden" sexual desires.

# 4

## Narratives of Seduction: The Criminal Femme Fatale and the “forbidden box” in James M. Cain

### 4.1 Introduction

James M. Cain did not write detective stories. He wrote stories about murder and love, ones that illustrate motives and explanations, rather than solutions, to the crimes in his works. Cain thus departs from Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler by creating narratives that are marked by a total absence of the figure of the detective. Cain’s work denotes a shift from the detective story to the crime novel or noir fiction, which places more emphasis on the world of the criminal.<sup>184</sup> Not only did Cain do away with the detective, but most of his narratives are told from the criminal’s point of view. Despite these pronounced differences in Cain’s work from both Hammett and Chandler, however, the works of the three authors do intersect in their representations of women.<sup>185</sup> They all position criminal femme fatales as key characters who ultimately challenge the male mastery and “hardboiled” masculinity of the male that is at the heart

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<sup>184</sup> Polito (2003: 15) challenges the notion that Cain was an “axial figure in the history of the crime novel.” Polito suggests that the shift in focus from the detective (Chandler, Hammett) to the criminal (David Goodis, Jim Thomson), was already underway in Hemingway’s “The Killers,” Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. In fact, the issue of genre in crime fiction and film noir has been considered problematic in terms of classification and terminology. Walker (1992) proposes subdividing noir into three main categories: detective/thriller (Hammett and Chandler), the femme fatale noir (Cain) and the paranoid noir (Cornell Woolrich). Orr (1997) emphasizes the distinction between melodrama and the femme fatale noir, considering the latter a narrative type rather than a genre; he also departs from Neale in his book *Genre* (1980) in labelling the detective/thriller genre as “crime genre” and marking the femme fatale narratives as “erotic crime.” This study veers away from the problems of categorization and labels in crime fiction and includes all three writers, Hammett, Chandler, and Cain under a general terminology of “crime fiction.”

<sup>185</sup> Irwin (2002: 255-6) discusses the similarities and differences between Hammett, Chandler and Cain, noting that all three worked as Hollywood screenwriters; set their works in California (Hammett in San Francisco, Chandler and Cain in Los Angeles); and shared the same publisher, Knopf, for most of their writing careers. However, unlike Hammett and Chandler, Cain did not have a detective in his work.

of the genre. These intersections open up a window through which to read the question of female agency in each author with which this study is concerned, despite the differences between their works.

Cain's oeuvre depicts ambitious criminal femme fatales who aspire to power and money. I will argue in this chapter that female agency in Cain's texts can be identified in the convergence of the women's desire to achieve economic success, and their sexual power that lures men into compromising situations. I will show that the economic discourse that Cain's narratives address is clearly contextualized by the Depression that ravaged the US in the 1930s, but that it is also connected to the sexual discourse that marks women with a destructive "sexual passion, a too-consuming love or an overpowering desire for material possessions" (Fine 1979: 28). Cain wrote about the breakdown of the American dream as a consequence of the Depression, addressing such themes as the chasm between reality and illusion, greed, deception, and the drive to self-fulfilment and self-actualization.<sup>186</sup> Given this range of themes, women's agency, therefore, is situated in a continuum that spans across dangerous eroticism, overweening ambition, and conflict between characters as they pursue power and control.

As noted in my previous chapters, the works of Chandler and Hammett centre upon the male detective and his ambivalent, distrustful relations to women. In contrast, Cain features prominent female characters who use sex as a weapon to fulfil their plans. They propel the narratives as instigators of the crimes, perpetrators, and seductresses who lure men into participating in or, indeed, carrying out their criminal intents. Cain's narratives take away the element of "whodunit" entirely as the reader often witnesses and even becomes an accomplice to the criminals in the narrative. Cain's work in effect reverses the process of detection and presents criminal femme fatales in action –

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<sup>186</sup> For more on the relation between the American Dream and the Depression see Fine (1979).

planning their manoeuvres, seducing their victims, and finally committing crimes. In so doing, Cain's narratives undercut the tropes of policing and the restoration of order that critics often ascribe to crime fiction in general. He achieves this effect by exploring the intersection between violence (criminal, sexual, emotional, and psychological) and illicit desire (for example, adultery and incest).

My reading of the criminal femme fatales' sexual power as key to female agency differs from much of the critical scholarship on Cain's female characters that limit them to stereotypical categories, such as the figure of the "bad" seductress. For example, Krutnik construes Cain's women as passive objects of male desire, suggesting that Cain "constructs a dominant male discourse which emphasizes aggression over tenderness, activity over passivity, the 'masculine' over the 'feminine'. This consolidation of 'masculinity' necessarily involves the elaboration of that which is transgressive" (1982: 36).<sup>187</sup> Richard Bradbury suggests that women in Cain are either "nightmarish or simply unexplainedly perverse" (1988: 94). Similarly, David Fine asserts that Cain's women are "version[s] of the familiar American bitch— a type of a long literary history who surfaces regularly in the fiction of the twenties and thirties" (1979: 28). This chapter will explore spaces that criminal femme fatales occupy in Cain's work beyond the critical scholarship's narrow imaging of the enthralling dangerous woman, hence focusing on their agency and role as essential players in the world of violence and desire limned by Cain.

In order to realize this recipe of violence and desire, Cain deploys what he calls the "love rack" – a motif that he introduces in his first novel, *The Postman Always*

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<sup>187</sup> Jenkins (1982) strongly criticizes Krutnik's article on the basis of its over-simplification, misinterpretations, and reductionism. He questions Krutnik's argument that the Cain text replaces murder and detective work with a preoccupation with sexuality and its relation to violence and disorder, and proposes that the analytical tendency to distinguish Cain from all other crime fiction authors is problematic. Instead Jenkins suggests adopting a "spectrum across which boundaries become blurred" in order to understand Cain's work (1982: 82).

*Rings Twice* (1934), and revisits repeatedly throughout his oeuvre. The term was originally suggested to Cain by his friend, Hollywood scriptwriter Vincent Lawrence, who used it vaguely to describe the ups and downs of love relationships. For Cain, however, the “love rack” assumes a more specific meaning: it refers to the “tortured passion between two people whose love by some fateful act such as a murder is turned inside out, so that they begin to hate each other as passionately as they once loved each other” (Corber 2006: 11).<sup>188</sup> Cain thus uses the “love rack” in his work to mean a love story between a man and a woman (and sometimes between two women, a mother and a daughter, as in the 1941 novel *Mildred Pierce*) in which one of the couple becomes subservient to the stronger character’s desires and ambitions. After the two unite in criminal or erotic complicity, they turn against each other, part company, and finally meet again in a disaster at the story’s denouement.

Sex and money are the primary motives behind the crimes that the lovers commit, and the stories subject them to a vicious cycle of crime and desire from which they cannot break free. According to Paul Skenazy, Cain’s characters are notable for the “fatalistic inevitability of their destinies, and the intense pressure of determinism one feels ruling their lives” (1989: 158). This insistence on “the fatality of passion” (1989: 46) relates to the dynamics between Cain’s characters, who are constructed as inseparable pairs tied to one another by passion and deadly ambition. It is notable that Cain creates pairs whose members are similar in their desire for money and power, but whose male constituent is usually defeated by his female counterpart who is more determined and scheming. As I will show, this formula changes a little with the

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<sup>188</sup>Cain in his conversation with Lawrence, which pretty much informed his choices of plot and narrative techniques, claimed that he never knew for sure what the latter meant by “love rack”: “I haven’t the faintest idea whether this is a rack on which the lovers are tortured, or something with pegs to hold the shining cloak of romance” (qtd. in Madden 1970: 60). Madden comments that Cain was trying to evaluate the response of the reader – typically sympathy – to the characters on the love rack, adding that Cain finally made the whole story into a love rack, rather than just certain scenes, so that “his lovers were to be viewed in respect to nothing but the experience itself” (1970: 60).

introduction of the mother-daughter pair in *Mildred Pierce*. In contrast to Chandler and Hammett, whose male detectives are set as a foil to the criminal femme fatale, Cain's version of this figure is closely complicit with her male counterpart. Moreover, Cain's criminal femme fatales tend to assume the triumphant role, and their agency is reinforced through the superiority of their powers over those of the male protagonists. The significance of this pairing lies in Cain's sketching of the relationship as a love story that encompasses the illicit "forbidden" desire and that leads either to crime or to the destruction of the characters:

I, so far as I can sense the pattern of my mind, write of the wish that comes true, for some reason a terrifying concept, at least to my imagination. Of course the wish must really have terror in it: just wanting a drink wouldn't quite be enough. I think my stories have some quality of the opening of the opening of *a forbidden box*, and that it is this, rather than violence, sex, or any of the other things usually cited by way of explanation, that gives them the drive so often noted. (Cain 1981: 10, my emphasis)

Cain thus describes the appeal of his works as issuing from the opening of the "forbidden box," which activates an illicit "wish" or desire that comes true. The box contains both the objects of desire and the "Furies" which "manifest themselves as the opposite, but logical, conclusion to that desire" (Bradbury 1988: 91). This notion of the "forbidden box" is central to my argument of female agency, and will be used to interrogate the slippage between desire and violence in Cain's narratives. That is, the criminal femme fatales who open up the "forbidden box" use their sexual appeal to control and manipulate men and also mobilize the power of their ambition to gain money and achieve social mobility, which eventually provides the impetus that leads to violence and crime.

Although Cain himself insisted that his use of the forbidden box motif is not simply about sex, W.M. Frohock (who dismisses Cain as a “tabloid poet”) remains unconvinced by the author’s claim:

What Pandora’s box contains invariably turns out to be sex, experienced with perfect animal intensity, sometimes with a little hint of the abnormal or the forbidden about it. And sex, so conceived, is inseparable from violence. Violence is at once associated with the sexual act itself, and made an inevitable accompaniment of anything which tends to frustrate the sexual experience .... For Cain, sex and violence are so much subjects as necessary accessories of the plot. (1950: 91)

Although Frohock establishes a link between sex and violence in Cain’s narratives as a critique, placing it in a negative framework, he does identify a major concern that governs Cain’s texts: the threat that the woman’s sexual power poses to the male character. Her eroticism (the woman as a seductress) is inextricably bound up with her criminality (the woman as an instigator and an accomplice). In other words, the woman’s desire as a subject, on the one hand, and her manipulation of the male’s desire *for her*, on the other, combine to propel the violence and simultaneously become the secret of the criminal femme fatale’s agency and power over the male. The texts’ “assertive female sexuality and female violence,” as Bradbury reveals, are both threatening and disempowering to the male narrators who would do anything in return for “momentary gain and/or sexual favours” (1988: 93). The configurations of desire and violence proposed by Cain, then, differ significantly from those of Chandler and Hammett. Cain portrays women whose transgressions entangle them with the law and the criminal justice system – the police, the courts, even the death penalty – as criminalized women who show culpability in their criminal actions. Unlike Hammett and Chandler, there is no suggestion in Cain’s writing that the criminal femme fatales might also be medicalized, that is, women who suffer from a psychological illness that takes away their agency by compelling them to behave in ways they cannot control.



With the absence of the medicalized woman, Cain's work is full of strong-willed women who use their sexual appeal to pursue their desires at any cost.

We can identify two models of female behaviour in Cain's fiction. The dominant model, the criminal femme fatale, is a ruthless woman who persuades the man to commit a crime either for or with her. Examples of this kind of female appear in *Double Indemnity* (1943) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (the latter will be discussed in this chapter). The criminal femme fatale here is the seductress whose sexuality is tied to her criminality, and she is willing to do all that she can to fulfil her dreams of success. The other, less prominent but nonetheless identifiable model of female behaviour, is characterized by a battle for agency that occurs between the dominant and subservient characters. In this case, two characters connected together as a "pair" compete for power and dominance. Love and desire is part of this struggle, and the battle over agency is not only a battle of wills, but arises from the complex love-hate relationship encapsulated in the "forbidden box." An example of this is *Mildred Pierce*, which will also be discussed in this chapter. Both of these models share the animating impulse of illicit desire that leads to transgression and crime.

*The Postman Always Rings Twice* is "characteristic of many Cain novels in its depiction of sex as enhanced vividly and palpably by the element of violence, food, drunkenness, and relatively genuine love" (Madden 1970: 77). It illustrates the interconnectedness of desire and violence, as well as that of financial gain and sexual fulfilment. The novel features Cora as a seductress who both instigates and perpetrates the murder of her husband. The connection between Cora's ambition and her sexual appeal is evident in her success in persuading Frank, her lover, to become her accomplice. *The Postman* presents the "love rack" in its most overt formulation and

indeed inaugurates a pattern of themes that governs Cain's subsequent work.<sup>189</sup> The other novel I will address in this chapter is *Mildred Pierce*. This work addresses a mother-daughter relationship, which formulates a variation of the "love rack" that propels the narrative. With Mildred and Veda competing for agency, the story portrays a complex set of dynamics that range from struggle over power, to overtones of incestuous desire and jealousy. I will conclude the chapter with an account of the film *Mildred Pierce* (1945), in which I seek to examine the implications of the film's departure from the novel in its representation of the criminal femme fatale.<sup>190</sup>

#### **4.2 *The Postman Always Rings Twice: The Criminal Femme Fatale as Seductress, Instigator, and Accomplice***

In 1927, the murder trial of Ruth Snyder, a woman from New York who killed her husband, Albert Snyder, in cooperation with her lover, Judd Gray, became a media sensation. Ruth's story, a housewife and a mother who "bobbed her hair flapper-style, danced, and drank," ended with her death in the electric chair (Polito 2003: 18). The photo of the masked Snyder at the moment of her electrocution, captured by the hidden camera of a photographer, became "one of the most famous photographs in media history" – the story of Snyder received widespread media coverage, "its narrative of sexual transgression and greed eagerly read by well over a million people each day" (Pelizzon and West 2005: 212). During the trial newspapers portrayed Gray as the weaker of the conspirators ("Putty Man"), while Ruth, as Gray testified, was a "Tiger

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<sup>189</sup> For example, *Double Indemnity* (1943) and *The Magician's Wife* (1965) employ the same pattern of the man and the woman killing the woman's husband in order to be together.

<sup>190</sup> Although this study is mainly concerned with novels, the discussion of the film here is not meant to be a digression from the generic unity of the study. Rather, it will illuminate the comparative representations of the criminal femme fatale in *Mildred Pierce*, the book and the film, and hence gestures towards the development of the criminal femme fatale in post-war American hardboiled fiction and film noir.

Woman” in bed.<sup>191</sup> In a conversation with Vincent Lawrence, Cain explained he was inspired by the “revelation” that Ruth was intending to poison her lover with a bottle of wine after killing her husband (a story which is in fact inaccurate as far as the Snyder-Gray story is concerned):

That jells the idea I’ve had for just such a story; a couple of jerks who discover that a murder, though dreadful enough morally, can be a love story too, but then wake up to discover that once they’ve pulled the thing off, no two people can share this terrible secret and live on the same earth. They turn against each other, as Judd and Ruth did. (qtd. in Hoopes 1982: 233)

The Snyder-Gray story inspired Cain to produce *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In this first novel, Cain suffuses a love story with crime, introducing the recipe of desire and violence on which so many of his later works would be based. *The Postman* presents the intertwined stories of Cora, a woman married to a small diner owner named Nick; and Frank, a drifter who is captivated by Cora’s beauty from their very first encounter. Cora manipulates the infatuated Frank into helping her kill her husband; after the deed is committed, however, they turn against each other. The story ends with Cora dead in an automobile accident and Frank on death row, ironically convicted of her “murder.” The central themes of this work are consonant with my argument in Chapter One concerning the representation of the criminal woman in criminological literature and media, namely that hardboiled crime fiction challenges the dominant discourses on women’s crime, offering a perspective that acknowledges female agency whilst at the same time recognizing the convergence between legal discourses and literary ones. That is, examining literary and legal discourses on female criminality side by side allows us

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<sup>191</sup> For more information on the Snyder-Gray case, see Kobler (1938). For more on the case in relation to Cain, see Polito (2003: 8), Marling (1995: 148-161), and Pelizzon and West (2005: 211-225). Pelizzon and West explore the relationship between tabloid journalism and film noir in their analysis of Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*.

to explore the intersections of the representations of the female criminal in both channels, and how popular writing sometimes copies, yet often challenges, critiques and contradicts the criminological data. In this way, *The Postman* provides a useful lens through which to view the female criminal who breaks the dichotomy of the “mad-bad” woman that underpins legal discourse. As a criminalized woman, Cora triumphs over the legal system and over Frank when she walks free from the trial of a crime she committed, gaining the upper hand over both her male counterpart and the legal system itself.

Cora is undoubtedly a strong-willed murderous woman who exploits Frank’s ardor for criminal ends. Cora’s relationship to Frank, though enmeshed in the cycle of sex and violence that characterizes Cain’s narratives in general, is bound to the connectedness between economic discourse (Cora’s ambition) and sexual discourse (her sexual charm and appeal which she uses to control Frank), and this connection forms the locus of her agency. But there is another aspect to Cora which complicates her character: her apparent victimhood in her unhappy marriage. That image is inspired by Ruth Snyder. Cain modelled Cora (and other female characters like Phyllis of *Double Indemnity*) according to his view of Ruth, as sexually aggressive women who are unhappily married to older men and whose dissatisfaction leads to murder. As V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy Martha West argue:

Like Cora, Ruth Snyder was presented as both a sympathetic victim and a sexually reckless temptress. Numerous tabloid articles portrayed her as a trapped housewife whose dissatisfaction with her cold and boring husband motivated her to kill .... The majority of articles, however, worked to shape Ruth into a figure of extraordinary evil who, similar to the weirdly thanatopic Phyllis, showed no signs of remorse for her slaying. Almost immediately, the tabloids christened her the ‘woman of glacial composure,’ the ‘synthetic blonde murderess,’ the ‘vampire wife,’

and in one remarkable turn of phrase, ‘Ruthless Ruth, the Viking Ice Matron of Queens Village.’ (2005: 226)<sup>192</sup>

The ambivalent view of Snyder projected in the press could equally be applied to Cora. It invites a reading that challenges the stereotypical interpretations of Cain’s female characters as simply dangerous or “evil,” and indicates the complexity of Cora’s imaging as a criminal femme fatale.<sup>193</sup> This complexity is also key to an understanding of her as a woman with agency. That is, the ambivalent and sometimes even contradictory facets of Cora’s character comprise her power and her submission, her dominance and her masochism, her family life and her business experience. But it is this multivalence that allows Cora to prevail at the end. The novel features a double representation of Cora as both a “victim” and a murderess, and the tension between these two aspects of her character becomes the space in which her agency takes shape.

Cora is a beautiful woman, but her beauty is not her only weapon. More important is the related but separate matter of her sexual appeal, which Cain treats as a uniquely “destructive force” (Bradbury 1988: 95). As a young woman, she wins a beauty contest in her Iowa hometown, and with it a trip to Hollywood, though her dreams are devastated when she discovers that her accent reveals her as a “cheap Des Moines trollop, that has as much chance in pictures as a monkey has” (*PART*: 20).<sup>194</sup> Her thwarted ambition signifies the “end of the American dream” where “the myth of the New Eden on the Coast collided head-on with the realities of the Depression” (Fine 1979: 25). One consequence of the younger Cora’s disappointment is her realization

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<sup>192</sup> Pelizzon and West (2005) cite the references from the newspapers in the quote above as follows: *Daily News*, May 8 1927, 3; *Daily News*, 17 June 1927, 2; *Daily Mirror*, 7 April 1927, 1; *Daily Mirror*, 12 April 1927, 11. Among the scholars who advocate the view that Cain was influenced by the Snyder-Gray case are Hoopes, Cain’s biographer (1982: 232-33), and Marling (1995: 148-161).

<sup>193</sup> See, for example, Madden (1970: 74-5).

<sup>194</sup> All subsequent citations from *The Postman always Rings Twice* are from *James M. Cain: Four Complete Novels* (1982), and the abbreviation *PART* will appear before the page number in all quotes from the novel.

that she cannot depend solely on her beauty in order to “be something”; rather, she must make plans to start a new life by climbing the social ladder. Hence, the beauty and sexual appeal that were objectified but finally rejected by Hollywood become important tools in the pursuit of economic mobility. And even though she marries Nick for security, she waits for the first opportunity – realized with Frank – to abandon her domestic life in order to start a new life in the masculine world of business.

From the first meeting between Frank and Cora, the dynamics of their deadly attraction are linked to a discourse of violence that swiftly develops into a murder plan. Cora opens the “forbidden box” – the wish with “terror” in it – when she seduces Frank to help her murder her husband. The obvious motive behind murdering Nick is for Cora and Frank to be together, but the implicit, more profound motive for Cora is her desire to escape her tedious life with Nick in order to realize her ambitions outside of the stultifying domestic arena. Desire, for Cora, works as a catalyst to fulfil the economic ambition that constitutes her agency; for Frank, it is by contrast the trap from which he cannot break free. The first-person narrative, told by Frank,<sup>195</sup> reveals the formula through which Cain’s story operates: the triangle of sex, violence, and consumption (especially food):

Then I saw her. She had been out back, in the kitchen, but she came in to gather up my dishes. Except for the shape, she really wasn’t any raving beauty, but she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her. (*PART: 4*)

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<sup>195</sup> The first person point of view in *The Postman* is achieved through the use of a confessional framework, the true nature of which is only revealed at the end of the novel. Frohock comments that the reader is compelled to continue reading – without realizing that it is a confession of a man in his death cell – because “we are listening to the man talk. The sentences and even the mistakes in grammar are the sentences and the mistakes of a living human voice, and catch the rhythms of vernacular speech with an authenticity” (1950: 88-9). For more on the first person narrator and confessional narrative see Skenazy (1989: 48-50, 160-3) and Bradbury (1988: 89).

What is notable here is that Frank's first encounter with Cora takes place in the kitchen, which is both associated with Cora's identity as a housewife and a cook and her rebellion against this identity. She tries to divorce the domesticity usually related to the kitchen by using this space as a site for sex and seduction. As such, Cain unites the sex drive in his characters with consumption and food in a way that places desire of and for the woman at the crux of the narrative, and thus grants Cora a central position. In *The Postman*, desire functions on multiple levels for characters, and it is through the interplay of desire as a sexual force as well as a physical one relating to food consumption that Cain, as Skenazy reveals, conflates "issues of power and authority, and sexuality, with the appetites" (1989: 25). Moreover, food is related to the economic gain to which Cora aspires via the restaurant business. References to food, which permeate the novel and indeed Cain's work broadly speaking, show the two contrasting but related positions for the woman: the kitchen and the workplace. Cora's agency becomes more apparent in the intersection of these two places – or perhaps, more accurately, in the conflict between the two. Cora eventually gives up her domestic role as a housewife and a cook in Nick's diner to be the "boss" of her own food business.

Cora's character undergoes a significant transformation in the course of the novel. I would argue that the breaking point in the narrative is the murder of Nick, after which Cora gains the upper hand by rejecting Frank's immature dreams of the "road" in favour of fulfilling her own dreams of commercial success. Cora, however, assumes a double position as the one who dominates Frank, through her role as a seductress and an instigator, and the one who demonstrates a masochistic desire: "Bite me! Bite me!" Cora tells Frank. "I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth. It was running down my neck when I carried her upstairs" (*PART*: 10). The novel in fact contains many similar instances when Cora explicitly asks for

sexual violence. Part of the ambivalent nature of Cora is that ironically, through her apparently submissive role, she gains more dominance over Frank. Frank, who feels sick and vomits when he cannot sleep with Cora, is entrapped at first sight. Her grip over him ultimately lures him into the trap of Nick's murder, and even when the pair are briefly married at the end of the novel, Cora does not lose her hold over Frank, a hold which ultimately results in Frank's conviction for her death. Therefore, Frank's desire for Cora is key to her agency. Frank's constant urge to "have" Cora (*PART*: 41) – to possess and contain her – is expressed in a traditional noir narrative of containment, but Cain twists this narrative by making Cora resist this scenario at the end of the novel, and give her space to escape another cycle of domesticity in her relationship with Frank.

Cora suggests the murder to Frank without naming it, yet she is undoubtedly the mastermind behind the crime. Cora persuades Frank not through direct exhortation, but rather, through innuendo and suggestion. We understand that Frank's sensibility mirrors Cora's, but again this is only intimated (Frohock 1950: 92). The following exchange reveals the dynamics of the relationship, and much about Cora's character:

"Do you love me so much that not anything matters?"

"Yes"

"There is one way."

"Did you say you weren't really a hell cat?"

"I said it, and I mean it. I'm not what you think I am, Frank, I want to work and be something, that's all. But you can't do it without love. Do you know that, Frank? Anyway, a woman can't. Well, I've made one mistake. And I've got to be a hell cat, just once, to fix it, but I'm not really a hell cat, Frank."

"They hang you for that"

"Not if you do it right. You're smart, Frank. I never fooled you for a minute. You'll think of a way. Plenty of them have. Don't worry. I'm not the first woman that had to turn hell cat to get out of a mess."

"He never did anything to me. He's all right."

"The hell he's all right. He stinks, I tell you. He is greasy and he stinks."

(*PART*: 14-15)



Here we can see how Cain sets up the “love rack”: the trap of Frank’s passion for Cora that leads to murder and later to destruction. Not only is she willing to fool him (inflating his ego by calling him “smart”) in order to incite him to commit the crime on her behalf, but her callous flippancy suggests she has no compunction about the act of murder itself. Frank’s hesitation is clearly balanced against Cora’s determination, a balance that is shown even more clearly during the trial. The indifference, even cruelty, with which Cora justifies her murderous intentions towards Nick – the accusation that he is dirty and greasy – if anything establishes her as a criminal femme fatale whose agency is located in her blind ambition, that drives her to do anything to fulfil her ends. Yet the totality of Cora’s ruthlessness is disrupted by a marked fragility, which is part of Cora’s aforementioned ambivalence. Her determination is unquestionable, but there are moments in the text where Cain reveals her fear and vulnerability – though she nonetheless uses these moments to make Frank do whatever she wants. For example, when her first attempt on Nick’s life fails, she spends the night crying and trembling, telling Frank, “I wasn’t any hell cat at all, then. I was just a little girl, afraid of the dark (*PART: 24*).<sup>196</sup> Yet soon after that Cora traps Frank into another murder plan. Hence, the “hell cat” metaphor that is recurrent in the book becomes a means with which to negotiate her agency, revealing the complexity of Cora’s characterization. The two sides of Cora, the entrepreneur and the criminal femme fatale, are bound together in opposition to the feminine ideal of passive domesticity during the Depression Era (when women were competing with men for jobs), and which Cain’s narrative problematizes.

The doubleness that informs the individual characters’ subjectivities is also extended to the locales in which these characters move, and the dynamics that inform

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<sup>196</sup> In this scene, Cora also plays with the words “dumb” and “smart,” telling Frank: “No, it was my fault, I was one that thought it up. You didn’t want to. *Next time* I’ll listen to you, Frank. You’re smart. You’re not dumb like I am” (*PART: 23*, my emphasis). It is clear that she is throwing bait to Frank, and although she describes herself as “dumb,” by the end of this short dialogue, she ensnares Frank into murdering her husband.

their relationships. In this sense, Cain produces oppositional parallels through which the connections between desire and violence are explored. The scene of Nick's murder presents several illuminating examples of these parallels. Cain uses the "road" in opposition to the domestic space in which Cora feels trapped. The "road" acquires significance not only as the location where the act of violence takes place, but as a contrast to the "kitchen" that is also associated with Cora, and which eventually (and perhaps ironically) becomes a site that frees Cora from her domestic life with Nick.<sup>197</sup> Cora's role as the chief perpetrator of Nick's murder is contrasted to Frank's role as an accessory. The graphic details of the murder, described by Frank, of how Nick's "head cracked, and I felt it crush, he crumpled up and curled on the seat like a cat on a sofa" (*PART*: 38), are balanced against a composed behaviour on Cora's part which shows her to be fully in control as she executes the murder plan carefully and without hesitation. Even Frank confirms her power: "We did not say anything. She knew what to do" (*PART*: 39). Once the murder has taken place, the violence of the killing is replaced by sexual violence. *The Postman* presents sexual violence and physical violence not only as another set of parallels, but as intimately interrelated, even interchangeable. Next to Nick's body, Cora and Frank make love in a scene that, according to Frohock, exploits an "extensive complex of our less praiseworthy instincts" (1950: 90).<sup>198</sup> Violence takes the form of passion, and Cora urges Frank to "Rip me! Rip me!" Frank, who describes himself as "some kind of a animal" [*sic*], surrenders to her allure: "I had to have her, if I

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<sup>197</sup> Cars and the road are dominant metaphors in Cain's narratives and at the heart of the American dream. Fine describes how Cain's characters, behind the wheels of their cars, "experience a brief, illusory sense of liberation both from the constraints of the Depression and the consequences of their acts. Fast driving provides release for his desperate people, an emotional and sexual stimulus" (1979: 26).

<sup>198</sup> Frohock dismisses *The Postman* as a "tabloid tragedy, the cheap slaughter that makes the inside pages of the thriller-press" (1950: 96). The critic also addresses the reception of the novel arguing that the book is "thoroughly immoral ... not so much because of the unpraiseworthy behaviour of the characters as because of the unpraiseworthy behavior of the reader" (98). Yet Frohock posits this book as the best example of Cain's work, describing it as "a distinguished book, certainly not for what is in it, but for the number and kind of people who read it" (88). Indeed the novel, which was banned in Boston (as was the 1937 novel *Serenade*), has received various critical responses that address the readership of the book. For more on this, see also Oates (1968) and Forter (1996 and 2000).

hung for it” (*PART*: 41). Thus, in the climax of the book, the illicit wish contained in the “forbidden box” comes true, which Cain encapsulates by dissolving what is sexual into what is violent.

From this point on, we notice a shift in the relationship between Cora and Frank. The moment at which Cora starts to exert more direct control over Frank through her sexuality and her ambition is also the moment when Frank and Cora begin to turn against each other. Hence Cora – who, we might recall, called herself “dumb” at the beginning of the story while describing Frank as “smart” – reconfigures her language and tone in order to assert her superiority over Frank: “You’ve been trying to make a bum out of me ever since you’ve known me, but you’re not going to do it. I told you, I’m not a bum. I want to be something. We stay here. We’re not going away. We take out the beer license. We amount to something” (*PART*: 78). With the “forbidden” desire now having been fulfilled and thus exhausted, the reader witnesses the increasing estrangement between Cora and Frank.<sup>199</sup> This alienation is underscored and illustrated through recourse to the aforementioned oppositional parallels that structure the novel: in this case, spatial mobility, as represented by Frank’s obsession with the “road”, versus economic stability, as represented by Cora’s dream of accomplishment in the world of business. While Frank dreams of being on the road and tries to sell it to Cora – “It’s fun, Cora. I know every twist and turn it’s got. And I know how to work it too” (*PART*: 21-22) – Cora rejects Frank’s vision, striving instead for stable commercial success.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Krutnik offers an Oedipal reading of *The Postman* that is based on the two “pulls” in Cain, the identification with the wish and its impossibility: “The incestuous phantasy – a legacy of the repression of desire effected through the Oedipus complex, in particular the repression of bisexuality and the relinquishment of the mother as love object” (1982:33). Accordingly, Cora is read as a mother to Frank, and with that transgressive desire, the failure of the wish is inevitable.

<sup>200</sup> Cora’s awareness of the hazards of the road reflects an anxiety related to her past, that the “road” leads her to the “hash house” that she found herself in after her failure in Hollywood. Cora’s anxiety about her past and the “hash house” is not unrelated to other anxieties that she demonstrates about race and class. When she first meets Frank, she strongly denies being a Mexican woman. Abbott examines in detail the racial anxieties in the book, see Abbott (2002: 97-106) and Marling (1995).

When Frank describes himself and Cora as “[j]ust a pair of tramps” (*PART*: 25), Cora retorts: “I don’t feel like no gypsy. I don’t feel like nothing” (*PART*: 26). The contrast between the discourse of mobility emblemized by the “road,” versus that of business, exemplified by the Twin Oaks Tavern diner that Cora inherits from Nick eventually gives more space for her to pursue her goals of success at the expense of Frank’s dreams of freedom and mobility.<sup>201</sup>

Nowhere is the alienation and disparity between Cora and Frank clearer than during the trial for Nick’s murder. During that scene, Cora displays an impressive control, while Frank cracks under the pressure when Sackett, the distinct attorney pushes him to sign a complaint against Cora. As the trial progresses, the pair turn inexorably against each other: “We thought we were on the top of a mountain. That wasn’t it. It’s on top of us” (*PART*: 94). Frank and Cora’s desire for one another degenerates into “claustrophobic suspicion that the other is about to confess” (Bradbury 1988: 91). Cora takes revenge against an increasingly antagonistic Frank by betraying his role in the crime. Her language, which reminds us of how she often called Frank “smart” and herself “dumb” at the beginning of the novel, changes and serves to emphasize her position of authority here:

I guess I’m pretty dumb. But I’m not that dumb. Listen, Mr. Frank Chambers. When I get through, just see how smart you are. There’s just such a thing as being too smart. (*PART*: 62)

The novel’s detailed account of the trial and the intricacies of the Cora’s and Frank’s respective testimonies remind us of the Snyder-Gray case that inspired the novel. The

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<sup>201</sup> Fine (1979: 30) suggests that the Twin Oaks Tavern, where Frank and Cora meet, make love and plot the murder, is the “consummate Depression representation of the dream, the meeting place of mobility and domesticity.” Fine also links Cain’s discourses on domesticity with those of mobility. Houses bear “ironic contrasts to the action, the ‘ordinary’ against which the ‘extraordinary’ events take place, the commonplace and domestic against which adultery, murder and extortion are played out.” In this way, Fine maintains, houses serve to show the failure and “betrayed dreams of their inhabitants” (1979: 30).

legal discourse of the courtroom is simulated with remarkable attention to detail in the novel. The trial, which is described via the language of a game – “a four-handed card game, where every player has been dealt a perfect hand” (*PART*: 65) – “saves” Cora from the death penalty, and ultimately allows her to walk free with a \$10,000 insurance policy. Cora benefits from a bargain plea in which she only gets a suspended sentence after the prosecution fails to collect enough evidence to convict her. Cora’s successful manipulation of the legal system is integral to and emblematic of her triumph over Frank. Moreover, the legal system’s failure to deliver justice also challenges conventional gender dynamics, examined in Chapter One, that favour the discourse of the male over that of the female. This legal discourse is quick to blame the woman for a criminal act but at the same time denies her agency by pathologizing her, using medical discourse to control and subordinate her to the codes of the dominant order. On the contrary, in *The Postman* Cora is acquitted from a crime she committed with full culpability, yet the narrative does not attempt to take her agency away. Rather, it is the male character who is wrongly convicted and punished for Cora’s “murder” which is no more than an accident. The ongoing conflict between Cora and Frank thus opens up ways to read disparities that are manifest in other discourses that the novel appropriates, such as legal and medical discourses and their redefinition of gender roles in relation to notions of criminality, culpability, and punishment.

The corruption of U.S. legal institutions that is manifest in Cora’s escape from justice is also linked to the machine of business. Katz, Cora’s lawyer, uses insurance companies to avoid a jail sentence for Cora when he negotiates a deal with these companies to testify that Nick’s death was a car accident stating that “if an insurance

company didn't believe she was guilty, a jury would never believe it" (*PART*: 70).<sup>202</sup> In this way, Cain shows the judiciary's "defencelessness before the machinations of the lawyers and the labyrinths of the legal system" (Bradbury 1988: 96). Fredrick Whiting both positions the insurance business in the context of the Depression, and maps its links to individual agency. He argues that the business of insurance companies, while assuaging some of the economic uncertainties of the Depression, posed a threat to individual agency, elaborating that although the insurance programs of that time "ostensibly went some way to restoring a sense of individual security, their mechanism for doing so simultaneously seemed to extend the logic of economic determinism that the crisis of the Depression had exposed" (2006: 198). By revealing what he calls the ideology of "government paternalism" brought about by the New Deal in the 1930s – an ideology that we also find its echoes in the policing and crime control programmes of the time that crime fiction addresses and, I would argue, critiques – Whiting suggests that the individual sphere (individual agency) was infiltrated by the institutionalization of business and more broadly a rather gloomy economic scene.<sup>203</sup> Although Whiting's argument is convincing in its attentiveness to economic contexts, it ignores the gender dynamics that occupy such a crucial position in Cain's narrative. *The Postman* presents a case where the economic anxieties that characterize the Depression benefit the woman

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<sup>202</sup> Sackett, the district attorney, forces Frank to sign a complaint against Cora, believing that if he arranges for Cora to be convicted for murder charges, he can then persuade Frank to file a suit against her for injuries as a consequence of the murder. In this case the two bonding companies would be "liable for every cent of their policies to satisfy that judgment" (*PART*: 68). However, Cora's lawyer Katz meets with the representatives of all three insurance companies, and cuts a deal in which the two bonding companies each put up money for the claim of the third company, which eventually agrees to pay the \$10,000 claim and represent Cora in court. At the trial, however, the representative changes his statement, and confirms Nick's death as an accident. On doing that Katz asks the guilty pleas that Cora made earlier to be withdrawn. Ultimately, the DA agrees to give Cora a six-month suspended sentence.

<sup>203</sup> It is important to note that Whiting's article (2006) examines the relation between persons and characters in Cain's *Double Indemnity*, analyzing connections between type as an "extra-literary concept" (as related to discourses of sociology and psychology) and type as a part of the genre formula (detective/crime, confessional literature). Whiting claims that *Double Indemnity* posits an opposition between types and persons.

but undermining the man. While the image of the man as the breadwinner was shaken by escalating unemployment during that time, the consequent troubling of gender roles gave women space to play with and even push the boundaries of these roles. *The Postman* presents in Cora a model of the female breadwinner who subverts the conventional gender roles through her ambition, her plans of self-fulfilment and also through her criminal acts. She thus challenges and manipulates the legal system – a criminalized woman who asserts her culpability through murder while defying the legal system and proving its failure to identify and penalize the criminal.

While Cora does triumph over the male-dominated system of the courts, however, happy endings are not an option in Cain's novels. He designs his narratives according to a formula of cycles of entrapment that lead to his characters' destruction. Cora's death in a car accident while Frank is rushing her to hospital after a miscarriage is not so much a punishment for her success, but a further trap into which Frank must inevitably fall. The ending, I suggest, also frees Cora from another cycle of domestic entrapment, after getting married to Frank and becoming pregnant with his child. Cain appears to conclude that the discourses of domesticity and success cannot be reconciled for his female character; as such, Cora must die rather than come back to her role as a wife and a mother. Cora rejected her domestic life when married to Nick, and the narrative emphasizes her attempts to assert her position in business, outside the domestic arena. The car accident alerts the reader to the illusion of Cain's world: Frank and Cora's reconciliatory trip to the ocean raises the reader's hopes for a happy ending which restores the gendered status quo through Cora's rehabilitation as a wife and mother. Of course, these hopes are immediately crushed. Not only do we finally discover that this was a confessional narrative and that Frank is telling the story from the cell where he awaits execution, but the death of Cora also rejects the conventional

familial structure. Her death at the end is not a containment of her transgressive role, but rather an expression of Cain's faithfulness to his model of the "forbidden box" and the terror of the wish therein.

We can read Cora's agency at the end of the novel through the lens of what Skenazy calls a "fatality of passion" (1989: 46). Even at her death, the narrative places her in a superior position to her doomed lover, who she continues to dominate even in death. Furthermore, Frank remains totally blind to his enslavement. In a text that offers few surprises (besides the final revelation of the text's conceit as a confession), the reader is fully cognizant that Frank is the victim of Cora's manipulation of her charms and his own desires – both those he is aware of and those that he is not. Frank denies accusations that he "subconsciously" wanted to kill Cora, instead emphasizing his uncontrollable desire and, by extension, Cora's role as a seductress and instigator: "I love her so, then, I tell you, that I would have died for her! To hell with the subconscious. I don't believe it. It's just a lot of hooley" (*PART*: 100-101). As Bradbury proposes, his denial of the role of the subconscious makes him a "victim of his own subconscious – unable to analyse his desires and therefore incapable of escaping their hold" (1988: 96).

In contrast to Chandler's novels, where the female characters do not have a marked presence in the text and yet their agency can be read retrospectively at the end of the book when the reader realizes that it was this (absent) woman who was responsible for the criminal action, Cain builds a narrative based upon clarity of motives, illustrating the crime and its consequences step by step. In this way, female agency in *The Postman* is very much realized in slow motion and the detail at the end that the narrative, which is nothing but a confession from Frank in his death cell, becomes less important than the power dynamics of the relationship between Cora and



Frank.<sup>204</sup> This clarity is necessary for the reader's comprehension of Frank's final entrapment, the one that precipitates his own death. *The Postman* thus reveals much about the general formula that Cain employs in his fiction, a formula that not only relies on the dramatization of sex, but one that exposes criminality from the criminal's perspective. Indeed *The Postman* sketches a narrative that renders crime as the central pillar on which his characterizations – and his interrogations of gender roles – are based. The centrality of the criminal's narrative foregrounds the female character as an arch manipulator of her male counterpart, inviting readings of her agency amidst themes of love, greed, lust, power, and legality. Evidence of Cora's agency can be found in Cain's reversal of the Snyder-Gray story, which dooms Frank, rather than Cora, to execution. The image of Frank at the very end of the novel hearing the guards coming to take him to the execution room is strongly reminiscent of the notorious image of Ruth Snyder at the electric chair; yet the reversal of gender is telling of how Cain's narrative opens up more space to Cora despite her death. Indeed, *The Postman* pushes female agency even further than his crime fiction contemporaries, Hammett and Chandler. Whereas Sam Spade hands Brigid to the police in *The Maltese Falcon*, and Marlowe sends Carmen away in *The Big Sleep*, Cain renders in Cora a more nuanced image, one that acknowledges her sexual power as well as the power of her ambitions to succeed financially.

### **4.3 *Mildred Pierce*: A Battle over Agency**

It is a different kind of book from any I have ever attempted ... I talk as though it were some extremely new and original departure; actually it is

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<sup>204</sup> In contrast, Frohock (1950) argues that Cain uses the confessional narrative to trick the reader into the position of potential accomplice. Forter (2000: 48-9) also analyzes in detail the position of the reader, examining the trickery that Cain uses in "our having been made to believe in our civilized superiority to the murderously unpraiseworthy, only to have that complacency shattered by the shock of excessive likeness", elaborating that "if a 'mad dog' like Frank has the capacity for so supreme an act of civility, who's to say which of his vulgar atrocities I mightn't myself be capable of?"

nothing but a straight novel, but it is new for me and considerably longer than anything I have done previously. (Cain, qtd. in Hoopes 1982: 303)

In *Mildred Pierce*, Cain departs from his first person narratives that tell a love story between a man and a woman, in order to formulate a variation of the “love rack” that occurs between two women, and which does not end in murder as the majority of Cain’s works do. *Mildred Pierce*, a longer, more ruminative book that lacks the fast-paced dialogue of *The Postman*, offers a different perspective on Cain’s gender representations. Cain’s focus in *Mildred Pierce* is not on a single woman’s quest for agency, but rather the competing imperatives of two women (Mildred and her daughter Veda) to attain the same. Like *The Postman*’s Cora, Mildred is an ambitious woman who achieves enormous success with her business. Cain charts Mildred’s metamorphosis from impoverished waitress to owner of a chain of restaurants in Los Angeles. The book also introduces a second female character, Mildred’s daughter Veda, a greedy and demanding young woman who competes with her mother for power and social mobility and is notable for her equal talents in singing and blackmail. The role of male characters, therefore, is significantly diminished.

While engaging the recurring themes of ambition, consumption, and food that characterize Cain’s fiction, *Mildred Pierce* is significant in its novel treatment of the trope of desire and violence. The narrative does not introduce violence in the form, prevalent in many of Cain’s novels, which we noted in *The Postman*: namely, the confluence of sexual violence and crime. Rather, violence in *Mildred Pierce* is more psychological and emotional than physical, embedded as it is in the unmitigated hatred Veda displays towards her mother, who adores her. It is this emotional violence that makes Veda fit the mould of the criminal femme fatale, even though she technically does not commit crime, as this section will explain in detail. *Mildred Pierce* is relevant

to this study because it provides a unique perspective on the agency most commonly exemplified by the criminal femme fatale (Veda) in the absence of the act of murder. The novel also illustrates an aspect of Cain's craft that is often overlooked in the critical scholarship: it demonstrates a case where the complexity of female-female relationship is such that the female protagonists entirely dominate the text. In this novel, Cain's female protagonist is not only the heroine but indeed the titular character. Therefore, in its dissection of the obsessive love of a mother for her daughter, the text formulates a different rendition of the "forbidden box" than the one found in the majority of Cain's narratives that delineate a male-female relationship. My reading, in its equal focus on Veda and Mildred as they compete in an entangling contest that combines love and revenge, deviates from much of the extant literary scholarship that focuses primarily on Mildred's character and does not pay much attention to Veda (including feminist criticism of the 1945 film version of *Mildred Pierce*, which I will address briefly at the end of the chapter).<sup>205</sup>

As in *The Postman*, *Mildred Pierce* situates female agency at the confluence between the woman's sexual charm and her financial ambitions, presenting a clear interaction between sexuality and money in a narrative in which both mother and daughter pursue "power and success," "those two chimeras of the Depression years" (Bradbury 1988: 90).<sup>206</sup> I argue that both Mildred and Veda exhibit agency, though Veda finally defeats her mother. The narrative favours Veda at the end, transposing any power Mildred had onto her daughter. Because the novel focuses on Mildred, her

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<sup>205</sup> The reason why feminist readings of *Mildred Pierce*, such as that of Nelson (1977), Cook (1978), Sochen (1978), Williams (1988), and Robertson (1990), focus on Mildred's character and neglect Veda is related to how these readings discuss the discourses of women's control through Mildred's story of success, which is contained and the way she is re-domesticated at the end of the film.

<sup>206</sup> Bradbury dismisses the novel as a weak work because it lacks the strength of the first person narrator and the "masculine" style of Cain (1988:91). Bradbury describes the "stylistic strength" in Cain's narrative mode as based on a "rigorous avoidance of abstraction and adjectival modification," but at the same time constituting more than just a linguistic feature. It extends to a complementary "frame of mind, an attitude" that established Cain as one of the distinguished hardboiled writers of the period (91).

successful journey and her relentless love for Veda, my reading of Veda as a criminal femme fatale is seen through the lens of Mildred's agency – the tension between Mildred and Veda informs the battle between the two to gain power. Indeed, *Mildred Pierce* illustrates the “love rack” through a maternal love story which is also a battle over agency. Although both Mildred and Veda exhibit agency in different registers, the way the narrative plays with the dynamics between the mother and daughter suggests that ultimately it is a zero-sum game that ends with one winner at the end – Veda's “win” depends on the total disenfranchisement of her mother. This battle over agency, however, witnesses a shift that takes place in the course of the novel. Mildred, who at the beginning of the novel tries to exert some control over Veda through her superior financial means, entirely loses this control once Veda achieves fame as a singer, and gains the power of public success. This renders Veda triumphant, both economically and in terms of the revenge she enacts upon her mother when she leaves with Monty at the end of the novel.

As another story set during and examining the Depression, the novel explores how an obsession with money and economic gain affects power relations, not only between the two main characters (in this case, Mildred and Veda), but also between men and women in a way that ultimately endows women with the greater agency. As Skenazy points out, the most salient element of Cain's vision of the Depression is not the job market, but the power structure between the sexes, and the way in which the “power structure of personal relations has been inverted” (1989: 69). The male characters are “feckless and deficient” (Polito 2003:19), out of work and dependent on women, who have become the breadwinners. This fact excludes men as competitors with Mildred and Veda, thus departing from a long tradition in hardboiled crime fiction which places a male character (in the case of Hammett and Chandler, a detective) as the

counterpart to a criminal femme fatale. Bert, Mildred's husband, is weaker than both his wife and daughter; in the narrative he is totally overwhelmed by Mildred and Veda. Mildred also exploits other male characters, including Wally, the family lawyer, and Monty, Mildred's lover whom she marries towards the end of the novel, to advance her own agenda. As such, the notions of self-actualization and sexual assertion on the part of Cain's female characters are inseparable not only from economic but also class anxieties. Like Cora, Mildred feels inferior due to her lack of education and unfulfilled in her work as a waitress: her first job as a waitress makes her feel like "walking to the electrical chair" (*MP*: 149).<sup>207</sup> The narrative clearly portrays class conflict in the 1930s in the dichotomy between Mildred's feelings of inferiority and Veda's high hopes of being a society girl and achieving success as an opera singer. Veda's deadly ambition surpasses that of Mildred's, despite all the success that the latter achieves. Veda's ambition to break away from her mother's world of restaurants through her music is the driving force in the narrative that, on the one hand, feeds Mildred's inferiority and her submission to her daughter, and on the other, gives Veda the space to win in the battle over agency.

From the first chapter of the novel, Cain establishes a contrast between the mother and the daughter, creating a mother who "doted" on her daughter "for her looks, her promise of talent, and her snobbery, which hinted at things superior to her own commonplace nature" (*MP*: 116). Mildred differs considerably from Cain's other female characters – she is not a criminal but a hardworking mother who loves her children while also prospering as a successful businesswoman. Mildred, however, manipulates the men in her life to get what she wants – Wally, to help her obtain the property for the restaurant, and Monty, whom she marries in the hope of re-establishing

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<sup>207</sup> All subsequent citations from *Mildred Pierce* are from *James M. Cain: Four Complete Novels* (1982), and the abbreviation *MP* will appear before the page number in all quotes from the novel.

contact with the now estranged Veda towards the end of the novel. In other words, Mildred is capable of acts that are opportunistic and serve her goals; often, she shows no guilt about such behaviour. In one such example, Mildred steals Bert's car keys after cooking for him and seducing him: "to her it was a simple matter of justice" (*MP*: 162). Mildred confronts Bert, stating "that car's mine. I'm working and I need it, and you're not, and you don't need it." (*MP*: 165).<sup>208</sup> Her rejection of domestic life after she separates from Bert clears the way for her business persona to flourish. However, it is also clear that Mildred's multiple identities as entrepreneur, mother, and seductress are connected and in fact dependent upon one another. As Skenazy explains,

Mildred the restaurateur is a direct extension of Mildred the mother and the housekeeper. Her cooking is her ego; she has made motherhood entrepreneurial. When she wants to show Monty that she is someone, she takes him to her restaurant and turns on the sign displaying her name.... Symbolically, Mildred offers her prenuptial bedroom for public consumption .... She has converted her sexuality into domesticity, and her domesticity into financial achievement. (1989: 70-1)

The novel thus positions Mildred in the crosshairs of two conflicting discourses, domesticity and maternity on the one hand and business on the other, so undermining her agency. Conversely, the narrative favours Veda by placing her outside of this dyad of oppositional discourses, endowing her with a talent (singing) that Cain correlates to notions of potency and agency, as shown in a number of Cain's novels but most vividly in *Serenade* (1937).<sup>209</sup> Veda's "miracle voice" (*MP*: 317) gives her "access to the

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<sup>208</sup> It is important to mention that *Mildred Pierce* continues Cain's interest in cars and the road as devices that give freedom to his characters. The novel presents a similar discourse of mobility and the road as *The Postman*, which implies that "physical motion is translated into social power and sexual release" (Fine 1979: 31). After her confrontation with Bert, Mildred "gave the car the gun, exactly watching the needle swing past 30, 40, and 50 ... The car was pumping something into her veins, something of pride, of arrogance, of regained self respect, that no talk, no liquor, no love, could possible give" (*MP*: 166). Freed of her dependence on her husband, Mildred, like Frank in *The Postman*, craves the "road" and the feeling of freedom that it gives her.

<sup>209</sup> In *Serenade*, singing is used as a metaphor of sexual power. It is the story of John Howard Sharp, a would-be singer who regains his lost voice and his sexual potency through Juana, a prostitute he meets in Mexico City.

mystical reservoir Cain associates with music” (Oates 1968: 116). Veda is also granted an unyielding love from her mother, which gives her an additional advantage as Veda uses this love to control Mildred and gain access to her money.<sup>210</sup> While Veda benefits from this maternal love, however, for Mildred it is akin to an illness, “twisting her painfully, like some sort of cancer” (*MP*: 311). Later in the novel, Veda is able to achieve her dreams of success and wealth, which in turn allow her to overthrow her mother’s power. Veda is as ruthless as any of Cain’s female characters, if not more so, even though she does not commit murder. She surpasses many of Cain’s female characters in “unmitigated selfishness and opportunism” (Fine 1979: 28). Even when she first appears in the novel aged eleven, Veda “moved with an erect, arrogant haughtiness that seemed comic in one so young” (*MP*: 114). She also combines a deadly ambition with sexual charm, her breasts described as “two round swelling protuberances that had appeared almost overnight in the high arching chest,” her hips endowed with a “touch of voluptuousness” (*MP*: 237). But above all she is a threatening woman; a blackmailer who feigns pregnancy in order to extort money from her boyfriend’s rich family; a scheming woman who takes advantage of everybody around her, especially Mildred, and is implacable in her pursuit of fame and money.

Mildred and Veda’s mother-daughter dynamic is “entirely S-M”, according to Polito (2003: 19). Veda takes every opportunity to hurt her mother, “enjoying the unhappiness she inflicted” (*MP*: 308), while Mildred takes this pain willingly and continues to seek her daughter’s love. Though Mildred proves to be a woman of steel will, her fatal weakness is Veda; Mildred is also a victim of her own relentless craving for her daughter’s love. Her abjection before Veda encourages the latter to master the

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<sup>210</sup> Mildred also enjoys the exclusive pleasure of listening to Veda play for her in the evenings after she returns from work. Mildred uses the word “delicious” to describe the pleasure of listening to Veda play for her, with obvious linguistic associations to food: “To have Veda play the piece about rainbows, just for her, was delicious” (*MP*: 292).

art of manipulation in order to attain more control. Such is Mildred's obsession that she prefers for Veda to be cruel to her than ignore her. "Incapable of leaving Veda alone" (*MP*: 292), Mildred becomes so accustomed to the attention – often negative – that she gets from Veda as a consequence of her daughter's financial dependence upon her that "patience, wisdom, and tolerance had almost ceased to be part of her" (*MP*: 292). In this way, Cain connects mother and daughter in ambition and manipulative behaviour, and yet makes Veda a

'better' Mildred— more in control, more ambitious, more snobbish, more sophisticated, a personification of Mildred's dreams. Mildred's obsessive love of her child is responsible for much of the child's self-absorption. Mildred wants her child to be better than herself—to achieve more, to be more famous, to rise to higher social position; Veda's accomplishments would also be Mildred's. (Skenazy 1989: 73)

The narrative presents the "forbidden box" through the complex relation between emotional violence that Veda inflicts on her mother, and an illicit desire on Mildred's part towards her daughter. There are numerous recurrent erotic references about Mildred's feelings towards Veda: "something unnatural, a little unhealthy, about the way she [Mildred] inhaled Veda's smells" (*MP*: 219), and Mildred's "mystical feeling" about her daughter's breasts, which made Mildred "think tremendously of Love, Motherhood, and similar milky concepts" (*MP*: 237). In an interview, Cain explicitly describes the relationship between Mildred and Veda as a love story: "The two lovers in that book ... are Mildred and Veda ... Mildred's so absorbed in Veda that it becomes equivalent almost of a sexual relation" (Carr 1983: 11). When Mildred knows that Veda is pregnant, she reacts with the "sick, nauseating, physical jealousy" (*MP*: 298) of a lover rather than of a mother. The clash between Mildred and Veda reaches a violent climax with a physical confrontation between the two, as Veda "mercilessly" and with a "grip like steel" repels her mother as she attempts to interfere. The clash, however, is



not only physical, but also emblemizes Veda's desire to break free from her mother's compulsive grasp, rejecting anything that stands in the way of her ambition: "as for matrimony, I beg to be excused. I'd much rather have the money" (*MP*: 307). Veda is successful in attenuating Mildred's power to the extent that the latter "back[s] down" in order to avoid "one of these scenes from which she always emerged beaten, humiliated, and hurt" (*MP*: 307).

Mildred's role in this novel is similar to that of Frank in *The Postman*. Just as Frank falls inexorably for Cora, Mildred also falls under the spell of her daughter. Although Mildred is more ambitious and more assertive than Frank with her efforts to control "all men within her orbit, and even achieve a kind of apocalyptic economic success out of the ruins of the Depression" (Oates 1968: 116), she cannot resist the constant urge to attain her daughter's love. Cain hence plays with passive versus active roles for his female characters. Veda's influence on her mother can be taken as positioning Mildred in a passive role despite the latter's leading character in the narrative, while the way in which Veda manipulates this love and uses it to fulfil her goals of fame and power grants her a more active subjectivity. Ultimately, Mildred cannot relinquish her obsessive love even as it leads to her defeat. This love empowers Veda in the context of the relationship and reinforces her agency as the domineering party, especially when she accomplishes financial independence from her mother. Therefore, Mildred's thwarted desire to gain Veda's love is the locus of the "forbidden box" that sustains Cain's formula of the impossibility of the illicit wish. As Krutnik elaborates:

The hub of the narrative is Mildred's desire to realize her illicit wish – her desire for her daughter Veda and the attempt to make the latter both the realization of her own desires and loved object. This emphasis on female desire locates the novel in the same familial-social milieu as the Hollywood melodrama, but the Mildred-Veda relationship and

Mildred's wish are pinned-down continually by the framing authorial *male* commentary, which locates the 'terror' of the wish in Mildred's attempt to take over the role of Father in relation to Veda (through the sexual and economic manipulation of men). (1982: 40, original emphasis)

The novel is full of encounters between Mildred and Veda that end with Veda's victory; in every battle against her daughter, Mildred emerges as the victim. Cain inverts what Cassuto (2009: 72) calls the "sentimental equation" – victory through defeat that calls for the rebellious daughter to learn from the loving, hardworking mother – and creates a model where Veda's victory reinforces her "cold, cruel, coarse, desire to torture her mother, to humiliate her, above everything else, to hurt her" (*MP*: 177). In chapter 5 when Veda, as a child, discovers her mother's work as a waitress, Mildred attempts to exercise her parental power: "I'm giving orders around here, not Miss Veda." She spansks Veda so hard that she is left "exhausted and Veda screamed as though demons were inside her" (*MP*: 177). Even in the wake of this violent disciplining, however, Veda "gave a soft laugh, and whispered, in sorrow rather than anger: 'A waitress.'" The young Veda cannily recognizes and exploits both Mildred's feelings of inferiority about her job and her unyielding maternal love.

She couldn't break Veda, no matter how much she beat. Veda got victory out of these struggles, she a trembling, ignoble defeat. It always came back to the same thing. She was afraid of Veda, of her snobbery, her contempt, her unbreakable spirit ... Mildred yearned for warm affection from this child, such as Bert apparently commanded. But all she got was a stagy, affected counterfeit. (*MP*: 177)

This encounter ends with Mildred trying to rationalize her desire for her daughter through their shared desire for money. Addressing her daughter, Mildred says: "now I *know* it, that from now on things are going to get better for us. So we'll have what we

want.... And it's all on account of you. Every good thing that happens is on account of you, if Mother only had a sense enough to know it" (*MP*: 179, original emphasis). Money is a common element that brings Mildred and Veda together, though it ultimately ends in the former's defeat. Later in the novel, when Mildred confronts Veda about the blackmail, pointing out that she gives her all the money she could possibly want, Veda coldly tells Mildred:

with enough money, I can get away from you, you poor, half-witted mope. From you, and your Pie Wagon, and your chickens, and your waffles, and your kitchens, and everything that smells of grease .... And from Glendale, and its dollar days, and its furniture factories, and its women that wear uniforms and its men that wear smocks. From every rotten, stinking thing that even reminds me of the place—or you. (*MP* 309)

Veda's words, reminiscent of Cora's anxiety concerning the "hash house" and the "smock," are telling evidence of the deadly ambition that drives her do whatever it takes to climb the social ladder. Her words also expand further the gap between Veda and Mildred in all their endeavours. Somewhat ironically, it is Mildred's own inexorable feelings of shame and inferiority that fuel Veda's desire for superiority. Mildred gives Veda music lessons, for example, motivated by an "almost religious conviction" (*MP*: 114) that Veda's talent will culminate in success. In some respects Mildred's behaviour can be read as a rather pathetic attempt to buy her daughter's love with money and material possessions, and, at least in the first half of the novel, Mildred succeeds to some extent.<sup>211</sup> But when Veda achieves success, both social and financial, on her own terms, Mildred is left bereft in the wake of Veda's rejection.

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<sup>211</sup> The shifting point in Mildred's career occurs in Chapter 12, when she approaches the peak of her success. She "never cooked anything herself, or put on a uniform ... and the money kept rolling in" (*MP*: 282).

The emergence of Veda's talent as an opera singer is a turning point in her relationship with her mother, especially if we consider that the success Veda gains takes place following her estrangement from Mildred as a consequence of the blackmail scam. After years of trying to play the piano, Veda discovers her singing talent, and her "miracle voice" (*MP*: 317) becomes a signifier of her agency. Veda assumes the melodramatic persona of the coloratura soprano, as her music teacher, Treviso describes: "crazy for rich pipple, all take no give, all act like a duchess, all twiddle a la valiere, all a same, every one. All borrow ten t'ousand bucks, go to Italy, study voice, never pay back money, t'ink was all friendship" (*MP*: 319). Cain presents Veda as a diva – an imperious glamorous singer who is always at the centre of attention and who is surrounded by an aura of fame and fandom. Veda ticks all the boxes as a diva icon. First she captures this image through her attractiveness and her seductive sexuality. The text presents her, since she is of young age, aware of her tempting beauty and her abilities, and we also see how she can use them to manipulate her biggest "fan," Mildred. The other distinctive feature of the diva is her willingness to have material possessions and achieve social mobility, which Veda aspires to and attains. With a sense of the dramatic, moreover, Veda masters the art of acting. As Ethan Mordden suggests, "the idea that a diva can sing without 'acting' – without expression– is as foolish as the idea that a diva can act without singing" (1984: 65).<sup>212</sup> Veda thus succeeds in controlling people around her, especially her mother, by her calculated manoeuvres.

Yet it is the voice that makes a diva of Veda. As an opera singer, Veda's voice is a talent, a natural unique gift that draws all eyes towards her. This singing voice and musicianship render Veda visible, audible and public – it signifies her agency versus

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<sup>212</sup> For more on the diva see, Mordden (1984), Christiansen (1984), and Poizat (1992). For a broader commentary on the representation of gender in opera see Smart (2000), and Joe and Theresa (2002) on the relation between opera and cinema.

Mildred's silence to her daughter's demands and unmitigated hatred for her. The narrative describes Veda's operatic voice as forceful and captivating, "so warm, rich, and vibrant that she [Mildred] began to fight off the effect it had on her" (*MP*: 315). With Veda beyond her reach, Mildred feels a strong sense of "injustice" – "it seemed unfair that that this girl, instead of being chastened by adversity, was up there, in front of the whole world, singing, and without any help from her" (*MP*: 315). The text connects singing to empowerment, thus moving away from the objectified position that is often attributed to persona of the female singer. For example, I take issue with Skenazy's reading of Veda as the most "objectified woman in all of Cain's work" (1989:78). While, for Skenazy, Veda's talent in singing makes her as an unknowable "other —the object of passion who must always remain mysterious" (1989: 78), I read Veda's talent as a source of liberation from her mother's control and enablement to achieve her ends. The text even ascribes a masculine dimension to her voice: as her music teacher says, "She sing full chest, sound like a man. I change to head tone, sound good, I t'ink, yes, 'ere is a voice. 'Ere is one voice in a million. Den I talk. I talk music, music, music" (*MP*: 320). This transgressive androgynous quality reinforces Veda's agency by combining the sexual charm that many of Cain's criminal femme fatales also possess, with a "masculine" voice that empowers her. As such, I further disagree with Skenazy's contention that Veda's singing talent "destroys the novel's illusion of realism and undermines Cain's patient development of the relations between Mildred and Veda" (1989: 78). On the contrary, Veda's singing voice is crucial to the battle of agency between Mildred and Veda in which the latter uses her voice not only to achieve fame and money but also to inflict more harm on her mother.

The moment when Mildred listens to Veda sing for the first time – when Veda's voice soars to the "dizzy heights of sound" via an impressive display of "vocal

gymnastics” (*MP*: 316) – represents the height of Veda’s agency and independence in contrast to Mildred’s powerlessness. Indeed for Mildred the moment marks the beginning of her decline; as she struggles impotently to reassert her power, she can only hope that some external event “would land the whole thing in ruin” (*MP*: 316). Mildred tries to regain her control over Veda by recourse to money, trying to convince her music teacher to charge his bills to her, stating, “I feel that her music is my responsibility” (*MP*: 317). When her request is denied, Mildred unsuccessfully tries to assert Veda’s position as her daughter: “She’s a wonderful girl,” she tells Treviso, to which he responds “No—is a wonderful singer ... De girl is lousy. She is a bitch. De singer—is not” (*MP*: 321). Here, the text dichotomizes Veda’s roles as a daughter and as a singer, underscoring Veda’s newfound independence from her mother, whose achievements she is more than capable of surpassing. This dichotomization also privileges Veda the singer over Veda the “lousy” girl. Veda’s singer persona even contrasts Veda’s persona as a “bitch.” In this way the text suggests that Veda’s voice even surpasses her sexual power, and by being a singer she enjoys even more agency than Cain’s other female characters such as Cora in *The Postman*.

Mildred nonetheless tries to fight back and have her say in the battle over agency with her daughter. She succeeds in luring Monty (Mildred’s aristocrat lover, whom Veda looks up to and is strongly attached to) into marriage, and thus using him as a conduit for her daughter’s affection, she lures Veda back into her nest – Monty’s mansion, bought with Mildred’s earnings. The peak of this wish-fulfilment is the concert scene in chapter 16 when Veda’s singing enraptures her mother so much that she feels “little quivers.” After the concert, Mildred “undresse[s] Veda, and put[s] the costume away” (*MP*: 245). The narrator uses sexually-charged language to describe this moment, calling it “the *climax* of Mildred’s life” (*MP*: 245, my emphasis). The erotic

reference here and indeed in many other passages is telling of the way the novel connects desire to power dynamics and violence. Whilst Mildred celebrates her daughter's love, the latter continues to inflict harm and assume more control over her mother. Mildred's exaltation is also the point at which her financial troubles begin; Mildred's delight at having her beloved daughter living with her again causes her to lose focus on her business and allows Veda to exhaust Mildred's financial resources. Veda, having already taken full advantage of her mother's money and love, finally tries to destroy her mother by taking her husband. The final blow to Mildred comes when she finds Veda in bed with Monty. On seeing Veda naked with her husband, Mildred attempts (though fails) to strangle her daughter. The wish-fulfilment that is realized through Veda's return to Mildred after a long period of estrangement, precipitates the tragic end of the story necessitated by Cain's recipe of the "forbidden box."

The act of strangling signifies not only Mildred's attempt to recover some of the power she has ceded to her daughter; it also symbolizes her repressed desire to destroy Veda's talent, her singing voice – the locus of her agency. Having destroyed her mother's marriage and business, Veda again proves to be ruthless, taking advantage of Mildred's actions by pretending to have lost her voice in order to break her contract; this, she hopes, will free her to secure a new one that is even more lucrative. She deals a final blow to Mildred by telling her that she is leaving with Monty. The ending of the book, which sees Mildred reunited with Bert, has been read by a number of feminist critics as the moment of Mildred's re-containment, signifying her retreat from her success as businesswoman and her return to the role of housewife.<sup>213</sup> Without discarding these readings entirely, I would like to shift the focus to the development of

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<sup>213</sup> The film's critics, in particular, paid extensive attention to the issue of social control. See, for example, Robertson (1990), Cook (1978), and Sochen (1978).

the relationship between Mildred and Veda. By the end of the book Mildred is practically destitute, and, at thirty-seven is “fat and getting a little shapeless” (*MP*: 361). Though Mildred comforts herself that her “only crime, if she had committed one, was that she had loved this girl too well” (*MP*: 362), she nonetheless affects a defiant attitude in spite of her considerable losses. The novel concludes with Mildred exclaiming “To hell with her [Veda]” (*MP*: 362), in a final rhetorical attempt to assert whatever modicum of power she has left. Unlike Frank in his death cell at the end of *The Postman*, Mildred tries to resist her desire for her daughter, in spite of the apparent futility of such a gesture – after all, it is Veda who walks away with everything: her talent, her success, and Monty.

The question we might ask at this juncture, then, is this: what are the implications of Veda’s victory over Mildred? As in *The Postman*, Cain adheres to a narrative formula: the threat of illicit desire leads to the wish-come-true that in turn leads to the downfall of the protagonist. In *Mildred Pierce*, however, Cain creates room for Veda to enjoy more power and more success. Although the critical scholarship on the book focuses on Mildred, and pays surprisingly little attention to Veda, I argue that the containment/punishment theory that critics often use to read Mildred’s fate is challenged and undermined by the presence of Veda in the narrative: a successful woman who is permitted at the end of the narrative to enjoy her youth, her success and her victory over her mother. And although sympathies tend towards Mildred given her losses, the triumph of Veda is nevertheless compelling. The ending invites a reading of Veda as a woman with agency as she exacts her revenge upon her mother, positing her own career on the loss of Mildred’s. I concur with Skenazy’s view that Veda is the “real, though unacknowledged, heroine” in the book (1989: 77). Cain himself takes pride in his creation of Veda, claiming that the



development of this child is one of the things I take pride in my writing, for she had to be credible at all times, and yet, when her ‘true’ talent is finally revealed, the reader must realize clearly and vividly believe that what he’s been a witness to is the development of an opera singer, a somewhat special breed, remote from Mildred’s world of pies, menu cards, and chefs, and utterly beyond her ability to understand. (qtd. in Hoopes 1982:309)

Cain thus creates two worlds, Mildred’s and Veda’s, and ultimately privileges the latter over the former. Mildred’s world, like Cora’s, is defined by food, sex and ambition – indeed, Mildred might be said, as Polito suggests, to amount to little more than “Cora in overdrive, a sirocco of ambition, sex, pies, alcohol, fast food chains, and inconvenient urges” (2003: 19). Mildred’s world is delineated in sharp contrast to Veda’s – one of fame and talent that allows Veda to make a claim on everything that Mildred aspired to. The narrative tells a story that posits not only two worlds but also two kinds of agency. Mildred’s success as a businesswoman is evidence that a combination of ambition and sexual charm can be a potent recipe for agency, and yet Veda’s voice combined with her manipulative character, arguably positions her as the “most hard-boiled character in the novel” (Cassuto 2009: 73). Veda displays all the attributes of the criminal femme fatale, despite the fact that she is not a murderess. She masters the art of blackmail, both in fact when she extorts money from her boyfriend, and in effect when she emotionally and psychologically manipulates her mother. In both applications, she shows more determination and ruthlessness than any of Cain’s murderesses, which goes some way to explaining why, in her representation in the film rendition of *Mildred Pierce* (1945), she *does* become a murderess.

*Mildred Pierce*, then, is more than just a story of the Depression;<sup>214</sup> it is also more than a story that depicts and, according to some commentators, endorses, the

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<sup>214</sup> For more on *Mildred Pierce* as a Depression story, see Madden (1970: 73).

social control of women. The novel offers an alternative to Mildred's failure to maintain the American dream by providing space for Veda's dream to succeed. According to James Farrell, the novel offered "the promise of a vivid, empirically grasped and well presented fictional account of the structure of American standardization," but was ultimately tainted by Cain's predilection for "cheap glamor and cynical melodrama" (1971: 84). Farrell's contention that *Mildred Pierce* "could have been a very good representative of American story; it could even have been a great one", is related to discourses surrounding the "Hollywoodizing" of Cain's texts through what Farrell calls "movietone realism" (1971: 79).<sup>215</sup> That is, *Mildred Pierce*, written as "a kind of literary movie" could have been a "poignant story" of American life and American family, but it is not. Although I agree with Farrell that *Mildred Pierce* is not just a story of a middle-class American housewife (1971: 83), as Cain suffuses the narrative with far more complex motives, I would nonetheless question elements of Farrell's reading. Cain, a major influence on post-war film noir, and a scriptwriter in Hollywood himself, is accused of "showing in his novels negative effects of the medium [film]" (Madden 1985: 38).<sup>216</sup> In what follows, I would like to engage Farrell's notion of "Hollywoodizing" Cain's narrative by examining the film rendition of *Mildred Pierce* in comparison with the original novel, with particular reference to my argument about female agency. To look at the filmic rendition of Cain's novel in the conclusion to my chapter allows a perspective to explore women's representation in both popular canons

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<sup>215</sup> Farrell (1971) argues that Cain writes his narratives in such a way that the reader does not have to follow from the first page to the last. The violence that permeates his works can be partly attributed to the fact that the novels take a similar form to films; "inasmuch as greater latitude is permitted the novelist than the scenarist, Cain's books have the appearance of greater reality than most films do." Farrell also contends that because the novels are not restrained by the Production Code, "the pattern of a Cain story can be more like patterns of real lives than can those of a motion picture. *Mildred Pierce* is no exception here, but it could have been an exception."

<sup>216</sup> Madden argues that to understand Cain and the tough-guy genre, he must be studied in relation to the movies. For more on this see Madden's chapter "Cain and the movies of the thirties and forties" (1985: 37-60).

(crime fiction and cinema), and by so doing a commentary can be made on how and why the positioning of women is less progressive in film than in fiction.

#### **4.4 Conclusion: The Cinematic Murderess: *Mildred Pierce* in Hollywood**

Directed by Michael Curtiz and featuring Joan Crawford, Ann Blyth, Jack Carson and Zachary Scott, the film *Mildred Pierce* was released on October 20<sup>th</sup> 1945. Some critics of *Mildred Pierce* read the film in relation to its release date – the end of the World War II, the return of GIs and the end of a period of unprecedented employment for American women. According to Betty Freidan (1965), this social shift precipitated the “feminine mystique,” a repressive post-war ideology that aspired to relocate women within a social domestic order.<sup>217</sup> Described as a “nasty, gratifying version of the James Cain novel about suburban grass-widowhood and the power of the native passion for money and all that money can buy” (James Agee qtd. in Sochen 1987: 7), the film lacks the complexities of the novel with regard to the relationship between Mildred and Veda. It presents a “less equivocal” version of Cain’s novel, one that is more “direct in its rendering of how family concerns have become matters of state in this new world of activist government” (Cassuto 2009: 90). Indeed, the film addresses issues of American individualism, family, class conflict, and women’s endeavours to challenge cultural codes – all interweaved into the generic form of the murder mystery.

The film departs from the novel in many ways. Firstly, the film is narrated from Mildred’s point of view; secondly, and more importantly, it creates a murderess of Veda. When Monty refuses to divorce Mildred and marry Veda instead, Veda exacts

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<sup>217</sup> For more on “the feminine mystique” see Freidan (1965). For more on the film in its historical moment see Williams (1988: 14) and Biskind (1983).

her revenge by shooting him dead.<sup>218</sup> The film does not only contrive a crime that is absent from the book, but also lends considerable screen time to the resolution of the murder mystery through the identification of the criminal. As a result of the murder, suspense – or what Farrell (1971:88) chooses to call “false suspense” – is an important element in the film, one which comes at the expense of the mother-daughter relationship. The film, in other words, reverses the clarity of motives that Cain’s novel turns upon, and introduces a story that instead centres upon the “whodunnit” question of “who killed Monty?”<sup>219</sup> The film begins with the sound of gunshots and a man (Monty) falling to the floor muttering “Mildred” as his last word. The next scene shows Mildred walking along the wharf leaning over the railing with a suggestion that she was the one who committed the murder and is now considering committing suicide. Following a policeman’s intervention, she goes to Wally’s nightclub and invites him to have a drink with her at her beach house. When they arrive, the viewer recognizes the murder scene, and the tension builds as Mildred locks Wally in the house to frame him for the murder. After he jumps out of the window to escape, two policemen discover Wally and take him in for questioning. Shortly thereafter, Mildred is also brought to the headquarters, where she starts narrating her life story, which the viewer sees in flashbacks.

It is evident that the film gives authority to police and policing discourse from the outset. The headquarters is central not only as a setting where the interrogations and confessions take place, but also as a space that brackets Mildred’s role, her story and voice within the limits of Inspector Peterson’s interrogation. The police station as a symbol of containment and control dramatizes the differences between the film and the novel on the question of female agency. The film tells the story, as Cassuto suggests, in

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<sup>218</sup> The film’s script uses the spelling “Monte” instead of “Monty” that Cain uses in the novel. Although the first version of spelling is found in a large number of the film’s critical commentaries, I will use the “Monty” as it occurs in the novel in this study for purposes of consistency.

<sup>219</sup> For more on the differences between the film and the novel, see LaValley (2008).

the form of “a quasi-therapy session with a detective acting as auditor/analyst for Mildred as she relates what happened” (2009: 91). By the end of this session the Inspector reveals the “truth” and thereby brings about justice. As such, the film introduces notions of the medicalization of women which are totally absent from the novel, and indeed Cain’s work more generally. The pathologization of women in the film, depicted here through the framework of analyst vs. analysand, is intrinsically intertwined with a twin legal framework of the detective vs. suspect, i.e. the interrogation of Mildred by the police is presented as a therapy session in which the interrogator/analyst is the one who asks the questions and Mildred is required to justify her experiences and life choices that we see in her flashbacks. In this way, the film alters the power dynamics between Mildred and Veda in a way that reinforces the defeat of both women: the criminal femme fatale, Veda, is taken away to jail at the end of the film, while Mildred, who is more domesticated than in the novel, loses everything she worked for and is pressed to reunite with her first husband, Bert.

The cinematic Veda cannot challenge the criminal justice system in the way Cora in *The Postman* does. At the end of the film, the Inspector reveals her as a guilty criminal and imposes her punishment. The film also verges on pathologizing Veda as “an outright and humanly impossible movie villainess” (Farrell 1971: 88), to the extent that the complexity of the character as she appears in the novel is lost. Veda’s manipulation of her mother’s love is “contained within the larger film noir discourse” which classifies Veda, as Pamela Robertson suggests, “as a *typical noir femme fatale*; the employment of the coded type here, within the family structure, recodes that structure and locates it within the noir universe” (1990: 49, my emphasis). To achieve this end, the filmmaker uses camera techniques and visual prompts to signal Mildred’s desire and fixation on Veda without alluding to it directly in the dialogue. Veda

accordingly becomes the object of Mildred's "masculinized" desire.<sup>220</sup> Positioning Mildred in a masculine role with subtle intimations of an incestuous subtext to her maternal love ultimately reconfigures the mother-daughter relationship; no longer engaged in a battle over agency, as we see in the novel, their relationship is recoded as "noir romantic" (Robertson 1990: 49).

This change to the plot and characterization conforms to the regulations of the Hays Office, which administered the Production Code that explicitly forbade "sex perversion, or any inference to it" (qtd. in Corber 2006: 7). The film explores Mildred's incestuous desire for Veda less explicitly than in the novel. By adding the murder, the film pushes the theme of incest, as Robert J. Corber reveals, "to the background where not all viewers would notice it" and without attracting the attention of the Production office (2006: 14). As such, the film marks not only Mildred's masculine role, but consequently allows Veda to emerge as the criminal femme fatale whose sexuality drives the narrative. As Corber elaborates:

Mildred's masculine gender presentation helps to mark her perversity, or queerness, as a mother. As a number of film scholars have shown, the studios got around the code's prohibition of the treatment of "sex perversion" by developing visual strategies that marked characters as sexually deviant while escaping the attention of the Production Code Administration (PCA). These strategies drew on an increasingly outmoded conceptual model that linked gender and sexual nonconformity. (2006:7)

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<sup>220</sup> For example, the masculine-looking suits with padded shoulders that Mildred starts wearing when she achieves success suggest her masculine gaze, and, in Corber's words "register visually the non-normativity of Mildred's gender and sexual identities" (2006: 5). Corber argues that Mildred disrupts the norms of the nuclear family and thus her masculine representation is a performance to attract the love of her daughter. Robertson also argues that Mildred's gaze is part of a larger discourse that identifies the desiring look with masculinity, and that Mildred accordingly is masculinized. In addition, Mildred's gaze "simply indicate[s] her unnaturally obsessive momism," though the family discourse, as Robertson suggests, runs deeper (1990: 48).

The ways in which the film negotiates the Mildred-Veda relationship has opened a critical debate about gender identities and politics in the film. As such, the 1945 *Mildred Pierce* occupies a central position in feminist film criticism, which addresses Mildred's attempts to disrupt the patriarchal order by trying to provide for her family, and examines how the film undercuts these attempts by re-domesticating her in the final shots of the film. The arguments made by feminist critics such as Pamela Robertson (1990), Pam Cook (1978), Andrea Walsh (1984), Janet Walker (1982), and Linda Williams (1988) attend to the gap and the consequent tension between two different discourses in the film: the past tense melodrama contained in Mildred's flashbacks, and the present tense "masculine" film noir discourse at the police station. Through this strategy the feminine voice of the film (that of Mildred, the narrator), is both circumscribed and superseded by the masculine ideology of the filmmaker. According to Robertson, this gap is "specifically and deliberately a gendered gap, one that encourages us to adopt a patriarchal point of view and deny Mildred's 'feminine' discourse its autonomy" (1990: 43).<sup>221</sup> Indeed, since Joyce Nelson's often quoted 1977 article "Mildred Pierce Reconsidered," a number of film critics have addressed different aspects of the film, focusing particularly on its depictions of social control. Nelson, for example, identifies the "false suture" of the film in the absence of the reverse shot that would reveal the identity of the murderer in the opening scene, adding that because the scene is executed in the present tense by Inspector Peterson, rather than in Mildred's flashback, the "masculine" ideology of the police and the filmmaker is privileged over Mildred's narration.

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<sup>221</sup> Robertson's (1990: 43) argument is that the film gives Mildred a "discursive mastery" that takes place in the structural gap between her narration and the filmmaker's. This structural gap operates by "juxtaposing a presumably objective, but clearly 'masculine,' image track with a female voice-over; by providing us with clues to a subtext, or unconscious level of narration, access to which is unavailable to Mildred; and by creating in the spectator a gendered division between responses of sympathy and judgment." (1990: 43).

The split structure of the film, however, reveals Veda's femme fatality that emerges out of Mildred's flashbacks. Besides the affirmation by feminist critiques that the gap between the two genres and techniques in the film operates in the service of the control of women, the same gap also points up the gender dynamics between the mother and daughter. The film does not reveal that Veda killed Monty until Mildred's last flashback, which shows Veda to be a treacherous and manipulative daughter who has been spoiled by her obsessive mother. The flashback shows how Veda manipulated Monty into having an affair with her. When Mildred arrives at the beach house to see Veda and Monty kissing, Veda says to her mother: "He never loved you. It's always been me. I got what I've wanted. Monty's going to divorce you and marry me." As soon as Mildred leaves, and Monty rejects any marriage plans (realizing that Veda has been using him to hurt her mother), Veda pulls the trigger in a jealous rage. Monty realizes Veda's treacherous nature too late, and whispers the word "Mildred" in his final breath. When Mildred returns to the beach house upon hearing the gunshots, Veda, characteristically trying to take advantage of her mother, asks the latter to save her life. Mildred's response to her daughter's plea (particularly if one remembers the first scene when she tries to commit suicide and then implicate Wally and even herself in the crime in order to save her daughter from any consequences) realizes Cain's concern with the forbidden box – the illicit desire that brings destruction at the end. In the case of the film, the destruction affects both Mildred and Veda.

Hence, the film that undercuts Mildred's voice also negates the victory the novel grants to Veda by letting her leave with Monty. Although I do not totally concur with the labelling the film as a piece of social control for women (Sochen 1978: 9), it ought to be acknowledged that the film is more conservative in its gender representations than



the novel.<sup>222</sup> Though depicting Mildred's ascendancy in the business world, the film attempts to further pathologize the transgressive sexuality that appears in the book. Indeed, the way in which the film questions Veda's culpability by locking her up in prison corroborates Horsley's suggestion that the cinematic femme fatale is generally more defeated and contained than the literary femme fatale (2001: 130). To this end, the film adds policing discourse (represented by the Inspector and the interrogation that the film leans on to solve the mystery) to Cain's recipe of emotional and psychological violence that we see more evidently in the book. This addition ultimately serves to limit the role of the female and translates the emotional violence in the relationship between Veda and Mildred into "social transgression in a way that transposes the family directly against the state" (Cassuto 2009: 91). That is, the film brings class struggle to the fore by pitting the idle aristocracy (Monty) against the hardworking middle-class (Mildred) in order to subvert the unity of the family. By focusing on this conflict that ends with Monty's murder, the film reaffirms the very middle-class values that the novel scrutinizes and criticizes. It changes Cain's story to promote an ideology that Cain himself strongly opposed.<sup>223</sup>

While the film is arguably more political than the book, it also appropriates melodrama which, in its elision with noir discourses, produces a femme fatale who is more likely to be repressed or punished for her transgressions. Some have argued that the film rendition of *Mildred Pierce* is reminiscent of earlier books that Cain wrote. The film, I suggest, has more in common with Cain's Depression-era hardboiled novels such as *The Postman*, as exemplified in the film's focus on the link between criminality and

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<sup>222</sup> According to Sochen (1978:13), the film warns "Women of America" to "know your place. Erase any ideas you may have to divorce your husband and/or enter the big, bad business world." Sochen adds that Mildred had to fail because if she "had succeeded both personally and in the business world she would have created a new social type: a career wife-mother."

<sup>223</sup> See Corber (2006: 9-10).

sexuality. Yet Cain's fictional work, including the novel *Mildred Pierce*, provides an image of female agency that is different from the one we see on the big screen. Woman's agency, which stems from the tie between her sexual power and her ambition, is reversed in the film through the introduction of the pathologized woman as a model of female identity. The film raises different possibilities for the analysis of Cain's work, affirming the imaging of the female criminal as a critical part of the genre's discourse on gender, but also extending to the larger legal and medical discourses that this study addresses. As I have shown, the ways in which the representations of the female criminal vary in legal, fictional and cinematic narratives is evidence of how these discourses interact and challenge one another, thus positioning female transgression as an effective key to the agency she exhibits.

The film *Mildred Pierce* is important not only as a site for feminist commentary on the issue of women's policing, but also because it indicates a shift in the film industry of the time. It marks the end of the "woman's film" of the 1930s and 1940s, a hybrid genre that casts a woman as the dominant character by intercalating the melodrama and the Independent Woman film,<sup>224</sup> and heralds an era of varied representations of the femme fatale in the 1950s. Indeed, the film *Mildred Pierce* informs the shifts that can be traced in the portrayal of criminal femme fatales in the post-war period and how these representations coincide with the myriad adjustments that took place in wartime and post-war American society, which my concluding chapter will hint at.

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<sup>224</sup> For more on women's film, see Sochen (1978: 9-11).

## Conclusion

Next thing I knew, I was down there with her, and we were staring in each other's eyes, and locked in each other's arms, and straining to get closer. Hell could have opened for me then, and it wouldn't have made any difference. I had to have her, if I hung for it.

I had her. (Cain *The Postman* 1982: 41)

This passage from James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is emblematic of the iconic image of the femme fatale: the dangerous siren whose sexual wiles open up the doors of Hell for the male character. Cain's description of his female characters is often read as characteristic of the language that hardboiled crime texts use to sexualize the woman's body as an "object" of the male gaze. Also, that the male character "had her" in the quotation is an example of how a number of critical readings on the femme fatale in crime fiction (but more in film noir) focus on her subjugation and objectification by the male's desire for her over-sexualized body.<sup>225</sup> As such, taking possession of the woman's body also becomes symptomatic of the entrapment, containment and enclosure of the femme fatale within the confines of the masculine. What is missing from these readings, however, is the femme fatale's power: the ways in which she uses these wiles to achieve her ambitions of success and social and economic mobility, even though, or perhaps only when, she commits criminal acts.

This thesis opens the closed doors behind which the archetype of the femme fatale is trapped and reconsiders her role in American hardboiled crime fiction. I argue that this genre presents a wide range of what I call *criminal femme fatales*, women who are equally criminal and alluring seductresses. These criminal femme fatales have the

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<sup>225</sup> As I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, the majority of critical studies address the femme fatale in film, especially film noir. For accounts that treat film noir as male-addressed and male-dominated narratives, see, for example, Krutnik (1991). For readings on the containment of the femme fatale, especially in Cain's work, see, for example Cook (1978), Sochen (1978), and Boozer (1999).

means to be the subjects of their own will and desire, and they use their sexual appeal to gain power. Consequently, I view them as women with *agency*. While not every femme fatale commits murder, the criminal femme fatales that inhabit the narratives of hardboiled crime fiction exhibit capability and culpability in their criminal actions and demonstrate such qualities as independence, determination, and calculation, enabling them to dominate the hardboiled world in which they operate. This study performs close readings of the narratives of Hammett, Chandler, and Cain in order to delineate the roles of criminal femme fatales in these authors' works. I show that the narratives of these authors do not present a single image of the femme fatale, but rather offer complex, multilayered manifestations of agency in a variety of differentiated criminal femme fatales.

This thesis thus takes up the discussions and debates around the femme fatale, but sets itself apart from a body of critical studies that focus on male characters, especially the figure of the detective, and treat the femme fatale as a cliché and/or an expression of misogyny. I take issue with the critical over-emphasis on objectification and containment of the femme fatale, and aim to reorient attention towards female agency. Surprisingly, while the femme fatale has been carefully studied in the canon of film noir, she has not been the subject of sustained critical attention in crime fiction. This study begins the process of filling this critical gap by presenting a detailed analysis of female characters in hardboiled crime fiction, identifying the criminal femme fatales as central characters who recur in the narratives of this genre. My textual analysis demonstrates that, while these novels are male-authored narratives in a genre notorious for the celebration of "hardboiled" masculinity, the criminal femme fatales therein question the mastery of the male character and ultimately break the totality of the genre as male-centred. The contribution of this study lies in offering subversive readings of

these texts and thereby understanding (criminal) femme fatales not merely as archetypes of female seduction and destructive sexuality but as women who rupture traditional notions of female transgression and containment. By so doing, the current project enters into a dialogue with an extant body of feminist scholarship<sup>226</sup> that frames the position of the femme fatale within the misogynistic confines of masculine texts. Breaking away from these confines, this study goes beyond the sexism and misogyny that can be attributed to the narratives to create the potential for a counter-reading of women's roles, a reading that circulates around female agency.

As my focus is on the criminality of femme fatales, my method of reading literary representations against criminological discourses is useful in its capacity to bring into sharper relief the contours of the criminal women in crime fiction. It also helps to rethink the issue of female criminality more widely outside the limits of traditional disciplinary divisions. Situating medico-legal discourses alongside literary ones, I illustrate the intersections between the different discourses that contribute to the creation and construction of images of the criminal woman. These intersections enable my reading of literary criminal femme fatales as agents who depart in important ways from dominant discourses in the study of women's crime. I do not, however, conceive of a model of female criminality or a prefigured type of female criminal behaviour that I apply to the literary representations in crime fiction. Rather, the incongruities and inconsistencies between medico-legal and literary portrayals of the female criminal illuminate the subversive roles of the criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime narratives. By looking at how criminological discourses deal with the questions of the invisibility of the criminal woman, the interpretation of her criminal behaviour in accordance with traditional gender roles (passivity and domesticity), and the

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<sup>226</sup> Some of this scholarship is in the field of feminist criminology that makes female criminality its focus, but most of it is situated in film criticism, especially that which examines women in film noir.

sexualization and medicalization of the female criminal, which question her culpability, we can by contrast reread the literary criminal femme fatales in the light of their empowerment and agency in the narratives.

In Chapter One I set out the debates around women's crime. I show how the image of the criminal woman that emerges in the criminological and medical literature is that of an abused, helpless women who kills in self-defence. In sharp contrast, the criminal femme fatales of the hardboiled crime narratives are confident and hyper-feminine criminals who use their sexuality as a powerful weapon against men. My reading of criminal femme fatales engages with many reading practices of female criminality. In doing so this study establishes connections, albeit with a necessary critical distance, with a large body of literature on female criminality. I critically engage the traditional theories on criminal women, which enclose them within the "mad-bad" dichotomy, and show how these theories resonate in popular understanding of women's crime. I also look at feminist readings that empathically address the victimization of the female criminal in a patriarchal order and a criminal justice system that, according to this view, consistently favours the male while demonizing the criminal woman. I trace the development in the field of the study of the female criminal from 1895's Lombroso and Ferrero *The Female Offender* in which they sought to identify the "natural type" of the "degenerated" female criminal, to an idea of the criminal woman in mid-twentieth century American sociological research which rendered her almost invisible, and finally to feminist critiques which scrutinize the imaging of the female criminal as "mad" and/or "bad" in traditional criminological texts and in society more broadly. Tracing this development has allowed this study both to examine representations in criminological literature contemporaneous to hardboiled crime fiction, and to use feminist insights to rethink and criticize the conceptualizations that shape

representations of the female criminal in popular culture. The chapter thus offers ways to conceptualize the issue of female agency in relation to criminality and sexuality closely examined in the narratives of the three authors in this thesis. In so doing, this chapter also speaks to a wider understanding of the relation between gender and crime and the question of representation of the female criminal in both criminological and literary discourses.

In approaching the question of the representations of criminal femme fatales in hardboiled narratives, this study deploys notions of *criminalized* and *medicalized* women as two poles on a spectrum where we can locate women's roles in hardboiled crime fiction. The criminalized woman is one who commits crimes, usually murder, and is involved in a legal encounter with the criminal justice system, while the medicalized woman is rendered irrational due to a psychological ailment and her culpability in her criminal actions is questioned in the hardboiled narratives at issue. The medicalized woman, however, does not usually exist in a text on her own; she is balanced against the criminalized woman who is the one with more palpable agency. Through these pairings (as in Hammett's *The Dain Curse* and Chandler's *The Big Sleep*), hardboiled crime narratives show the dynamics of women's power. The narratives also explore the mechanisms of power, especially between the criminal femme fatales and the male protagonist, through another set of poles: the hyper-masculinity of the male protagonist and the hyper-femininity of the criminal femme fatale. The texts play out the tensions that attend to the representation of hardboiled masculinity as it stands against the hyper-femininity of criminal women by rendering images of criminal femme fatales who problematize the male's mastery and often outwit the male criminals and gangsters in the underworld, such as in the case of Brigid in *The Maltese Falcon*.

My second chapter addresses this underworld and the criminal femme fatales that move within it in Dashiell Hammett's work. I demonstrate that criminal femme fatales are not only part of Hammett's underworld but also compete with and frequently outdo their male counterparts of gangsters and even the detective himself. The chapter examines how Hammett's work in the late 1920s and 1930s speaks to contemporary criminological and policing discourses by portraying its criminal femme fatales as a fundamental point of connection between literary and criminological fields. My analysis of *Red Harvest*, which contextualizes these different discourses, shows how Hammett's underworld is full of ironies and is characterized by a blurring of any distinctions between appearance and reality. In this milieu, female agency is situated in the dynamism of the destabilized urban space that enables the criminal femme fatales to move swiftly in this underworld. I show that, in his depiction of criminal femme fatales, Hammett's writing is far from being unified. His varied portrayal of female characters includes a medicalized woman (Gabrielle) and an absent/present criminal woman (Alice) in *The Dain Curse*, a strong-willed hardboiled woman in *The Maltese Falcon* (Brigid), and even a woman detective in *The Thin Man* (Nora). Through my analysis of Hammett's texts and his different models of female agency, I establish the connections between the historical specificity of Hammett's narratives (especially in relation to how criminality was linked to political and socio-cultural factors in the US in the 1920s and 1930s), and the ways that these narratives, whether consciously or not, push the boundaries of gender roles through their rendering of women with agency.

My understanding of the criminal femme fatales' agency is produced via an attention to the ways in which they transgress already blurry boundaries between crime and law. In the hardboiled world in which these characters are situated, crime is the rule, not the exception. It taints everyone, and ultimately renders a world in which the



distinctions between law and crime, and between the role of the law-enforcer (the detective) and the criminal (femme fatale), are hazy and muddled. This elision invites the criminal femme fatales to transgress legal, social and even familial codes and norms that position criminality as a masculine trait and understand femininity in terms of domesticity and passivity. Hammett's underworld provides good examples of these blurry boundaries. His criminal femme fatales are situated within these boundaries and, at the same time, question the limits of these boundaries.

Raymond Chandler's world, discussed in my third chapter, is more domestic than Hammett's. Chandler's narratives transpose the danger from the underworld into wealthy corrupt family settings in which criminal femme fatales demonstrate varying degrees of visibility and are set against Philip Marlowe, who takes a central role. The chapter offers a new reading of Chandler's female characters that departs from the critical scholarship on this author. We can read female agency for Chandler's criminal femme fatales through their absent/present roles, namely, their (in)visible power which ultimately reveals Marlowe's inefficacy as a detective. This is most clear in *The Lady in the Lake*, in which Mildred/Muriel is absent throughout the narrative and yet is the mastermind behind crimes to which Marlowe's detection skills are unequal. And although Chandler consistently presents criminal women in his work, he plays with the dynamics of how his female characters appear or do *not* appear and how they interact with Marlowe. *The Big Sleep*, for example, depicts two sisters between whom there is much tension, but who nonetheless act in concert against Marlowe, a formula that is also adopted in *The Long Goodbye*. The latter novel amplifies this power imbalance by portraying an even more dangerous criminal femme fatale, Eileen, and an even more sentimental Marlowe. Chandler's work shows various forms of female agency manifested in (in)visible roles and faked identities of women as in *The Lady in the Lake*.

Another form is the accessory agency as shown in Vivian's powerful role as an accomplice to her sister's crimes, which clears a way for her to take over her family's wealth and power at the end of the narrative, and at the same time undercutting Marlow's authority as a detective. This chapter thus reveals the complex relations between the sentimentality of the detective, the absence/presence of the woman and the power that circulates between them, and allows me to thus destabilize the image of the detective as a "hero" and creates room for a powerful role for the criminal femme fatales.

Contrary to Chandler's depiction of (in)visible roles for his female characters, James M. Cain's work explores criminal motivations and exposes the world of the criminal, as I show in Chapter Four. Cain's criminal femme fatales are shown in action. In the absence of the detective, Cain's texts do away with the element of mystery completely, and hence the readers witness the criminal femme fatales seduce and manipulate the male characters to commit the crimes with or for them. The agency of these criminal femme fatales is realized in their use of sexual appeal to fulfil their economic and material ambitions. Cain's work marks a transition from detective fiction to "noir" fiction, a mode of writing which exposes the internal world of the criminal and shows the *dark* side of crime from the criminal's point of view. My analyses of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Mildred Pierce* illustrate how Cain's criminal femme fatales embody, more clearly than in Hammett's and Chandler's works, the components that we find in film noir, such as the interplay between crime and desire, and the tensions around the representation of sexuality and the body. As the epigraph at the beginning of this conclusion illustrates, Cora's irresistibility to Frank in *The Postman* is key to her dominant role and her agency as a criminal femme fatale. Indeed, Cain's work reveals the intersections between crime fiction and film noir, which flourished in

the late 1940s and early 1950s, and introduced iconic images of threatening and seductive women.<sup>227</sup> In my discussion of *Mildred Pierce* (the novel and the film), with which I end the thesis, I suggest that my reading of Veda in Cain's novel becomes even more clear if we compare the novel to the film version of 1945. I argue that Veda in the novel embodies the characteristics of a criminal femme fatale, despite the fact that she does not commit murder. Cain's narrative presents a case of emotional violence inflicted by a ruthless and strong-willed daughter (Veda) on her mother (Mildred) in a battle over agency between the two that ends with the remarkable victory of Veda. And while the film makes a murderess of Veda, it, nonetheless, undercuts her agency and her culpability in ways that point to the compelling depiction of the criminal femme fatale in Cain's fictional narrative. The discussion of the differences between the novel and the film thus helps clarify Cain's representation of agency and the struggle over and for it. The film changes the dynamic of the battle for agency between Mildred and Veda in a way that tends to limit the potential of the female characters' power and independence more than in the case of fiction.<sup>228</sup> Hence, an engagement with Cain's narratives,

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<sup>227</sup> The definition of film noir is problematic. As a contested and fraught term, critics differ in defining its characteristics, history, generic politics, influences, and timeline. In general, film noir is understood as a group of films in the 1940s and early 1950s in the US that is characterized by specific visual style, narrative form, character presentation, and tone. Borde and Chaumeton, in their classic study of film noir which was originally published in 1955 and reprinted in 2002, are among the first French critics to use the term "film noir" and that they used in reference to the crime thrillers in cinema, which focus on criminality and "complex contradictions in motives and events" (qtd. in Hanson 2007: 2). Despite disagreements around film noir, a connection has been made between film noir and the socio-cultural context in which it was produced, especially the changes of gender roles during and after World War II. For example, Neale (2000) discusses the sexual desire which can be traced in the social and cultural context as one of the distinctive features of film noir. The world of film noir thus is "catastrophic, hopeless, doomed predetermined, by the past, without clear moral or personal identity" (Place 1978: 41). Also, at the heart of film noir is the protagonist who is alienated and well-embroiled in the world of crime and violence (Orr 1997). There is a massive body of scholarship on film noir, see for example, Hirsch (1983), Cameron (1992), Palmer (1994), Copjec (1993), Naremore (1995 and 2008), Silver and Ursini 1-4, (1996, 1999, 2002, 2004), and Mayer and McDonnell (2007). For studies that focus on women in film noir, see, for example, Walsh (1984), Kaplan (1978/1998 and 1988), Cowie (1993 and 1997), Hanson (2007), and Grossman (2009).

<sup>228</sup> The body of film noir is seen by a number of critics (for example, Place (1978), Cowie (1993 and 1997), Krutnik (1991)) as a response to male's fear of woman's sexuality. Krutnik says that film noir underscores masculinity in crisis in the US (1991: 91). Martin also argues that the femme fatale in film noir achieved definition with film theory being male dominated (1998: 206). See Hillis (2005) and

especially his depiction of the interactions between his female characters' ambition, their dangerous sexuality, and their criminality, helps the reader to imagine a space where femme fatales operate as transgressive figures. My discussion of Cain's texts shows that not only do his characters that I am reading in terms of the criminal femme fatale trouble legal and socio-cultural norms, they also break the unity and fixity of their own stereotype.

Although the female characters created by Hammett, Chandler, and Cain that I am calling criminal femme fatales are situated in a world of crime, corruption, chaos and random violence, they do not provide one unified image of *the* criminal femme fatale. Every one of these authors offers a complex array of characters' motives and dynamics within the texts that shed light on the criminality of the femme fatales, and there are noticeable variations within the oeuvre of each author. The varying representations of the criminal femme fatales also complicate our understanding of agency as not simply an abstract concept with a stable, limited meaning. Instead, the polyvalence of my use of the term agency in this study, both inflected by my reading of the texts and drawing upon sociological research as I have outlined in my Introduction, shows the spectrum in which female roles are situated. As mentioned above, this spectrum extends between criminalization and medicalization, and illustrates the boundaries within which agency may be expressed in the space of the narratives. This limited space is signified in instances where agency is far from being absolute or all-encompassing, such as, for example, the accessory agency and (in)visible agency I identify in Raymond Chandler's work.

One way that hardboiled crime narratives show the criminal femme fatales negotiating gender roles in relation to power is through their challenging of the

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Jancovich (2010) for debates on the relation between film noir, especially the role of the femme fatale, and World War II and post-war anxieties.

boundaries of genre. Although the criminal femme fatales that this study examines are the product of a wider context in the US at the time – a society facing Prohibition, the Depression, World War II, urban crime and corruption – there is more to read in this context. Despite the criminal femme fatales' capacity to integrate themselves into a hardboiled underworld, they continuously redefine this position within the genre. These criminal femme fatales at once represent an enduring component of the genre and challenge the boundaries of that genre in their refiguring of women's roles therein. Hence they go beyond the function of foil to the male characters, or "heroines" that need to be rescued, to occupy a powerful space that is at the heart of the narrative. This space grants the criminal femme fatales the power, freedom and fluidity to disrupt and indeed break the stereotype of the femme fatale as a threatening woman who is contained at the end of the narrative – even when they *are* contained at the end of the narrative through punishment or death. Cain's criminal femme fatales, for example, illustrate a break from both the traditional role of the passive woman, and that of the sexually threatening femme fatale by uniting various roles as seductresses, accomplices, and perpetrators.

My reading of criminal femme fatales thus showcases a critical interaction between the expectations of a genre that relies on romantic notions of a tough lone male and female characters who problematize the stability of the male character's role. As I have shown in the discussion of Chandler's narratives, for instance, his criminal femme fatales continuously render Marlowe's mission to solve the mystery pointless and ineffective. This trope also questions and indeed critiques the basis on which these expectations stand not only as conventions of crime fiction (as a popular genre), but also as a mode of writing that embraces gendered precepts of male and female roles, especially in relation to power dynamics. Indeed, the ways that I address the question of

female agency in this study take issue with the view of crime fiction as merely a set of rigid conventions (as a crime narrative with a criminal, a male detective and a femme fatale). Instead, individual works of crime fiction invite a multiplicity of readings that complicate the stability of genre as a fixed formula. At the same time, my intervention also interrogates the assumptions that inform these conventions in American culture – the ideologies of masculine individualism – by reading criminal femme fatales in the context of contemporaneous discourses on crime and policing. This study thus forges connections between various discourses on female criminality, and between popular culture (as a vehicle to rethink and re-imagine the conceptions and perceptions about crime and law) and the representation of gender roles in American society at that specific point of time.

By exploring female criminality in relation to agency in hardboiled crime fiction, this thesis engages diverse discussions about gender, sexuality, genre, and representation. The significance of the criminal femme fatales with which this study is concerned is manifested in the ways that these characters highlight the tension between gender and genre in crime fiction.<sup>229</sup> This tension is translated in feminist critiques of the hardboiled mode as a “masculine genre,” one which is unaccommodating to feminist politics.<sup>230</sup> The centrality of the position of criminal femme fatales in hardboiled crime narratives, however, points to how the genre inexorably relies on discourses of sexuality and gender to represent and/or critique structures of power and, even more broadly,

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<sup>229</sup> A number of critics have done work on the interrelationship between gender and genre, but more in relation to film. Neal’s (1980, 1990 and 2000) and Gledhill’s (1978 and 2000) studies are among the prominent ones in film studies. For gender and genre in crime fiction, see, for example, Klein (1988), Cranny-Francis (1988), and Longhurst (1989).

<sup>230</sup> The genre of crime fiction to Klein for example, is designed to “exclude female characters.” She holds that there is an incompatibility between the genre and feminist interests because of its “sex/gender valuation” and the endorsement of “male hegemony” (1988: 225). Klein in more than one book and article (1988, 1995 and 1999) fundamentally argues that the crime fiction, whether it is written by male or female authors, is an unwelcoming to women. She even insists that women writers who use a female detective merely “undercut their protagonists to reinforce a social standard of female inequality and, undermine the genre in which they write” (1988: 174). For more on feminist detective fiction see also Watson and Jones (1999), Munt (1994), and Irons (1995).

themes such as violence, policing, and individualism. And although the critiques that feminist scholars of the genre put forward focus on and take issue with what they describe as a “conservative” genre (on the basis of its alleged tendency to misrepresent and contain women), this study offers the possibility for a reading of female agency in hardboiled crime narratives, expanding the margins and loosening the tensions between gender and genre, and thus inviting more reparative feminist readings of the role of women in hardboiled crime fiction. Furthermore, by highlighting these kinds of reparative readings, this study suggests new possibilities for understanding the representation of women in crime fiction from other periods. While writers in the 1970s and 1980s onward have constructed strong female characters in crime fiction, the current project invites a further study of whether and how these criminal femme fatales in the masculine works of Hammett, Chandler, and Cain might actually be unexpected predecessors. Indeed, the subversive readings of women’s roles that this thesis provides open the door to investigate and reconsider various images of the female criminal, such as that of the “female psychopath,” for example, that appeared in later representations of female criminality in noir fiction and film.<sup>231</sup>

Finally, this line of inquiry opens wider debates not only in regards to gender and genre but also in relation to the ongoing conversation about the femme fatale in film criticism.<sup>232</sup> The weight of film criticism (which I have used as a point of reference in the critiques about the femme fatale) in how it has shaped views on the femme fatale in cinema and even more broadly in popular culture cannot be overestimated. However, the perspective that this study offers on the imagined space of agency of criminal

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<sup>231</sup> For an account on the female psychopath in film see, for example, Jermyn (1996). Jermyn argues that there is “a substantive new generic development,” shown in the figure of the “female psychopath,” in Hollywood’s psychological thrillers, especially in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>232</sup> Examples of films that are based on hardboiled narratives include Billy Wilder *Double Indemnity* (1944), Tay Garnett’s *The Postman always Rings Twice* (1946), Howard Hawks’s *The Big Sleep* (1946), Edward Dmytryk’s *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), which is based on Chandler’s *Farewell, My lovely*.

femme fatales in hardboiled crime fiction questions some of the fundamental premises on which film criticism bases its view of the femme fatale, including notions of women's control and containment.<sup>233</sup> As I have shown in my analysis of *Mildred Pierce*, the film, despite portraying Veda as a murderess, limits the transgressive potential of women's roles that we can find in Cain's novel. Indeed, examining the differences between hardboiled crime narratives and their filmic adaptations invites a number of questions that are significant to understand the wider implications of the representations of female criminality and agency across genres. For example, as with the changes required to make Veda in the film adaptation of *Mildred Pierce* into an actual criminal, what other changes to female agency do the structures of cinematic representation demand? Also, since Chandler and Cain themselves were involved in making some of these adaptations, how might we better understand their ambivalence about female empowerment? Is it possible to read their fiction as decidedly more subversive than their work in Hollywood? Or does the agency of the criminal femme fatale simply look different yet again from what we can find in the literary works?

This study therefore also invites re-readings of the (criminal) femme fatale in cinema, especially film noir, which might consider the different factors that shape the production and reception of visual, often memorable, images of femme fatales, and ask how cinematic representations of these characters might be placed in dialogue with those of hardboiled crime fiction. Hence, this study expedites the investigation of potential connections between film noir and hardboiled crime fiction as far as the

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<sup>233</sup> Because the femme fatale is mostly perceived as a visual construction, she is remembered and epitomized in quintessential roles in 1940s noir films, providing a fertile ground for feminists to address different aspects of these representations. As such, feminist film criticism mainly looks at the femme fatale through theories of the male gaze and masculine pleasure (inspired by Mulvey's seminal 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema") and through using psychoanalytic frameworks, the focus of many studies remained on the visual form of the femme fatale as an erotic spectacle and on the fetishization of her body. See, for example, Doane (1991) and Copjec (1993).



representations of criminal women are concerned.<sup>234</sup> By looking at film adaptations of popular crime narratives, we can examine how and why Hollywood changed the imaging of femme fatales in film noir in comparison to their text sources. This in turn facilitates an examination of the generic boundaries that define and govern these representations in both the literary and the cinematic canons. Finally, reading (criminal) femme fatales in and beyond the genres in which they are situated permits us to see the “bigger picture” of the question of representation of women in popular culture, opening up a space for re-readings that admit transgression as a dynamic for female agency.

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<sup>234</sup> Hardboiled crime fiction is acknowledged by a large number of critics as a major influence on film noir. See, for example, Krutnik (1991), especially chapter 3.

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