

**“Dames Are Always Pulling a Switch on You”:
The Disruption of the Femme Fatale in *Laura***

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Dangerous and enigmatic women have fascinated people for centuries. In the United States, the femme fatale emerged during the post-war era as one of the most common archetypes in crime fiction and noir film, both genres which often perpetuated extremely masculine ideologies. Many scholars have examined the role that traditional male notions of the femme fatale play in popular culture, but what happens when these notions are complicated because the archetype materializes out of a woman’s pen? In Vera Caspary’s 1943 detective novel *Laura*, the role of the femme fatale is obfuscated. Who is the femme fatale in this piece? The woman who embodies the traditional characteristics of this character but is ultimately harmless, or the feminine male who turns out to be the murderer? This question is explored again, and in new ways, in Otto Preminger’s 1944 film version.

How does this complex instance of the femme fatale work in the society in which it was created? By examining feminist theory, as well as looking at the social context of *Laura*, one can begin to tease out who the true femme fatale is in both the novel and the film. In these works, Vera Caspary and Otto Preminger play with gendered expectations and heterosexual assumptions to allow both Laura Hunt and Waldo Lydecker to be read as femmes fatales. Both characters occupy a zone outside of the normalized binary gender paradigm and, by doing so, are manifestations of male anxieties in an era that is marked by changing gender dynamics that threatened male supremacy.

I). The Development of the Femme Fatale

Lilith, Pandora, Circe, Salome, Cleopatra, Mata Hari, Lola Montez. The figure of the femme fatale stands on the shoulders of a long line of dangerous women. From the Bible to Greek mythology to celebrated historical figures, it seems there is no limit to what a sexually-conscious female can achieve. In Hollywood specifically, vamps like Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was* and spider women like Marlene Dietrich in *Blue Angel* paved the way for the femme fatale of film noir (Billinghurst 96, 103). Whereas “the vamp is an active predator[...] who actively stalks her victim [...] and bleeds him dry” and the spider lady a woman “who waits for the fly to land [...] so she can squeeze the masculinity out of him,” the femme fatale occupies a space all her own (116). The femme fatale seduces and manipulates a man for her own ends, usually resulting in his (and her) demise.

Compared to the vamp and the spider woman, the femme fatale of 1930’s and 40’s pulp fiction is more strategic in her use of men. A direct descendent of a connection of women to spiders– by authors such as Hanns Heinz Ewers (*The Spider* in 1907) , Jacob Cats (*Sinne- en minnebelden* in 1618), and Christian Heinrich Spiess (*Biographies of the Insane* in 1795)– the dangerous woman’s “identification with the spider [...came to an end] around the Second World War” (Michalska, 93-105). Nevertheless, despite her distinction from the spider lady due to her more tangible goals in using sexuality for achievement, a reading of the femme fatale is enhanced by the context of “the spiderish erotic deceit and erotic subterfuge” of female sexuality that was encoded in the popular temptress that preceded, and influenced, her (108). The ability of woman to use her sexuality duplicitously was a “symptom of a civilizational [sic]

crisis” for Otto Weininger, and plays into male anxieties over a shifting gender status quo (112). In the 1930s and 40s, the dangerous spider woman turned into the more scheming femme fatale as male fears evolved.

It is impossible to see the femme fatale without recognizing her dependence on men. Rebecca Stott argues that “She is characterized above all by her effect upon men: a *femme* cannot be *fatale* without a male being present, even where her fatalism is directed towards herself” (viii). Unlike the vamps and spider women that came before her, “the femme fatale operates within the confines of male-generated rules [...and...] does not act alone” (Billinghurst, 120). This male dependency turns the femme fatale into a figure to be commodified: “the focus of the film noir often becomes not the sexual attraction between the temptress and her victim but the chemistry between the two male protagonists” (120). In this light, the femme fatale can be seen as a prize in a male contest, but it is from this male drive for competition that she ultimately gains her power. By being aware of her potential as a commodity, the femme fatale co-opts her “prize-like” quality and manipulates men to help her achieve her goals. It is this very focus on the male competition for the femme fatale that plays out among Mark McPherson, Waldo Lydecker, and Shelby Carpenter in *Laura*, both on the screen and on the page.

The femme fatale is an outsider, an Other who does not fit into normal society: “For Darwinism the Other is imagined as the spectre of degeneration signalled [sic] by the ape. For criminology the Other is the criminal, the evolutionary throwback in our midst (the ‘beast’ visibly present in society.) For defensive/nationalist discourse the Other is out there waiting to invade” (Stott, 48). The Other is a lurking danger that

needs to be conquered. Similar to the national drive to uncover the communist, an additional feared Other in this same era, exposing and naming the femme fatale can be seen as an effort toward this very conquering of deviance from the safe and expected. In this way, the femme fatale's representation in literature and film is a manifestation of the fear of the empowered woman as well as an attempt to control her.

Ultimately, by looking at “the femme-fatale-as-a-sign,” one can analyze concepts “of self and of cultural order and normality in a specific historical moment” (Stott, 47). More specifically, by looking at how the archetype of the femme fatale functions in Vera Caspary's novel *Laura*, as well as the subsequent interpretation presented in Otto Preminger's film *Laura*, one can tease out the purposeful implications of the femme fatale in a distinct moment of popular cultural production.

II). Vera Caspary Biography

A powerful woman in her own right, Vera Caspary was born in 1899 and grew up on the South Side of Chicago with her Jewish family. Similar to her character Laura Hunt, young Vera was motivated to succeed and was employed in advertising by the age of twenty-one. Her tenacity in looking for work as a writer— constantly asking bosses for writing jobs and applying to jobs with only her initials to avoid gender prejudice— reminds one of Laura's unwavering drive to receive Waldo Lydecker's endorsement of the Byron pen.

Perhaps as a way to fight the gendered obstacles she encountered in her own life, “she recognized that aesthetic representation is a vital political weapon in the social battle for female self-expression, and her own work was often preoccupied with the

struggle between men's objectification of the female and women's struggles for self-control" (Wald, 109). In this light, her use of the femme fatale archetype in *Laura* was a revolutionary act not only because it played with heteronormative assumptions, but because it was an instance of a female voice reclaiming and critiquing the male conceptualization of the femme fatale in popular culture. In her nineteen novels character studies of women emerged as one of her most consistent foci. Caspary "effectively merged women's quest for identity and love with murder plots" and most of her novels featured modern working women (Emrys, 196). Because of her interest in writing about "the actions of normal people under high tension" as opposed to crime, women struggling to find their place in a rapidly shifting milieu could identify with her writing. It is this interest in the human mind that also pushed her writing to the genre of "psycho-thriller."

During her time in Hollywood as a screen writer in the 1930s, Vera Caspary became interested in, and eventually joined, the Communist Party. She acted out her communist beliefs by participating in cell meetings, raising money for her cause, traveling to Russia, and writing socialist plays with George Sklar. Eventually, Caspary was gray-listed and "provided technically truthful but unrevealing testimony in response to California investigation of un-American activities (Emrys, 201). Her status as a Jewish communist was not unusual in Hollywood at this time. In fact, "the connection [between these two identities] was inescapable" in the highly radicalized Hollywood of that time (Buhle, 57).

Vera Caspary lived as an Other three-times-over, as a Jew, as a motivated woman, and as a communist. Of these three intersectional and marginalized identities,

Caspary chose to explore gender in *Laura*. Alan Wald asserts that with “its disruption of conventional detective story motifs,” Vera Caspary’s *Laura* was able to “disclose the threat of the feminine [and is] distant from the sort of domestic novels that portray identity as natural so that the operation of social power is veiled to the reader” (109). By revising the femme fatale, Caspary uncovers those at the top of the social hierarchy that control the production of the Other in society.

III). Plot Summary

Through a process of complication, Caspary almost allows her readers to reach the end of the novel under the impression that Laura Hunt is a murderess. The narrative of Laura leads the reader through a maze and destabilizes them at every turn. The novel begins with “Part One” narrated by the rich, eccentric writer and friend of the recently murdered Laura Hunt, Waldo Lydecker. He displays a very intellectual disposition throughout his narration which can lead the reader to view him as a reliable narrator. Additionally, in the second chapter, Lydecker informs the audience of his desire to “record [his] flaws with the same objectivity as if [he] were no more important than any other figure in this macabre romance” (Caspary, 26). From the onset, however, it is clear that Lydecker’s desire to control Laura and the image she presents to the world will cause his opinions on the other men in her life, her fiancé Shelby Carpenter and the detective Mark McPherson, to infect his intended narrative objectivity.

It is in “Part One” that we meet the cast of characters. Mark McPherson emerges as the lonely, introspective detective whose investigation into Laura Hunt’s death causes him to fall in love with her. In contrast, Shelby Carpenter, Laura’s fiancé, is shown as a

cookie-cutter illusion of man. Although Laura has insisted that she loves Shelby, the façade of his perfection and worthiness of her love crumbles throughout the novel, beginning with the knowledge that Laura supports him financially.

Just as one is becoming accustomed to the self-congratulatory and jealous voice of Waldo Lydecker, “Part Two” opens with Mark McPherson assuming the role of narrator after Lydecker has his “prose style [knocked] right out of him” (Casparly, 83). Once again, the reader is presented with a narration that will be impossible to trust. Mark shares that he views this unofficial (as opposed to police reports) medium as a chance to “express a few personal opinions” (83). “Part Two” is extremely important to the plot of this book as this section features the reappearance of Laura. The reader discovers that instead of being killed in her apartment, Laura Hunt was at her country home to calm her nerves before her impending wedding to Shelby Carpenter.

It is also revealed that the dead girl is Diane Redfern, a model from the advertising agency where Laura and Shelby work to whom Laura loaned her apartment. As “Part Two” gathers speed, Shelby and Diane’s ambiguous relationship is revealed. While celebrating Laura’s life the night after she reappears, Waldo intentionally tells Mark about a party at Laura’s house a couple nights before the murder. Waldo acts out the scenario and forces Laura to reveal to Mark that because she was so frustrated by the romantic dynamic between Diane and Shelby, she “conked her with a tray hors d’oeuvres” (125). This small but violent outburst at the murder victim thus gives Laura a motive to kill Diane and the suspicion of her as a killer gathers speed.

“Part Three”, a stenographic report, is arguably the most objective section of the novel, although Shelby’s sexist opinions ultimately lead the reader astray and serve to build the suspicion of Laura as a murderer.

We are finally exposed to Laura’s first-person voice in “Part Four”. It is in this section that the idea of “normal people under high tension” is manifested most clearly. Laura reveals in her diary that the only time she is able to write is when her emotions are running high: “It’s always when I start on a long journey or meet an exciting man or take a new job that I must sit for hours in a frenzy of recapitulation” (161). While it is clear here that the murder of Diane has created high tensions for Laura, it is unclear whether high tensions before Diane’s death led Laura to commit the crime.

In the final section, “Part Five,” Caspary returns us again to the detective Mark McPherson. In his mostly fact-based account, we learn that most of what has been narrated– Shelby and Diane’s affair, clues leading to Laura’s or Shelby’s guilt– are merely distractions to who perpetuated the crime. Ultimately, Waldo Lydecker broke under the high tension of attempting to control a woman whom he could not possess. Just as he broke the mercury glass vase in the window of Mr. Claudius’ store: if he cannot have her, no one can.

Ultimately, this plot serves to complicate the femme fatale. Because the plot so clearly lines up with other detective narratives of its time, the reader can place the novel into the genre of detective fiction. Fredric Jameson writes that “genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public” and that “the strategic value [...] of the notion of a genre [is that it allows] the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of

the history of forms and the evolution of social life” (106, 105). If we see the goal of Caspary’s inclusion of the femme fatale in *Laura* as a way to disrupt the hegemony that produced this archetype by representing (and revising) her through a female’s voice, her use of this specific genre of fiction is particularly apt. By invoking the genre of hard-boiled detective stories— one need only look to Mark McPherson for evidence of this— she is entering a literary realm that “hard-boiled authors like Hammett and Chandler [saw as] a manly, American, ‘realistic’ reaction against the silly [...] fiction written by women” (Smith, 147). Simply by authoring a plot that fits into the hard-boiled detective narrative, Caspary is disrupting gendered expectations associated with this genre.

Like Jameson explains, genre fiction is an important tool because a reader engages with not only a particular text, but also the historical lineage of that text. The plot of *Laura* pushes the novel into the genre of detective fiction and Caspary plays with readers’ expectations of this genre in order to make a statement on gender. The accepted conventions of detective fiction allow Caspary to not only build suspense in her thriller, but also to challenge the reader to question these conventions— such as the femme fatale— by disrupting them. Just as Mark McPherson philosophizes in Preminger’s film, “dames are always pulling a switch on you” and Vera Caspary was no exception.

IV). The Shift from the Page to the Screen

Otto Preminger disclosed in an interview that Laura’s reappearance ““was the good part of the novel. Everything else, including the characters, was newly created for the film”” (Hirsch). While there are certainly some differences between the film and the movie, this instance of Preminger’s inability to properly give credit to Vera Caspary is an

insight into the difficulties these two artists found in the transition of *Laura* from the page to the screen. From the very beginning of their relationship, the two were at odds about the direction *Laura* should go. At their first meeting, Caspary recalls that Preminger “wanted to make it a conventional detective story; I saw it as a psychological drama about people involved in a murder” (Hirsch). Ultimately, the film would differ from the novel in several ways.

One of the most notable literary devices in Caspary’s novel is the use of multiple unreliable narrators. In the movie, this device is replaced with “the Hollywood convention in which objective, ‘invisible’ third-person narration is always preferable to first-person” (Hirsch). Additionally, Preminger decided to feature Waldo, as opposed to the titular character, as the focus of the film (Hirsch). This move was something that angered Caspary as she felt that he “misread her heroine” (Hirsch).

A less noticeable, but in Caspary’s eyes important, difference in the film is Waldo’s murder weapon. In the novel, Waldo conceals his gun in his cane. This was intentional on the part of Caspary who viewed it as “a symbol (Freudian) of Waldo’s impotence and destructiveness” (Hirsch). In the film, Preminger opted for, in his opinion, the more logical narrative of Waldo concealing a gun in Laura’s antique clock.

While the film achieved great critical and popular success, Caspary maintained until the end that Preminger had done a disservice to her novel in the making of the film. When the director and author encountered each other at The Stork Club after *Laura* opened, they had a very public and very hostile confrontation over their differing points of view. Even in 1971, Caspary maintained that she “still [believed] it would have been a better picture if the melodrama at the end had been equal to the mood of the

beginning, if Waldo's character had remained consistent, if the weapon had been contained in the cane" (Hirsch). Without a doubt, the film and the novel are presented differently and this deviance is partly a result of Preminger's and Caspary's conflicting points of view.

Though the vitriol exchanged between the director and the author is distracting, it is important to remember that differences between a novel and film are a necessary by-product of adapting a novel into a film. George Bluestone reminds us that "differences derive from the contrast between the novel as a conceptual and discursive form [and] the film as a perceptual and presentational form (vii). Bluestone goes on to point out that because films "are the product of a commercial society, the Hollywood commodity must make a profit [...] More than anyone else, novelists with screen-writing experience have been responsible for scathing indictments of the film industry" (34). Caspary's position as both a screen-writer and a novelist allowed her to clearly see the financial motivations of Hollywood and the phenomenon that "in the film, more than in any of the other arts, the signature of social forces is evident in the final work" (35). Subtleties such as the phallic symbolism of a gun contained in a cane are exchanged for sensational scenes of Waldo in a bathtub in order to produce a profit in the film industry. This focus on the visual and the obvious paves the way for Preminger's exaggerated portrayal of Waldo Lydecker.

V). Understanding Possible Misreadings

There are many ways in which one could misread both the novel and the film versions of *Laura*. One of the most important is the assumption that Waldo's desire for

Laura as a romantic partner is the impetuous for his crime. This is, however, not a correct assumption. Instead, Waldo's interest in Laura is a result of his desire to control her. From the first instance of their meeting, in both the film and the novel, Waldo carefully crafts Laura Hunt into being the type of woman Waldo would be if he were a woman. Although she was "only mildly terrific at [their first meeting, Waldo] recognized her possibilities" (Casparly, 20) and he brings her to high-brow social events, helps her get her start in her career, impedes her relationships with men he deems unsuitable, and even tells her which commodities (liquor, clothing, antiques, etc.) to buy. When Mark McPherson enters her apartment and calls her a "dame," Waldo asks angrily: "Look at this room. Does it reveal nothing of the person who planned and decorated it?" He "awaited [McPherson's] answer like a touchy Jehovah" and feared that Mark would fail "to appreciate the quality of the woman who had adorned this room" (40). To Waldo, the meticulously crafted image of Laura that he created is of utmost importance.

A strong example of Waldo's desire to control Laura and her image occurs on the first page of the novel. While mourning his deceased friend and writing her epitaph, he "found consolation in the thought that my friend, had she lived, [...] would have passed into oblivion [...] whereas the violence of her passing and the genius of her admirer gave her a fair chance at immortality" (Casparly, 9). Even in her death, Waldo controls the way in which the public views Laura.

When Laura becomes the main murder suspect, Waldo again shows his eagerness to shape her image. He wants to use his authorial influence to make Laura his "greatest creation" (Casparly, 187). He boasts that "millions will read about [Laura]" and that he

will make her “greater than Lizzie Borden” (187). Caspary’s choice to tell her novel from different points of view enhances the weight of Waldo’s authorial power because the reader directly experiences the influence that each narrator has over one’s interpretation of the plot and the characters.

Reflective surfaces, especially mercury glass objects, emerge as a leitmotif associated with the character of Waldo Lydecker. Waldo is so enamored with this specific type of glass, which he writes about in an essay entitled “Distortion and Refraction,” that Mark McPherson cites him as starting “the craze for mercury glass among certain high-class antique snobs” (Caspary, 133). Throughout the novel, Waldo places significance upon reflective surfaces, especially the pair of mercury glass vases, one of which is in Waldo’s apartment and the other in Laura’s.

In fact, it is his obsession with mercury glass vases that gives the clearest indications of his guilt. During “Part Two,” Waldo sees a mercury glass vase in the window of Mr. Claudius’s antique shop and insists that Mark and he stop. Upon learning that the glass vase is not for sale, and has in fact already been sold to someone, Waldo becomes incensed. Waldo pretends to trip and drops the unattainable glass vase, consequently breaking it. Detective McPherson notes that after the vase broke, “Waldo joined me at the car. He had his wallet in his hand. But his mood had improved. He stood in the rain, looking back at Claudius’s shop and smiling. Almost as if he’d got the vase anyway” (135). Similar to Laura, the vase is a commodity that Waldo can not have. Waldo uses his influence to shape the public image of both Laura and mercury glass,

¹ Here, Caspary is referencing the highly sensationalized case of Lizzie Borden, a young woman accused of killing her parents. Though she was ultimately acquitted of the crime, she remains a ubiquitous example of a popular American murderer, only famous due to the murder accusations against her (Cantwell).

and it is clear that when he loses control over the commodities he crafts, he would rather destroy them than confront the reality of not owning them. It is also the discovery that BB shot is used to weigh down antiques, like the mercury vases, that leads Mark McPherson to uncover solid evidence to use against Waldo.

This preoccupation with mercury glass, as well as images of mirrors being used during Waldo's narration, shows how important reflection is to Waldo. In many ways, Waldo sees Laura as a reflection of himself. Because of his investment in her public image, he feels ownership of her. In Preminger's film, Waldo tells Laura that she is "the best part of [himself]. That's what you are". Instead of feeling a romantic love toward Laura, as it is often interpreted, Waldo sees her as his female reflection. Therefore, when faced with another person interfering with the image he has crafted, he would rather kill Laura than lose control over "the best part" of himself.

It is unclear whether Laura understands fully the implications of her friendship with Waldo, but it is obvious that she knows it is not romantic. When we hear her voice in "Part Four," she divulges that although "he had always insisted on the gestures of courtship [...] the lover rôle had been too unwavering for honesty, but Waldo would never for a moment let either of us forget that he wore trousers and I skirts. But there had been a certain delicacy in our avoiding any implication that the wooing might have purpose beyond its charm" (184). Waldo clearly understands the role that society wishes to impose on him as a man, and by projecting his repressed feminine leanings onto Laura he can inhabit both roles.

Through this understanding of Waldo and Laura's relationship, one is able to take a step further and look at the role of gender in both the novel and the film. Viewing

Laura in Waldo's eyes, as a person who is the manifestation of how Waldo would act out the gender of woman, gives the reader the ability to see him as the femme fatale. One can assume that he identifies with the feminine as he projects his desires to inhabit this realm onto Laura through an attempt to control her. In this sense, he transcends the gender binary of man versus woman, in the same manner as the traditional femme fatale, by displaying a mixture of masculine and feminine qualities. This paired with the knowledge that Waldo is a murderer qualify him to assume the role of the femme fatale.

Many have read Laura Hunt as a femme fatale. In fact, "the force of association between *noir* and *femme fatales* is such that '*femme fatale*' is often used as a term to label the eponymous protagonists of such canonic *noirs* as *Laura* [...] even though [she is not a *femme fatale*] at all" (Neale, 188). Laura herself recognizes the pervasive nature of this assumption. While under interrogation by Mark McPherson in the film, she asks him "What difference does it make what I say? You've made up your mind I'm guilty" (Preminger). Indeed, In "Part Five," McPherson confirms her thoughts and writes that for much of the investigation, Laura "looked as guilty as Ruth Synder" (Caspary, 210). This comparison to Ruth Synder², a pop cultural femme fatale and the inspiration for James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, clearly show that Laura's portrayal throughout the plot of both of the novel and the film cause her to be perceived as a femme fatale (MacKellar). This reading is ultimately flawed as Laura is not fatal, but is understandable. Throughout the novel, Caspary encodes Laura with

² A woman who was accused of, and executed for, killing her husband in 1927. Similar to Lizzie Borden, she was sensationalized by the American judicial system and news media. Eventually, she came to be viewed in popular culture as a femme fatale (MacKellar).

characteristics that correspond to the femme fatale to set-up her disruption of this archetype.

Most noticeably, Laura's status as a modern woman gives her many characteristics of the femme fatale. Waldo tells Mark in the first chapter that "the activities of crooks and racketeers will seem simple in comparison with the motives of a modern woman" (Casparly, 21). She is portrayed as possessing a self confidence and motivation that have gotten her higher in her career than her fiancé. The film especially highlights her career as entering the male domain. By showing her in meetings with male executives and in positions of superiority over men in her workplace, it establishes her ability to transcend what it means to be a typical woman who is isolated in the role that society has prescribed her. Laura is also a woman who is fiercely independent. This is shown in her desire to live alone and even go so far as to live in a building without a doorman. It is also evidenced when she decides to take a weekend in the country before her nuptials to relish the privacy that she values so highly.

When she reappears after Diane's murder, her lies and scheming become a central part of McPherson's investigation. Mark's narration strengthens the view of Laura as a femme fatale. By referring to himself as a "sucker" many times after trusting Laura, he places himself in the typical position of a man faced with a femme fatale in other works in this genre. Giving the audience the idea that he knows she is lying to him, but that he can not resist falling into her trap, validates the readers' assumption that the plot and characters will function in the same way that other works of this genre do.

As she does with Laura, Casparly encodes Waldo with signifiers of the femme fatale. Whereas Laura's signifiers are intentionally more apparent upon a first reading of

the novel so that Caspary can utilize the readers' expectations in order to disrupt the traditional concept of the femme fatale, Waldo's signifiers are more obvious upon a second look. Without the distraction of anticipating Laura to be a femme fatale, the reader can clearly see how Waldo acts out the role of the femme fatale throughout the entire novel.

Waldo's sense of being an epicene is well noted by most who watch the film. In fact, though it is never directly stated, Otto Preminger's biographer calls Waldo "a homosexual fearful of losing Laura to a heterosexual rival" (Hirsch). Certainly, the film version of Waldo comes off as even more eccentric and Other-ized than the Waldo of Caspary. From the opening scene in which Waldo invites Mark into his bathroom and allows the detective to see him naked and typing in his bathtub, it is clear that Waldo is a character that stands outside of the norm of what it means to be male. Additionally, his speech and "prose style" queers his image and sets him apart from McPherson. Sharif Mowlabocus notes that in gangster films, "the well-spoken [man] carries with him connotations of queer desire, particularly when placed within the context of American hegemonic masculinity" (140). His queerness is doubly significant. First, it works to dissuade the audience from perceiving the relationship between Laura and Waldo to be romantic. Secondly, within a heteronormative framework, it genders Waldo feminine because his homosexuality would cause his sexual desires to match up with those of a heterosexual female inasmuch that he sexually desires men.

Waldo's vanity is impossible to miss. From his "belief that the substitution of saccharine for sugar in coffee will make [him] slender and fascinating," to his habit of consistently bringing up his work, to his affectations, Waldo is certainly a character who

believes that “self-absorption is completely justified. [He has] never discovered any other subject so worthy of [his] attention” (Caspary, 16; Preminger). His vanity, a personality trait that is sharply contrasted with the manly external focuses of Detective McPherson, place him squarely in a feminine realm.

It is also important to understand the implications of Waldo’s self-view as a heroic figure. In the second chapter, Waldo expresses that he is “given to thinking of [himself] in the third person” and “rare are the nights when [he fails] to lull himself to sleep without the sedative of some heroic statement” (Caspary, 24). Simone de Beauvoir relates this narcissistic hero complex to the state of womanhood: “Many women see themselves in literary heroines [...] a trait such women have in common is that they feel misunderstood; people around them fail to recognize their special qualities [...] richly endowed with her misunderstood treasures, woman shares the tragic hero’s need for a ruling destiny” (De Beauvoir, 633-634). De Beauvoir goes on to say that the home of the narcissist “becomes the temple where her worship is performed” (634). The conspicuous care with which Waldo selects and displays items in his home is further evidence of his feminine narcissism.

From the beginning, it is clear that Waldo is scheming. In a sense, one could say that he flirts with McPherson to attempt to sway his opinion. Waldo dines with Mark and ingratiates himself to him. He also attempts to immediately take all suspicion off of himself in the first scene of both the movie and the novel when he turns to the mirror and exclaims: “How singularly innocent I seem this morning! McPherson, have you ever seen such candid eyes?” (Caspary, 17; Preminger). Waldo is also notably observant and this trait can help the reader to understand his ability to scheme. For example,

Waldo notices McPherson's injury directly upon meeting him. Looking for weaknesses to exploit is no doubt a tool that can be used to take advantage of someone.

It has been said that Caspary uses "murder [as a] context in which both male and female characters resolve their own mysterious lives" (Emrys, 196). For Waldo, this is certainly true. He ultimately and totally takes away Laura's freedom to construct her own life when he kills her. He resolves his own enigmatic uses for Laura by ending her life and establishing complete and final control over her.

VI). Contextualizing *Laura*

In many ways, the femme fatale became a reoccurring character in popular culture due to societal factors of the time in which she appeared. Seen widely just before, during, and after WWII, she was a response to a "male nervousness [that was] compounded by the fact that women had proved themselves so capable during World War II" (Billinghurst, 115). Additionally, these capable American women had fought for and won the right to vote in 1920, just two years after the end of the first World War. Women in this time period were becoming increasingly powerful, and men were confronted with the question of where this power shift would leave them. As men are most often the keepers of histories and stories, it has been conjectured that "just how temptresses are presented all depends on how confident the storytellers are about male supremacy. When men feel strong, temptresses are lusty and full of life. When men feel weak, temptresses are chilling predators with chaos on their minds" (Billinghurst, 4). Along these lines, the femme fatale is a manifestation of a collective male fear during this time period.

Popular fiction, then, is the perfect vehicle with which to deal with these widespread anxieties. While it is tricky to define the term popular— negotiating the difference between “what is genuinely a manifestation of popular taste” and “what is imposed upon people by those for whom culture is a business” is precarious to say the least— one can safely assume that popular fiction deals with literature that is produced and consumed on a mass level (Glover, 3). The pulp fiction heritage from which Caspary’s *Laura* emerged is an example of a popular fiction product par excellence. Pulp fiction novels were “often sensational, mass-produced literature [that were] frequently viewed as ‘trash’— cheap, disposable and lacking in literary quality” (Smith, 141). It is easy to understand why “popular fiction has always had an intricate connection with questions of gender and sexuality” when considering its mass consumption (Mitchell, 122). Taking into account its necessity to appeal to the largest portion of society as possible, it inevitably deals with forces that shape the dominate social structures such as gender construction. In the presentation of societal gender norms, popular fiction can be processed in different ways: “on the one hand, [it encourages] a kind of ‘false consciousness’ and [participates] in the work of gender and sexual regulation and, on the other hand, as [it provides] opportunities for (at least) the negotiation of normativity and (at best) its contestation” (125). By subverting the heteronormative assumptions of her mass audience, Caspary was able to achieve the latter.

A shift in gender roles was not the only thing to fear during the era in which *Laura* written. A growing fear of communism was also spreading throughout America during the 1930s and 40s. A fear of the femme fatale and a fear of communism can be viewed as intersectional concepts. Bram Dijkstra argues that “women who attempted to

enter these fields [of intellectual and capital gain] of manly achievement were shirking their duty in the dimorphic realm of the evolutionary advance... many feared that once women gained a foothold in there, men might as well pack their bags” (216-217). It is this threatening sense of economic Otherness that directly relates the femme fatale to communism and “it became thus progressively less difficult to believe that these ‘unnatural women’ had formed a perverse alliance with the [...] anti-individualistic working-class upstarts [...] who called themselves socialists and communists” (217).

This connection between the communist and the modern woman is fostered because each of these subjects triggered Americans to fear a danger that lurks beneath the surface. Many viewers interpreted *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as a portrayal of the American Red Scare (Mann). *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* features an evil that is nearly impossible to detect as the alien pods taking over Santa Mira are identical to the citizens of this town. In this way, a viewer of the film “whose way of life was imminently threatened by invasive outsiders” were left with the impression that in order to escape this evil, one must be constantly vigilant in recognizing this Other that was permeating society (Mann, 50). An American audience— at that time dealing with what Jonathan Auerbach calls a “hysteria that the most secure social structures in the United States were being undermined by an alien enemy dwelling in the country’s midst” (18)— could quickly associate the fear of the pods with the fear of the communist because both represented identities that were difficult to distinguish.

The femme fatale presents this same difficulty because she “is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. For her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be” (Doane,

1). Waldo Lydecker is conscious of the dilemma he poses to those who try to pin down his personality when he tells Mark McPherson that “I’m not kind, I’m vicious. It’s the secret of my charm” (Preminger). This fear of the unknowable, then, is advantageous to those producing popular portrayals of the Other. Audiences were drawn to these portrayals in attempt to understand the those “Un-American” forces– the femme fatale or the communist– which evaded understanding “demanded probing and surveillance that superseded traditional police work” (Auerbach, 5).

It is true that in many ways the fascination with the femme fatale, as proven through her prevalence in literature and film, represents a manifestation of male anxieties and the attempt to control them. In her seminal film theory essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explores the concept of “the male gaze.” The on-screen female’s “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” allows the male gazer to actively project his desires onto the female figure (Mulvey, 442). While this scopophilic act produces pleasure, the male viewer must also come to terms with the fact that the woman “symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis” (438). A way to deal with this castration anxiety is “a re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*)” (444). Though this concept is found in both literature and film, it is perfectly represented in cinema because of the possibility to shift “the emphasis of the look” (447). This dominance over a feared object comes from the imperial authority inherent in the exploration, and subsequent understanding of the Other through exposure, that is part of being a viewer. Mulvey’s conceptualization of the male gaze supports the claim that

“in film noir, it is clear that men need to control women’s sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it” (Place, 49).

Although this exposure to the Other serves those in power by allowing them to understand, define, and dominate pervasive and hard-to-distinguish outside threats, it was not produced without incidence. In the case of the first wave of feminism, the exploration of female sexuality was focused on and “an important strand in the backlash, or counterattack against feminism and the challenge to sexual and moral orthodoxy taking place in fiction, was to associate it with popular anxieties about a declining empire and a weakening moral fibre [...] moral purity in this moment of crisis became paramount” (Stott, 12, 15). The concept of the femme fatale which was portrayed in both the novel and the film *Laura* challenged the constructed association of this archetype with “a weakening moral fibre” through story-telling. The subversive disruptions that are made possible in these mediums occupied a zone that anxious audiences felt comfortable with: close enough to the Other to attempt to recognize and dominate it, but not so close as to accept it.

VII). Conclusion

The archetype of the femme fatale is clearly gendered. By its very name, the femme fatale (translated in English from the original French to fatal woman) refers to someone who is gendered female. In many ways, a femme fatale character interrupts the accepted notions of what it means to be female. Instead of being passive, innocent, and selfless, the femme fatale is scheming, ruthless, and self-serving. By going against the

traditional role of woman, the femme fatale is a vehicle through which one can question the naturalization of the institution of gender.

The ability to read both Laura and Waldo as an embodiment of the femme fatale allows the reader to place them both in the category of a third sex, “neither truly male nor truly female, an attempt to suspend the fundamental gender dichotomy” (Dijkstra, 24). This category of a third sex, an other outside the binary conception of gender, can be seen as an “attempt to establish a dialectical synthesis of these two fundamentally opposed principles [and therefore signal] a first step toward the total collapse of civilized society” (24). Furthermore, by occupying a role outside of the two accepted genders, Laura and Waldo are intentionally being unproductive in the furthering of the race. Within the context of Caspary’s communist leanings, it makes sense that she would explore this concept. Just as communism opposes the American ideal of capitalism, the transcendence of accepted notions of gender opposes the American ideal of family production. Reading both of these characters as the femme fatale has specific implications to the paradigm of binary gender roles, but each reading works in a different way.

What is the effect of a femme fatale character that turns out to be innocent? In many ways, this literary slight-of-hand exposes the ways in which the femme fatale is constructed through social prejudices. It can be said that by pursuing a career, Laura represents a “subversion of the feminine spirit of dutiful reproductive service” (Dijkstra, 24). Instead of Laura’s career success, beauty, and independence being signs of an empowered woman who is a positive asset to society, these traits distract the reader into believing Laura to be the murderer. While Laura as the femme fatale exposes prejudices

against the female, Waldo as the femme fatale exposes prejudices against men transcending traditional gender roles.

Because he is a male, the depiction of Waldo Lydecker acting out stereotypes of this gendered role is significant. Similar to Judith Butler's assertion that "by conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation" (8). In other words, by inhabiting a role that is by discursively constructed as reserved for women, Waldo Lydecker challenges the notion that the femme fatale role must be assumed by a specific kind of woman and opens the archetype of the femme fatale to represent more than just a beautiful, deceitful woman. Just as with feminism, the femme fatale becomes a more powerful tool and less oppressive when the subject of woman is complicated. In this sense, Caspary is striving toward the same goal as Butler in *Gender Trouble*: "to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (5). In order to achieve this goal, a destabilization of accepted norms must take place. To emancipate the modern woman from association with the femme fatale, Caspary goes beyond simply complicating the expectations of the femme fatale as an archetype and additionally complicates the production of the femme fatale as an exclusively female role. By putting Waldo in an inherently feminine position, Caspary can ask the question that Simone De Beauvoir answers in *The Second Sex*: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir, 267). Just because Waldo was born with a body that was sexed male, he is not barred from inhabiting an traditionally feminine character.

In many ways, “*Laura* is Caspary’s manifesto, applying her experience both in advertising and as a woman professional with a private life” (Emrys, 203). Being a known communist and a modern woman, Caspary was familiar with disrupting the hegemony in her own lived experience. It would make sense, then, that in her novel *Laura*, she would look for ways to further complicate societal norms. She takes advantage of the modes of popular fiction and the detective story genre by playing with the assumptions that they carry in order to question gender.

Furthermore, her use of the femme fatale is appropriate for this goal of destabilizing power structures that have marginalized her identities. Traditional femme fatales of the time period were already disrupting what it means to be a woman by using their femininity duplicitously for individual gain as opposed to using it passively and for reproduction. Vera Caspary takes this archetype even further. The innocence of the presumed murderer, Laura Hunt, forces the audience to question the vilification of the personality traits associated with the femme fatale. By featuring a male who ultimately acts out the role of the femme fatale, she is able to challenge the production of gender roles. Just as her communist belief system signified the crumbling of American capitalism, her use of the femme fatale represents a complete disruption of the assumptions of gender that allow sexism function in society.

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