There's No Place Like Home...Anymore:
Domestic Masquerade & Faux-Housewife Femme Fatale in
Barbara Stanwyck's Early 1940's Films

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Film Studies

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

Barbara Stanwyck's performance as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* is considered to be the quintessential femme fatale. Despite this, the consideration of her other femme fatale performances is minimal. Her contribution to the canon of the subversive figure can be located in her engagement with the domestic, specifically her disruption and transformation of domestic spaces through the utilization of her sexuality and sexualized image. This thesis will explore the ways her characters in the early 1940's films *Ball of Fire*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Christmas in Connecticut* are narratively and formally positioned as cinematic fatales in their representation and use domestic masquerade and gender performance in order to prove their narrative agency.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Carleton Film Studies Department for assisting me in my intellectual and personal growth, but especially Charles O'Brien, who never wavered in his encouragement of my studies or interests. Special thanks goes to Laura Horak for suggesting new directions to take my thesis. Carleton has also graced me with the loveliest colleagues a newcomer to the discipline could ask for. Thanks to Celia Kingsbury and José Sanchez for always believing in me. I am grateful for my father, Rick Hopkins, and sister, Anna Hopkins, who offer their unconditional support in all my endeavors. It would be disastrous for me to exclude my nephews, Sven and Fenrir, who are collectively "bae." I am indebted to David Cunningham and Chris Byram for their assistance with my writing process, the endless love of Helen Anderson and Devin Hartley, and my biggest cheerleader back home, Laurel Duever. And to my habibi, Mo Bin Masoud, whose humor, wit, and tenderness keep me laughing and inspired (even when he believes I think people call me on his phone). Is there greater flattery than being likened to Jessica Rabbit and Liz Lemon? I think not.

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Introduction

Draped in a towel at the top of the stairs, Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson seductively murmurs, “Wait till I put something on, I’ll be right down.” Her explicit reference is to clothing, but as a deceptive figure, she entertains many guises. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwall’s comprehensive *A Dictionary of Film Studies* describes Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* as the quintessential femme fatale (Kuhn 158). Film scholarship concerning the noir fatales at least mentions, if not thoroughly analyzes, this performance because her character within it embodies most of the theoretical and aesthetic characteristics attributed to ideas of the prototypical femme fatale. The visual catalogue *Femme Fatale: Cinema's Most Unforgettable Lethal Ladies* suggests that Stanwyck had the longest career as a femme fatale of any star (Mainon 172). The femme fatale is an archetypal staple within the humanities that populates early film history and invades the contemporary trajectory. The dominant roles of actresses within these films solidify their femme fatale status and feed into the subversion of their icon, from Marlene Dietrich’s Lola-Lola to Angelina Jolie’s Lara Croft. Although celebrity persona contextually impacts the understanding of a fatale status, it is the pattern of roles that engage with concerns of female agency and sexuality that ultimately contribute to one’s classification as “femme fatale.”

Hollywood’s star system and celebrity culture are responsible for the multiplicity of scholarship and accessible materials on uncovering the femme fatale essence of Stanwyck’s contemporaries, such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, and

Joan Crawford. Despite playing the role that is exemplary of what a femme fatale is, Barbara Stanwyck's femme fatale characterization, outside of Phyllis Dietrichson, is minimal. There has been, however, an influx of interest in Stanwyck and her characters within the past decade, especially the last few years. Recent biographies recognize the impact of Stanwyck's performances as narrative agent. Dan Callahan's *Barbara Stanwyck: The Miracle Woman* and Victoria Wilson's *A Life of Barbara Stanwyck: Steel-True 1907-1940* attempt to pierce the essence of Stanwyck using biographical detail. Callahan tries to proclaim Stanwyck a lesbian icon for her subversive contribution (Callahan 169). Maria Battista's *Fast-Talking Dames* looks at Stanwyck's agency through dialogue in *The Lady Eve*, but only briefly touches on the ideas related to the femme fatale. Linda Berkvens completed her dissertation, "No Crinoline-Covered Lady: Stardom, Agency, and the Career of Barbara Stanwyck," on the relationship between Stanwyck's agency and her celebrity career with media-industrial contexts. Andrew Klevan's *Barbara Stanwyck (Film Stars)* for the British Film Institute is the most recent significant exploration of her performances, including *Double Indemnity*. He assesses film performance in a new light, utilizing a theatrical approach in conjunction with a contextual reading of Stanwyck as a performer across her roles. My reading of the films is less about her personal style and more about how her characters are constructed and portrayed within the diegetic world.

I discovered in my research of her films that Stanwyck not only played femme fatales often throughout her filmography, but most of the roles during the height of her career were some kind of cinematic fatale. I also noticed a pattern with many of her early 40's films---her characters' agency had direct complications with the domestic, requiring

her to manipulate props, spaces, and social roles to her advantage. This thesis offers a close formal and narrative analysis of the films *Double Indemnity*, *Christmas in Connecticut*, and *Ball of Fire* to demonstrate how Stanwyck's engagement with domestic spaces and roles prove her significant contribution to the cinematic femme fatale canon.

Film scholarship concerning the femme fatale is plentiful in the ideas that form the foundation of the figure, but still growing in unpacking the figure herself. Mary Ann Doane's *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* remains the most important investigation of ideas related to the cinematic fatale. She explores masquerade, epistemological crises, and the close-up in relation to well-known femme fatale figures (e.g. Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth, Louise Brooks). However, she notes, "This book is not really *about* the femme fatale (although I would like to write that book someday). Instead, the femme fatale acts as a kind of signpost or emblem for many of the issues or concerns addressed in the essays collected here" (Doane 3). Considering her book remains the authoritative cinematic fatale text, this caveat required me to develop an analysis based on correlating theoretical fragments.

Three other important texts continue the conversation on the femme fatale that interact with Doane's work: Julie Grossman's *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, Antonio Marcio da Silva's *The "Femme" Fatale in Brazilian Cinema: Challenging Hollywood Norms*, and Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe's *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*. Grossman and da Silva offer new ways to think about the cinematic fatale. As the title of her book indicates, Grossman is concerned with engaging with the femme fatale outside of the figure's psychoanalytic scholarship and generic cementation. She writes, "...bad women in noir are not demonized in the film in which

they appear and are very often shown to be victims: first, of the social rules that dictate gender roles and, second, of reading practices that overidentify with and overinvest in the idea of the ‘femme fatale’” (Grossman 2). Da Silva explores the figure in Brazilian cinema in her own national context, but within his introduction, he looks at scholarship devoted to the Hollywood fatale in relation to his work. He asserts that the femme fatale is not even tied to the female sex, but a queer consciousness about gender performativity, which allows for the reading of other kinds of femme fatales. He explains, “...the femme fatale is beyond a single definition because she has multiple gender and sexual identities, and belongs to different social classes and racial groups” (da Silva 1). O’Rawe and Hanson echo this constriction of the femme fatale by noir, “The tendency to ‘read the femme fatale either as an embodiment of threat or as textual enigma’ overlooks her agency and ‘tragic sensibility’” (Hanson 3). Their book addresses the femme fatale as she appears across the humanities, but the last section is devoted specifically to film. Even with literature included, they attribute much of their theoretical work to Doane in the introduction. Grossman, da Silva, and O’Rawe and Hanson all voice concerns about current femme fatale scholarship and prove newer theoretical considerations of the figure are necessary.

The first objective to unpacking ideas surrounding the film fatale is to understand its bondage to film noir. This will both illuminate the figure’s cinematic history as well as assist in developing a more inclusive definition. The femme fatale has been rigidly situated within the context of film noir as she is considered more than a trope, but an integral component to the recognition of the genre. The problem is that the generic constraint of noir, especially one that is descriptive, restricts readings of the figure as only

a product of a male-gearred narrative. Many of the essays in Kaplan's anthology *Women in Film Noir* attribute the socio-historic influence (second and third wave feminism, gay liberation) as the causation for the changes in the neo-noir femme fatale. While this is sound for a generic evolutionary reading of the noir fatale, it builds on a definition dependent on a specific understanding of the cinematic fatale. Kaplan herself comments in the introduction, "Our 1978 theories largely conceived of the femme fatale as a male fantasy, as serving unconscious male anxieties and forbidden anxieties" (Kaplan 7).

Therefore, I feel it is important to stress---the noir fatale may dominate discussions about the figure, but the noir trope is only a section of the cinematic fatale's rich history. The femme fatale existed before noir, and was especially prevalent in film's infancy as evidenced by Theda Bara, Anna May Wong, and Pola Negri. In addition, Doane's work on Dietrich and Brooks prove the figure does not singularly belong to noir even in scholarship. Grossman challenges not only how the noir fatale is read, but how the cinematic fatale is understood, proving more contexts of a wider scope are necessary for evolving discourses on the cinematic fatale.

My attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the femme fatale is not meant to provide a definitive proclamation of what or whom she is. A core aspect to the figure is that she cannot be known---it is the mystery of her sexuality and image that provokes and challenges patriarchy. Doane offers a primary consideration, "For her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable" (Doane 1). That said, by acknowledging her cinematic prominence, relevance in feminist scholarship, and evolving cultural context, one can find new methods for recognizing and

unpacking her essence. This thesis uses the figure to locate the concerns of female representation and agency.

Rather than a comprehensive expression of the cinematic fatale, I instead offer a few observations and consistencies about femme fatales in the humanities from my research, which will establish a foundation for this analysis. First, she resists patriarchy or patriarchal order in some fashion, typically in the aim of her own desires. Grossman similarly notes for films that prominently feature the figure, “It is the leading female’s commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be (sexual, capitalist, maternal), at any cost, that makes her cynosure, the compelling point of interest for men and women” (Grossman 3). This assessment provides an idea of how agency is a key component to understanding the figure and how she transitioned from Theda Bara to Barbara Stanwyck to Angelina Jolie. The argument that the cinematic fatale simply embodies male fears of feminism or unconsciously acts as a part of her femininity dismisses her accomplishments as a narrative agent. Film scholarship seems to treat fatales of the later 20th century less like this, most likely for their socio-historic context as heroines emerging as culture reflection. However, Angelina Jolie and Sharon Stone are no more subversive for their time than Mae West or Louise Brooks, so why reduce the contribution of the latter? Second, her sexuality and gendered image are implicit in her agency and, as it especially applies to the cinematic fatale, are as evident in formal components as narrative. These observations are key in recognizing Stanwyck’s cinematic fatales.

I developed an interest in Barbara Stanwyck’s engagement with the cinematic fatale after I noticed a relationship between her agency and domestic spaces or roles.

What struck me as compelling were the narrative patterns and textual similarities that existed between these films with Stanwyck at the helm. In some cases, she entertains domesticity in pursuit of her material desires as a faux-housewife, whether pretending to be married in *Christmas in Connecticut* or regarding her actual nuptials as a device for higher agency in *Double Indemnity*. In another, *Ball of Fire*, she enters an unusual domestic situation and controls her manipulation of the space through performative femininity. Though my analysis is concerned with her early 40's roles, my investigation of her entire filmography revealed roles that challenged or confronted traditional gender roles.

These domestic patterns are made even more interesting when one considers that her titular role in *Stella Dallas* (1937) frequents scholarship on the melodrama and female spectatorship. Stella is not unlike Stanwyck's other characters in the romantic comedies of this thesis, where her "nature" is inherently destructive despite good intentions. Stella's subjugation as narrative agent in relation to her motherly role is explored by Linda Williams in her influential essay "Something Else besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama." She says of the famous last scene, "Significantly, Stella appears in this scene for the first time stripped of the exaggerated marks of femininity---the excessive make-up, furs, feathers, clank-ing jewelry, and ruffled dresses---that have been the weapons of her defiant assertions that a woman can be 'something else besides a mother'" (Williams 16). The disparity between social roles and female agency is made apparent in the film's treatment of its heroine. Curiously, Doane says of the femme fatale, "...the femme fatale is represented as the antithesis of the maternal---sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes

production” (Doane 2). Perhaps it is because of roles like Stella Dallas, the sacrificial mother, that many neglect to see Stanwyck as less subversive than some of her contemporaries, but this conflicting identity (mother vs. individual) and this sense of incompatibility with the domestic makes her characters’ reading as a femme fatale even more worthy of consideration.

To engage with the domestic component of her femme fatale characterization, I utilize Doane’s ideas on masquerade and female spectatorship and Judith Butler’s conception of gender performativity. The discomfort of domesticity and gender roles found in Stanwyck’s Stella Dallas character is similar to the patterns across the films explored in this thesis. In all three films, her characters employ a gendered disguise while in a domestic space to further their agency. In her essay, “Masquerade Reconsidered,” Doane builds on Joan Riviere’s discussion of femininity as a “play of masks,” while acknowledging the masquerade does not imply a real femininity exists behind a performed one (Doane 37). In his assertions that the femme fatale is not male, da Silva uses Butler’s work on gender as performance as support. In my own analysis, I use the term “faux-housewife” as way to describe Stanwyck’s characters’ utilization of the domestic, whether role or space, as merely a device to secure her desire. The gendered consciousness of Stanwyck’s characters, Sugarpuss O’Shea, Phyllis Dietrichson, and Elizabeth Lane, about femininity and social role supports the notion that they act in spite of patriarchy toward a goal of material and/or sexual fulfillment.

My focus on postwar films in the early 1940’s, where the abundance of the femme fatale and noir generate a correlation, serves two purposes. One, by beginning with *Double Indemnity*, I offer a different reading of the film that works with a more

nuanced understanding of the cinematic femme fatale. Following Kaplan and Grossman's concerns with reading film noir as "male," I offer a consideration of her extensive agency rather than dismissing her as a misogynistic construction. Secondly, I use romantic comedies to support this understanding of the cinematic fatale and prove that these characteristics are transgeneric even during the height of noir.

One may wonder what is the significance of locating roles that fulfill the archetypal woman who typically embodies male fantasies and anxieties about the dangers of female sexuality. Like myself, Antonio Marcio da Silva recognizes the figure's gendered evolution and contemporary importance as subversive icon. He sums up her historical place, "The figure permeated social imaginaries as a source of anxiety because she challenged patriarchal law. Consequently, she became a symptom of contemporary anxieties, and patriarchal society projects its anxieties onto this representation of woman who is an ambivalent symbol of transgression because she is hated yet simultaneously venerated" (da Silva 7). The containment of the cinematic fatale does not diminish her staying power, that is, everything she did or said before the narrative conclusion either kills her or secures her place. As a figure of resistance, she rejects patriarchal restrictions on her agency and desire, sometimes managing to utilize her own sexuality, body, or gendered image in her own favor. In pursuit of her own desires in resistance to hegemonic forces, the femme fatale has become an icon for those with sexualities outside of heteronormativity (queer, BDSM, etc.). Stanwyck's contribution is significant in her peculiar engagement with the ideas surrounding the figure. These textual re-readings of her classic films provide a new feminist perspective with which to better understand the

scope of the cinematic fatale as well as locate the diversity offered by Stanwyck's unique iterations.

Each chapter explores a specific film and her characters' specific take on the cinematic femme fatale. These roles offer a different kind of character who demonstrates the ideas circulated by the scholars and theorists mentioned in this introduction. There is logic in the ordering of films. By beginning with *Double Indemnity*, the film containing the "quintessential femme fatale" and excessive scholarship, I establish a foundation for recognizing patterns of representation and agency through a fresh lens. Both characters in *Double Indemnity* and *Christmas in Connecticut* satisfy my "faux-housewife" characterization by exhibiting domestic masquerade, yet their objectives and narrative design differ. I conclude with *Ball of Fire* because it strays the most in terms of its engagement with domesticity and absence of the faux-housewife, but the cinematic fatale patterns evident in the first two chapters still play a significant part in her character's representation. The generic components are considered in terms of the film's construction of narrative structure and gender, but the patterns of representation are ultimately transgeneric. In parts of the thesis, I refer to the film's recognition of Stanwyck as femme fatale. By this, I mean her character's gendered behavior or image is coded as "bad." This coding fetishizes her to satisfy the male gaze, while simultaneously recognizing her active sexuality as reflective of her type of femininity. This analysis does not seek to definitively prove what the femme fatale is or to investigate Stanwyck's celebrity and its impact on her fatale status. Instead, I provide a thorough textual analysis of how her characters are visually and narratively positioned in relationship to their gendered representation, agency, and engagement with domesticity within the diegesis---all related

theoretical concerns associated with the history of the cinematic fatale. Through domestic masquerade and gender performativity, Stanwyck's characters argue for a wider consideration of the femme fatale and the extensive significance of her contribution to female representation.

Chapter 1

Domestic Saboteur

In her most vindictive role aside from Martha Ivers, Barbara Stanwyck plays ruthless vixen Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944). The designation of her character as quintessential femme fatale is strictly a generic characterization. Despite the multiplicity of scholarship surrounding the film and Stanwyck's character, the majority is situated in psychoanalytic readings, including the essay about the film in Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir* by Claire Johnson. One of the more recent essays about the film, Steve Neale's essay, "I Can't Tell Whether You're Lying: *Double Indemnity*, *Human Desire* and the Narratology of Femmes Fatales," looks at narratological devices in relation to noir and the figure. In discussing the objective for his essay, he acknowledges the narrative construction as useful for analysis, "...the mechanisms of narration can be used not only to contribute or reinforce the stereotype of the *femme fatale*, but also to complicate or even to undermine it" (Hanson 188). That said, his analysis of *Double Indemnity* is quite brief and is used more as setup for *Human Desire*. This chapter will not work in spite of the noir consideration, but in conjunction with it. As previously stressed in my introduction, the noir fatale is only part of the cinematic fatale's rich history. Therefore, while I do not dismiss her noir contribution, my analysis of the film offers a fresh reading of Phyllis Dietrichson as *cinematic fatale* in an attempt to stress her individual agency rather than read her as simply a personified symptom of male anxieties.

The restrictive narrative of the film is given from the account of insurance salesman, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray). Walter arrives at the Dietrichson house where he meets the sultry Phyllis Dietrichson (Stanwyck). He is immediately smitten by her physical allure and returns to see her. When he believes her questions about accident insurance are in anticipation of her husband's death, he leaves. She visits his apartment later that night and seduces him, but they agree any action would be too risky, especially under the inspection of the insurance claim hound, Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). However, when Walter devises a foolproof plan, the two proceed with the murder of Mr. Dietrichson (Tom Powers) with the aim of achieving an accidental death, thus double the money for a double indemnity claim. Though at first Keyes and his superior, Edward S. Norton Jr. (Richard Gaines), cannot figure out the truth of the situation, Keyes's intuition starts to piece logical missteps together. When Dietrichson's daughter, Lola (Jean Heather), decides to speak against Phyllis and informs Neff of her dark past, he begins to doubt his choices and trust in Phyllis. Lola's ex-boyfriend, Nino Zachetti, becomes entangled in the mess and Walter realizes the fantasy he had concocted is no longer a reality. Despite receiving everything from Walter's perspective, all narrative action is spurred by Phyllis, who becomes the primary narrative agent.

Double Indemnity, situated before two romantic comedies in this thesis, provides a darker contrast for which to compare the other two lighter films. Phyllis is an integral part to this analysis because her construction allows one to see how Stanwyck's baddest vixen demonstrates agency in the same way as her lovable Sugarpuss and Elizabeth. Recognizing how Stanwyck's characters are positioned and represented despite generic constrictions accentuates the transgeneric proliferation of the cinematic fatale. The

differences are tonally apparent, but the similarities in representation expose the patterns of how female characters with higher agency are coded within industry films. There are sympathetic suggestions that Phyllis is perhaps a victim of some kind, but the film overtly paints her as malicious. However, the staunch disparity does not hinder an intertextual reading of Stanwyck's characters, it only strengthens it. That her portrayals vary from misguided to evil, and yet one can witness how closely the symbiotic relationship between sexuality and agency is delivered yet another indication that the femme fatale does not belong to one genre or formula. This also highlights how broadly female sexuality is understood and designed by mainstream films.

Unlike the Stanwyck's other two characters assessed in this thesis, Phyllis is actually a housewife by law. I argue that her faux-housewife characterization is applicable because of her rejection of the domestic, her utilization of the role to further her agency, and her method of deception via gender performance. Sugarpuss feigns a sweeter femininity and Elizabeth plays wife, but Phyllis still fulfills the "faux" part because the role is only a means of achieving her monetary or material desires. Her particular demonstration of faux-housewife femme fatale is clearly evident in two ways. First, she ruins and transforms the domestic space similar to Stanwyck's other characters. The Dietrichson house is only featured in a few scenes, but her influence marks a shift in the familial arena by the film's conclusion. The second is the diversity of performances she utilizes to adapt to the situations around her to control her presentation to the other characters. In every scene, we are treated to a different Phyllis who exhibits a kind of nuance to achieve her desired effect. These two aspects support her characterization,

showcase her use of domestic masquerade, and engage with the cinematic fatale's relationship with gendered representation.

Lola functions as a foil to Phyllis in the film's treatment of her character. The familial aspect, their relationship as stepmother and stepdaughter, lends itself to this division in representation as well. Keyes mentions the post-mortem identification of Mr. Dietrichson's body as being done by his daughter and wife. They are paired together because of their relationship to Mr. Dietrichson, but are separated for the role they play in relation to him. Lola's femininity is also tied to her age as the naïve, virginal youth. Phyllis is a stepmother who has inserted herself into the family unit, and with this comes a certain denigration of its sacred bond. Lola was traditionally brought into the household whereas Phyllis adopted a role from another woman, suggesting her as a kind of foreign invader. From Lola's soft-spoken, high pitched sweetness to Phyllis's sultry purring, these differences are meant to further polarize their representation. The first scene in which Lola appears, Mr. Dietrichson's signing of the documents with Walter and Phyllis present, formally communicates this polarity. In the first shot, Lola and Phyllis are seated near each other, playing a game of checkers. This playful challenging evidences oppositional construction on a larger narrative scale. The bifurcation of their femininities is formally evident from the color of their outfits and visibility of their faces. Lola wears white, a nod to her purity, and the entirety of her face is visible. Her wholesome appearance aligns with her naivety---she is as she appears. Phyllis, on the other hand, wears black and is shown primarily in profile. Her face is partially hidden because she conceals her nature, giving an impression of deception. Although these contrasting

qualities are may be emphasized because of their dislike for each other, narrative instances involving their opposition are heavily tied to the depiction of their femininities.

Lola's narrative purpose is to provide a female character to contrast with Phyllis to further depict her femininity as bad. Consider the cause-and-effect relationship this narrative effort has on their portrayal. The more Lola is emphatically stressed as victim through Walter's narration, the more vilified Phyllis is. Lola's personal account of the events leading up to Phyllis's entrance into the household reveal to Walter the true nature of Phyllis (i.e. type of woman). He sees through the performative illusion and recognizes Phyllis's corrupted femininity through the lens of Lola's pure femininity. This bears similarity to the design of Miss Bragg in *Ball of Fire*, who provides a kind of foil for Sugarpudd. Bragg, as an enforcer of patriarchal femininity and the only one immune to Sugarpudd's sexual appeal, identifies Sugarpudd as femme fatale because she represents her ideological opposite. Lola's youth and behavior provide the image of a completely different kind of femininity than Bragg, but they align in their function to counter the representation of Stanwyck's cinematic fatale. As such, Lola's oppositional positioning grants Walter the patriarchal discernment to properly identify Phyllis.

The way Lola's femininity is coded offers insight into Walter's treatment of her and the gendered politics of the film. Lola approaches Walter at the insurance building and tries to discredit Phyllis and indict her in the crime. Continuing with her delicate feminine construction, she feels she must dismiss the possibility of female hysteria to be taken seriously, "Look at me, Mr. Neff. I'm not crazy. I'm not hysterical. I'm not even crying." She unconsciously identifies Phyllis as a femme fatale in her account of the

death of her mother, “The nurse stood there. She didn't say a word, but there was a look in her eyes I'll never forget. Two days later my mother was dead.” Walter tries to put it in strictly familial terms, “You don't like your stepmother, do you? Isn't it just because she is your stepmother?” However, she rejects this, “I loathe her because she did it. She did for the money.” She exhibits behavior that goes against traditional femininity in her rant, “She's not going to get away with it this time, because I'm going to speak up. I'm going to tell everything I know.” Her abrasive attitude conflicts with gendered expectations so she apologizes, “I didn't mean to act like this.” She is constructed as self-conscious about her behavior because as an oppositional figure, her gendered depiction functions to demonize Phyllis.

Walter's interaction with Lola not only reveals the deception of Phyllis, but it also indicates patriarchal mentalities concerning female sexuality. According to his voiceover and dialogue with Phyllis, Walter treats Lola out to dinner to keep her content and occupied. However, he grows to trust her word over anyone else's. Lola is instrumental in the shift of his feelings toward Phyllis and this is fueled by her idealized and appealing femininity. His feelings for her develop and he protects her, defends her, and takes her side over Phyllis. This is largely due to Lola's femininity being the kind that patriarchy approves of and necessitates. Walter prefers to be the provider and defender of a delicate femininity, which comes down to control. Patriarchy desires female sexuality it can possess. Phyllis is the antithesis to this, as her sexuality is provocative, open, and she can utilize it to manipulate those around her. He notes that he finds Lola's presence comforting, which is tied to her appropriate gendered performance. Following his murder of Phyllis, he catches Zachetti outside and convinces him to return to Lola. He does this

immediately after learning Phyllis had planned to exploit his temper to get him to murder Lola. Lola's affection for him aside, why would Walter use his last moments to reunite her with an abusive boyfriend? Walter feels Lola needs a male figure to protect and take care of her because her delicate femininity requires it. His influence on her as a father figure and caretaker is what corrects her feminine hysteria and allows her positive gendered portrayal to flourish. In Claire Johnson's essay on *Double Indemnity*, she writes, "It is Neff's paternal function in relation to Lola which restores her as good object within familial relations" (Kaplan 92). As an oppositional figure in terms of representation, unpacking these ideas surrounding Lola and her treatment give a patriarchal context to the narrative's design and the same ideas that demonize female sexuality and code Phyllis as a femme fatale.

The intriguing aspect of this film's exploration of domestic transformation is that the household has already seen a fundamental transition by the time the film starts. Through Phyllis's and Lola's accounts, we learn that Phyllis was the former Mrs. Dietrichson's nurse and then became the new Mrs. Dietrichson within a matter of six months. Whereas Sugarpuss and Elizabeth are thrown into the domestic sphere at the very beginnings of their films, Phyllis has already invaded and disrupted the house. Although her influence has had a tremendous impact, her encounter with Walter proves her intended effect is far from complete because, as a pursuer of wealth, she has yet to be satisfied. The first scene featuring Phyllis indicates her foreign presence within the house through a formalistic reveal. After Walter strong-arms his way into the house wanting to talk to Mr. Dietrichson, Phyllis appears at the top of the stairs wrapped in a towel and holding sunglasses. She is mostly concealed by the stair handrail, but visible through

deep focus in the background of the shot. She speaks, “I’m Mrs. Dietrichson. What is it?” When he introduces himself and his occupation, it cuts to her as she inches forward in a low-angle long shot asking, “Is there anything I can do?” The camera lingers on her as he explains his purpose. Seeming interested in him, she moves forward to the handrail, now in plain view. Her positioning in these two shots establishes her as the authority of the house, and grappling with a towel that barely conceals her body, fuses this authority with her sexuality. Her provocative image entices the male gaze, but the towel and distance serve as a reminder that she remains in control. During this exchange, the progression of shots move closer and closer to her. By her fourth shot, she fills the frame in another low-angle shot. This trajectory illustrates her methodology. As one who understands agency through her sexuality, she uses her image to appeal to the male gaze. She draws in Walter when she recognizes the possible opportunities for wealth he provides for her. The conceal and subsequent reveal sequence and positioning solidify her dominance over the household as secured by the understanding of her sexuality. The device she uses to enter and join the Dietrichson house is the same one she uses to transform it into a space more suited to her needs.

Phyllis gradually reveals herself to Walter as an agent in control of her image. (Figure 1.1, 1.2, 1.3)

Following their introduction to one another, Phyllis invites Walter to join her in the living room. He notices the picture frames of Lola and Mr. Dietrichson on the piano where Phyllis is curiously absent. These pictures indicate what remains of a space that is defined by the stability of the nuclear family it houses. Phyllis's missing picture suggests she is not a part of the familial unit, but rather foreign invader. As she descends the stairs, he is captivated by her ankles. The mise-en-scene of their interactions within the living room suggest her deceptive nature. When she first enters the living room, she looks into the mirror and says, "Hope I've got my face on straight." She talks to him in the mirror while she brushes up. A few moments later, she paces while musing on her fears concerning her husband's safety and her shadow follows her movement on the fireplace. These two reflections of her figure are formal indications of the disparity between her self and performance of self. The visual clues align with their exchange, where she plays up the housewife routine, all the while baiting him with her image. She refers to him as smart because she recognizes his potential utility for her. The house is not a space in which she belongs, but a space she can utilize to further her agency. She subtly flirts with Walter because the sacred connotation of a domestic space means nothing to her.

Phyllis makes plans with Walter for a second rendezvous at night when she believes her husband will be home. However, she changes the plans to afternoon, knowing he would be absent. This second encounter proves her transformation of the house as a space of her own utility. During their first encounter, he walks into the house and she warms up to him as she finds him advantageous. The second encounter, knowing both his attraction and possible value to her agency, she greets him at the door as though inviting him into her lair, "Hello, Mr. Neff. Aren't you coming in?" Her invitation seems

less casual and more like a command. He learns that not only her husband is missing, but the maid as well. She acts as if it were not intentional, "Oh, I forgot. Today's the maid's day off." Another domestic alteration surfaces when she asks if he would prefer a drink. He expresses interest in a beer, but she offers him an iced tea. He accepts and she asks, "Lemon? Sugar?" He responds, "Fix it your way." She seemingly performs a domestic task, but transforms the connotation into a sexual one. Instead of giving him what he wants, she offers him her own concoction, one he cannot resist. The drink represents her sexuality in that she makes a proposition, but on her own terms. His own narration supports this following his exit from the house, "I stopped at a drive-in for a bottle of beer, the one I had wanted all along, only I wanted it worse now, to get rid of the sour taste of her iced tea and everything that went with it." The longer his visit inside the house, the more aware he becomes of her true intentions.

By the third household scene, Phyllis and Walter have conspired to kill Mr. Dietrichson and collect the double indemnity claim. The previous scenes exposed her position in the house and gradual seduction of Walter, but this time he is no longer a visitor, but an extension of the housewife. The opening of the scene establishes the aftermath of Phyllis's entrance into the house that happened before Walter came into the picture. Phyllis and Lola are playing a game, illustrating their opposition to one another, with Mr. Dietrichson seated near them. The disruption of the family unit is evident in this scattered blocking. Walter, Phyllis, Lola, and Mr. Dietrichson are all present for the signing of the car insurance. This moment arises because Phyllis and Walter realize they need a witness, Lola, to be present at the signing. Her perversion of the domestic haven is initiated by her invasion, but Walter enacts her destruction of the nuclear family within it.

Through him, Phyllis is able to change the structure of the house. She carries through a plan that seeks to dethrone and remove the patriarch from his position while in his own home. The femme fatale is known for her utilization of others, so as the faux-housewife, it follows that Phyllis would invade the domestic by bringing in another entity that would disrupt the nuclear family. After Mr. Dietrichson retreats to bed, Phyllis and Walter gather at the doorstep to discuss the continuation of their plans. As a member of the Dietrichson clan, she is granted agency as it concerns the household which allows her, as concealed invader, to invite other domestic invaders into the homely realm.

The complications that arise from Mr. Dietrichson's death force Phyllis and Walter to be separated to avoid any suspicion. As a result, the fourth scene involving the interior of the Dietrichson house comes much later at the conclusion of the film. This final scene mirrors much of their first interaction, indicating she is the one whose actions are causation for the changes in the house. By this point, Phyllis has ejected the entire original familial unit from their own home, leaving a figure who arrived into already inhabited space. She elicited the help of Walter in order to kill her husband, removing the patriarchal constriction on her domestic role. Following the elimination of Mr. Dietrichson, Lola's hatred for Phyllis causes her to live elsewhere. Phyllis murders both parental figures and ejects the daughter from their familial home, transforming it from a domestic space into a residence solely of her own design. Though Walter asks her to shut off the lights before his arrival, the dark mise-en-scene is also indicative of the domestic fallout. As a destructive force, she has rendered the house into a shadow of its previous establishment. She stashes a gun underneath the cushion of her chair, hiding this destructive prop under the furniture in line with the concealment of violence. All of her

actions are related to concealing and then revealing when appropriate. Despite the familiar blocking which recalls the initial living room scene, her body language and demeanor are entirely different. Because the house is now her sanctuary to roam, she feels no need to keep up any performative charade. Walter, as the last patriarchal figure in her vicinity to interfere with the pursuit of her desire, must be killed as well. He arrives per his own request, but he enters her space, which is why she feels comfortable shooting him. Sugarpuss and Elizabeth disrupt the domestic spaces they enter, but Phyllis not only perverts them, she possesses them. The mirroring of this final scene with the first evidences her capability to wholly transform them in service of her own desires. Though there is logic to Phyllis's actions, there need not be, as she fulfills the cultural anxieties of the femme fatale who is governed by self-satisfying drive that sets her on a destructive path. Phyllis does not lose sight of her desires and is only defeated because Walter recognizes her catastrophic potential.

The most defining aspect of the faux-housewife characterization is its performance. Every scene involving Phyllis has her playing to the other characters in her vicinity. Despite a heartfelt admission before Walter kills her, we are never definitively treated to the real Phyllis Dietrichson outside of facial expressions not cast in anyone's direction. Her dialogue, body language, and role are all elements of performance she uses as guise. This echoes Doane's remarks about femininity as masquerade (Doane 37) and Judith Butler's gender performativity, as the audience is never treated to a sequence which reveals the "true" Phyllis. Instead we receive a series of masks, and it is this denial of unmasking that gives her the power to manipulate those around her. Phyllis's consciousness about gendered performance is more evidence for her positioning as strong

narrative agent. What makes Phyllis's construction so fascinating is that she seems to have adopted this performative nature as the only self she uses to interact with others. Perhaps this is due to her being written as a destructive feminine force who thrives on the inauthentic to seduce men, but the nuance suggests it has more purpose than just demonizing her. Consider their first interaction where she tries to portray herself as neglected housewife. She invites Walter to talk about insurance, "My husband never tells me anything." Her first mention of her marital relationship comes not long after this, "I guess he's been too busy down at Long Beach in the oil fields." She does this in an attempt to garner his sympathy as well as entice him to encroach upon her. Upon their second meeting, she is less concerned with reeling him in and more interested in convincing him to play a part in her insurance setup. She says, "I was thinking about my husband. I worry about him a lot down in those oil fields. It's very dangerous." Her feigned concern is punctuated in a medium close-up. She plays it up by continuing, "It's got me jittery just thinking about it." The intention of this performance is to make Walter believe the insurance was his idea and that she merely voices concern. When he mentions the capital sum in case of Mr. Dietrichson's death, she appears disturbed by the thought of it, when in actuality it is what she desires. Once again, she puts the idea on him, "I suppose you have to think of everything in your field." However, when she realizes he needs coaxing, she transitions back into playing neglect, "Sometimes we sit here all evening and never say a word to each other." Everything she utters is conditional upon her environment. She adapts to whomever she addresses in order to control others' perception of her. Similar to the employment of her sexuality, this performative self gives her control of her image.

Even after Walter realizes Phyllis wishes to murder her husband, he still buys into her charade because she shifts her tactics. When she arrives at his apartment, she tries to recover any damage from their previous encounter, "I must have said something that gave you a terribly wrong impression. You must never think anything like that about me, Walter." The alteration of this performance from before is her attempt to portray herself as a benevolent figure, "I was his wife's nurse. She was a sick a long time. When she died, he was terribly broken up. I pitied him so." She describes her marriage as a sacrifice of independence in exchange for security. She continues, "He's so mean to me. Every time I buy a dress or pair of shoes, he yells his head off. He never lets me go anywhere. He keeps me shut up. He's always been mean to me." Knowing that neglect and ill-tempered behavior are insufficient, she transitions into suggestions of abuse; "Walter, I don't want to kill him. I never did. Not even when he gets drunk and slaps my face." Throughout these heartfelt confessions, almost all of her medium shots convey the same emotion she feeds to him; there is a surprising lack of ironic expressions or reflexive winks. It cannot be attributed to the film's restrictive narration as we are sometimes treated to small moments that Walter is not privy to. Perhaps this is done in the effort to subvert the spectator's expectations by the conclusion, but it could also suggest that she as a femme fatale figure, has adopted a performative self in order to grant herself the highest agency afforded by her sex. As the perception of her femininity informs her capabilities in a patriarchal society, she lives entirely beneath the surface. Her image and behavior are restricted by culture, but in living a performance, she traverses and dominates spaces otherwise not available to her.

Her variations on housewife are compelling in the construction of her image in relation to Walter, but they become even more fascinating when she stages for other characters while in his vicinity, developing a multi-layered performance. The first occurrence is one Phyllis and Walter share with Mr. Dietrichson and Lola during the automobile renewal signing. When Mr. Dietrichson declines Walter's sales pitch, Phyllis dutifully backs him up, "If we bought up all the insurance they can think up we'd stay broke paying for it, wouldn't we, honey?" Dietrichson brings up his upcoming travels to Palo Alto and she brags about his alma mater with pride, "He's a Stanford man, Mr. Neff. And he still goes to his class reunion every year." While Dietrichson signs, Phyllis and Walter exchange glances. She is not only developing a guise for her husband, but she must convey her commitment to Walter. In addition, her comments seem to bait Dietrichson into dismissing her, which supports the earlier grievances she expressed to Walter about his behavior toward her. She plays her part in appearing as the loyal housewife to Dietrichson and Lola, to secure the witness to the witness, all the while conveying her neglected and abused housewife status indirectly to Walter. She does this again during the car ride to the train before Walter kills Dietrichson. Before the murder, she baits her husband into feeding into the impression of him she gave, "It makes you feel pretty good to get away from me, doesn't it?" Despite leading him to his death unknowingly, her dialogue here is for Walter. He responds, "It's only for four days. I'll be back Monday at the latest." While his comments directed at her during the renewal signing scene were dismissive, his casual attitude suggests there exists a disparity between her description and his actual behavior. Walter may be aware of her intentions, but he is the one she needs to continue to fool so that she attains what she desires. Once

Dietrichson is finished, Walter disguises himself as the deceased, transitioning her intended audience from him to the train crew. He plays along, “You take it easy driving home,” and she wishes him well, “I’ll miss you, honey,” before they kiss. Phyllis confirms her faux-housewife status, because although this setup is contrived, it is indicative of her feelings toward her domestic role. She treats her real marriage like this fake exchange, as a necessary performance.

Her next nuanced performance is in front of three gentlemen, Walter, her confidant, and the insurance ringleaders, Keyes and Norton. Her dark garb is one of mourning, but also a costume suited for her performance. She wears a veil, a widowed headpiece, to express her grief, but as is the case with the femme fatale, a veil also signifies her deceptive nature. Often the veil is tied to fetishized ideas of exotic femininity, but here it offers concealment. She controls her exposure and perception with the veil by playing the role of mourning housewife. It is a staple of her performance, thus making it a costumed prop in service of her agency. Doane argues the use of the veil as a tool of feminine agency, the denial of the gaze, in her essay “Veiling Over Desire” concerning Marlene Dietrich in *The Devil Is A Woman* (1935) (Doane 49-50). In addition to the physical masking, she continues ideas of domestic masquerade as the late Mrs. Dietrichson. Unlike the encounter with Dietrichson and Walter, her efforts are directed at the other men in this instance. Norton discusses the insurance deal at hand and then informs her they believe it was suicide so that they do not have to pay her the double indemnity claim. Her dialogue supplements her appearance, “When I came here, I had no idea you owed me money. You told me you did. Then you told me you didn’t. You want to bargain with me at a time like this. I don’t like your insinuations about my husband and

I don't like your methods.” Notice how the usually collected Phyllis presents herself as emotionally unstable. Her performance extends beyond playing housewife and into a more appropriate gendered rendering of her femininity. Following this insurance meeting, she returns to her affectionate guise while on the phone with Walter. She gushes, “I felt so funny. I wanted to look at you all the time.” He returns her gesture, “How do you think I felt, baby?” The fluidity she demonstrates in transitioning from one performative self to the other proves how natural it is for her to adopt another identity.

Lola's account of Phyllis forces Walter to reconsider his perception of Phyllis, and as a result, she revises her performative tactics to try and keep him secured. The more apparent her methods become to him, the less interest she has in sustaining her illusion. Their second meeting in the grocery store, she arrives in a similar vein to her appearance in the insurance office. Her eyes are covered by a pair of sunglasses she wears to conceal her identity, but also demonstrate her authority to Walter. Like before, through her concealment she has control over her image and perception. She feigns jealousy to reel him in further, “Lola's been telling you some other cockeyed stories. She's been seeing you.” However, in this scene, as he pressures her and she realizes her performance is no longer necessary, she shirks the sunglasses and speaks to him directly. In their final scene together, as a last appeal to his sensibilities, she tries to play him, “Maybe I had Zachetti here so they won't get a chance to trip me up, so we can get the money and be together.” The neglected and abusive housewife performance she used to distract his intuition from picking up any falsities functioned until it no longer had a purpose for her. She carried this impression along until it opened new opportunities for her, and then built a performance upon a performance. Her sexuality functions as the tool and her

performative guise serves as the methodology. This excavation of performance in her interaction with others provides an understanding of how the “faux” part of my characterization is especially appropriate. Though a housewife in actuality, her faux-rendering of the role evidences her adoption of it for the sole purpose of self-interest.

Aside from performance, the display of Phyllis's sexuality and its utilization to inform her agency continues these ideas of domestic ruin. Another unique quality to Phyllis as femme fatale is the extent of control that her sexuality provides. Walter gives the impression of being forward, aggressive in his suggestive passes toward Phyllis, which is more in line with traditional gender roles. This is a role reversal of Stanwyck's other two characters, who are both the direct pursuer in their films. Sugarpuss is quite aggressive in her seduction of Potts. Elizabeth, while more reserved, does most of the chasing. Phyllis is as much a pursuer, but in an indirect, unassuming manner like Elizabeth. Phyllis's methods differ in that she makes Walter believe that all decisive action derives from his own will. Consider the gendered treatment in the abrasive way he holds her, condescends by referring to her as “baby,” and consoles her outbursts. Lola's feminine, passive appeal is precisely what Phyllis wishes Walter to perceive of her because it gives him the impression she is under his control, and it is his realization of his lack of control that decimates their relationship. This dynamic can best be described as her control over him by making him believe he has control over her. Phyllis is a subversive puppet master who creates an illusion stemming from notions of gendered performance by using her sexuality. Revisiting some of the previously investigated sequences through this scope offers even more evidence for her association with the femme fatale.

Walter's evolution from pursuer to puppet is secured when she arrives at his apartment following his second visit to her house. Recall that when he become aware her questions about insurance are from his desire to financially profit from her husband's murder, he vacates the premises. Because he persistently communicated his attraction to her, she knows that her sexuality can be used to ensnare and inevitably use him. Although she plays passive, her dialogue is quite suggestive, "It's about time you said you were glad to see me." She appeals to him, "I want you to be nice to me. Like the first time you came to the house." He deflects, "It can't be like the first time. Something's happened." She warps this, "I know it has. It's happened to us." The next moment showcases her bait and snatch perfectly. She feels his hesitation and says, "Maybe I oughtn't have come" He echoes her, "Maybe you oughtn't." She then asks, "You want me to go?" and he kisses her, confessing, "I'm crazy about you, baby." Notice how in this moment he makes the move, but she entices him into action. This initiates the beginning of their relationship, one where the agency resides in the person calling the shots, not in the one performing them. She lends ideas through suggestion for Walter to pick up. She returned to his apartment because she knew he would follow through with the murder of her husband in order to have her. She admits fantasies of killing him to escape her situation, but she concludes with, "But Walter, I didn't do it and I'm not going to do it." She articulates her desire to him in a manner that will provoke him to carry out what she cannot do alone. He tells her the operation is too risky and she embraces him, conscious of the affect her physicality has on his judgment.

Before Phyllis exits his apartment, she attempts to use her sexuality again to sway him. She kisses him and then informs him of the extent of her suffering, "What if they

did hang me? It's better than going on this way.” Suddenly Walter's demeanor is alert as though he reached an epiphany, “They're not gonna hang you because you're gonna do it and I'm gonna help you.” She pretends to be shocked, “Do you know what you're saying?” He replies, “Sure, I know what I'm saying. We're gonna do it and we're gonna do it right.” His clarity countering her hesitation for a service that mostly benefits her illustrates the dynamic she establishes with the promise of her sexuality lingering in his mind. He affirms, “There's not going to be any slip-up. Nothing sloppy. Nothing weak. It's got to be perfect,” and then kisses her again. The entirety of this exchange happens in shot/reverse shot close-ups of the couple embracing. His nearness to her renders him helpless. As she grants him closer proximity, he becomes more vulnerable. Doane states, “Female specificity is thus theorized in terms of spatial proximity” (Doane 23). Knowing and visibility are inextricably tied. Through her proximity and image, she is able to control her sexuality. The femme fatale's sexuality is dangerous because it drives men to be wild and uninhibited. Walter decides to venture on this quest because he wants Phyllis for himself. His inability to resist is noted in his narration to Keyes preceding this scene, “I fought it, only I guess I didn't fight it hard enough.” At the time he decides to do it, however, he believes it in the service of his own desire, which again proves him to be her puppet.

Once Walter decides to assist Phyllis in the murder of her husband, he becomes a device for her agency. The following scenes involving their collective effort to mislead others and subdue Mr. Dietrichson place Phyllis at the helm. The cinematography of these sequences always positions her in a role of authority. During the renewal-signing scene, Walter is the one leading Mr. Dietrichson to sign the necessary papers for their

deceit. In most of the shots, the two men are spatially paired together with Phyllis lingering in the distance. One particular shot exposes her control over the action. Phyllis is centered between the two men; she looks from one to the other as they talk. Her expression and dominant positioning here indicate she is running the operation. In addition, the blocking of her body gives a sexual impression, again bridging a link between the allure of her image and the power it grants.

The puppet master pulls the strings. (Figure 2.4)

The scene entailing the murder of Mr. Dietrichson provides the strongest evidence for Phyllis as sexualized puppet master. Checking on Walter hidden in the backseat floor of the car, Phyllis gives him sly look and mouths something inaudible. Her face is mostly obscured by the dark, but her features are somewhat visible. This alignment of sexual presence and darkness is a repeated motif throughout the film.

During this sequence, Phyllis drives the car en route to the train and her husband's murder. Her status as driver is symbolic of position as primary agent. When Dietrichson notices she has navigated off course, he questions her, "This is not the right street. Why did you turn here?" Her eyes shift in a medium close-up as she ventures into darkness to consume him. Phyllis presses the horn three times, a signal to Walter that he should strike. She notifies him to act without having to commit the crime herself. For the duration of Dietrichson's off-screen asphyxiation, the camera curiously lingers on Phyllis. She bears a cold expression as though unaffected by his demise. Doane theorizes that the face is the access to knowledge in her essay "Veiling Over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman," and a lack of expression supports my suggestion that she remains in control by denying the spectator access to internal feelings. The focus remains on her because she is the source of his death. In addition, her face is implicit in the action because it is her image that allows her to manipulate others to enact her desire. When she meets Walter in the grocery store following Lola's account to him, she takes off her sunglasses, revealing herself to him. She not only reveals her manipulation of him, but her true femininity; one informed by an embracement and utilization of her sexuality. He becomes aware of his role as her puppet. In his narration preceding the final visit to the Dietrichson home, he mentions thoughts of cemeteries, "I guess that was the first time I ever thought about Phyllis that way." As a patriarchal figure aware of the destructive potential of a woman who wields her sexuality, he believes it his duty to finish or contain her. He shirks her sexual pull over him, "I'm all through thinking, baby. I just came to say goodbye." Despite his implications in the crimes committed, her sexuality is treated as the cause for

all wrongdoing. Like the archetypal femmes fatales Pandora and Eve before her, female sexuality becomes this mythic causation for the evil within the world.

Goodbye, my dear, dear husband. (Figure 2.5)

Using her performative self and sexuality in tandem, Phyllis proves herself a capable narrative agent by traversing spaces in gendered guise while ensnaring men with her provocation. Without a doubt, on the surface Phyllis is the most misogynistically constructed character. She embraces her sexuality and ventures after her desires, leaving destruction in her wake until the protagonist realizes he must destroy her. However, this critical analysis of her representation offers a reading that highlights her accomplishments and in several ways, proves her to have the highest demonstration of female agency within a patriarchal culture. Sugarpuss and Elizabeth fit Doane's good-bad

girl characterization, generic considerations aside, and are, according to patriarchal decree, secured or saved through matrimony. Phyllis, on the other hand, operates as pure id and refuses to let any social restrictions interfere with the pursuit of her desires until her murder. Kaplan even mentions in her introduction to *Women in Film Noir* that a female character must be an effective figure of resistance if the only resolution is to kill her. Further, her devotion to securing those desires is unrelenting as evident by her implications in the deceit and murder of others. A figure of resistance, despite its decimation or conquest, symbolically resonates with the spectator, which is why the femme fatale's legacy persists.

Chapter 2

Adulterous Author

The next picture in this lineup, *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), most directly engages with issues of domesticity. Stanwyck stars as Elizabeth Lane, a writer whose columns are dedicated to domestic women. She offers recipes, tips, and an account of her own daily duties for readers as inspiration. However, Elizabeth doesn't know the first thing about running a household. She's an unmarried career woman who, with the help of her friend Felix (played by Hungarian character actor S.Z. Sakall), fabricates this image of herself as an ideal housewife in order to pay the rent. Although her supervisor is aware of her concoction, the publisher of the magazine, patriarchal Alexander Yardley (Sydney Greenstreet), is not. Meanwhile, a romantic nurse (Joyce Compton) who has fallen for her charge, veteran Jefferson Jones (Dennis Morgan), decides to write to the magazine in hopes that a dinner from the famous Elizabeth Lane will inspire him to settle down with her. The bombastic businessman Yardley likes the idea so much, he decides to join the dinner to witness her magic. To avoid losing her job and getting her supervisor fired, she decides to attempt to recreate her literary persona using Felix's cooking and the rural home of a relentless suitor, John Sloan (Reginald Gardiner), thus setting in motion the chaotic farce for a romantic comedy formula. The film's ambitious engagement with gender suggests a self-consciousness atypical of its generic brethren.

Many of the films with a femme fatale at the helm are noted for their provocation. Although this film's romantic comedy slant is almost oppositional in its generic tone and convention to film noir, once again, deception is the primary narrative drive. In *Double*

Indemnity, Stanwyck's facade works to mask her archetypal destructive nature. In *Christmas in Connecticut*, Stanwyck's exterior reveals her internal conflict. The generic differences change her character's methods, but they align in their objective: to conceal her desire while in pursuit of it. Phyllis Dietrichson might more explicitly demonstrate agency in her manipulation of the men in her life, but Elizabeth Lane works within a domestic sphere under the illusion of being a domestic player. This analysis may seem chronologically linear in its dissection of the spaces explored, but this is done for the purpose of showcasing the evolution of Elizabeth's agency.

Consider the title itself, *Christmas in Connecticut*, which alludes to her concocted fantasy. Christmas, a capitalistic holiday that caters to promotion of the nuclear family unit, generates its share of domestic imagery as it applies to American culture (Home for the Holidays, parents gifting their children, etc.). The geographical location, thriving on a pastoral appeal, only contributes to the picturesque image of a traditional household. Although the farm house exists, it is not the actual home of Elizabeth Lane, only an illusion. Much like Elizabeth herself, this location operates under the guise of an ideal. Her role as faux-housewife therefore extends beyond her manipulation of gendered spaces into her ability to transform an entire domestic habitat. The space is owned by a patriarchal force, John, but serves as a means to fulfill her material and sexual desire. It is through this narrative action that we understand the full capacity of the femme fatale. Whether she is conscious of her impact or not, her ability to overthrow should not be dismissed. Her initial intentions may appear genuine or passive to the male figures; for example, part of the reason she takes on the charade is out of guilt for the possible expulsion of her supervisor, complicating his ability to provide for his family. In addition,

she agrees to marry John because she believes the end of her career marks the end of her autonomy. Notice how in both of these instances she concedes out of obligation.

Although she doesn't explicitly articulate her desire in the interactions with these men, the unfolding of the plot exposes her intentions.

To understand how Stanwyck's character is positioned in the narrative, one must consider how the film recognizes the patriarchal and capitalistic grip on marriage and domesticity that informs American tradition as seen through two primary male characters. Elizabeth's boss, Alexander Yardley, forms the bureaucratic force of tradition and capitalism. He embodies a strict conservative mentality in relation to marriage. The causal chain of the narrative is largely propelled by Yardley's insistence that all domestic activities are better when performed by a woman, specifically the grand meal from which Elizabeth's troubles originate. For example, consider the pancake flipping sequence where Elizabeth is put on the spot to flip a pancake for him. We see her practice earlier and fail, but by sheer luck, she manages to land it to the glee of Yardley. This trivial demand proves his obsession with the image of gender performance. He comments that he wants to see, "an attractive woman performing the homely little task of flipping flapjacks." During one of the attempted wedding ceremonies he accidentally walks into he admits, "I'm quite a sentimentalist myself." This self-description is congruent with his treatment of matrimony as frivolous. In addition, Yardley represents the corporate muscle. His gendered reservations extend beyond personal belief and into his business. In a conversation with John, Elizabeth's faux beau, he suggests that they have another baby to boost circulation for his publication. Another instance is when Felix creates a diversion to help Elizabeth escape exchanging vows by pretending that the baby swallowed his

gold watch. Yardley's concern is not for the health of the baby, but rather for the effect the baby's illness or death would have on his publication. His investment in Elizabeth's life is purely economic. Yardley's deeply held family values are immediately denigrated and exposed as less genuine, making his character's disinterest in the actual individuals who represent him show the dehumanizing effects of capitalism, especially as they apply to female autonomy. These two demonstrations of his character demonstrate the commodification of domesticity as product rather than sacred foundation for a fruitful society.

While Yardley encompasses the profit obsessed, John's figure is relevant to the patriarchal design of American culture that hinders Elizabeth's ability to reconcile her desires. John is not immediately portrayed as greedy, but rather a benevolent individual who exhibits concern for her well-being at the beginning of the film. He first surfaces in the film as a persistent bachelor who desires Elizabeth to be his wife. Whether she loves or desires him is inconsequential, his primary interest is marrying her. She directly addresses her lack of affection to him but he assures her that he does not care. He argues his proposition by emphasizing the security she would possess through marriage. The moment they reach the farmhouse, Elizabeth and John attempt to exchange vows to officiate their marriage, but Felix notices Elizabeth's reluctance and interferes every chance he gets. The first attempted faux-wedding exposes John's disregard for what she wants. Elizabeth suggests they play Mozart for the wedding march, but he retorts, "No, no, darling, no. The wedding march is the conventional thing." He later solidifies his patriarchal status to Yardley in response to the physical structure of the house, which can be read figuratively as well: "I'm the architect. I never allow anyone to interfere with my

plans.” John's previously sweet demeanor is unveiled by his own admission of power. He refers to himself as the architect again and again in various scenes. This self-description is paramount to his identity as control freak, especially in regards to controlling Elizabeth. He wants to *have* her, not be joined with her. John represents the male rejection of reciprocated female desire irrelevant, meaning she appeals to him as something to own. In addition, because he functions as the wrong partner for Elizabeth, he is further separated from her and more in alignment with Yardley.

The juxtaposition of Yardley and John is emphasized in the scene where they play poker. While holding their cards, veteran Jeff tickles the piano keys and Elizabeth decorates the tree. Yardley comments, “nice voice, that boy,” and a panning shot moves from the men to Jeff, thus establishing a dichotomy between the pairs. While Yardley and John are situated in *mise-en-scene* indicative of their masculinities, Jeff musicalizes in the other room. This shot serves to further separate the type of invasive patriarchal figures who want to use her versus Jeff, who is desired by Elizabeth. Jeff is different than Yardley and John because unlike the other two, she actually reciprocates his feelings. By recognizing her desire, the film seems to suggest that patriarchy infringes on the success of marriage. Concerned for her contentment, Jeff asks Yardley if Elizabeth is happy. Yardley responds by listing off John's accomplishments. The difference in men is once again tied to definitions of traditional masculinity, i.e. the male as breadwinner and provider. Jeff voices his concern for Elizabeth's contentment while Yardley measures her feelings by the level of John's status. Both male figures, Yardley and John, embody the traditional stance of matrimony, and by extension domesticity, that deems female desire or autonomy as irrelevant to unity. Elizabeth is in opposition to Yardley because she uses

his ideas of idyllic female domesticity as a means of support. She works in opposition to John because she wants to marry for love or attraction rather than as a means of survival. These men are different in their relationship to her, but both represent patriarchal figures seeking to use her for their own design. As it follows, Elizabeth is positioned in opposition to the patriarchal forces that conflict with her desires, solidifying her role as a cinematic fatale and figure of resistance.

Yardley and John are not the only two figures to consider in their participation of patriarchal structure. Another belongs to the only other female character with a significant part, John's maid, Nora. The social impact of patriarchy extends beyond hegemonic oppression and into cultural mentalities concerning femininity. Nora is also presented as a figure of tradition, one informed by those same cultural mentalities. The notion of women reinforcing misogyny is archetypal in mothers or matrons aggressively pressuring female youth to abide by traditional ideas of what a woman should be, and here Nora follows this trend. She likes the domestic activities done her own way much to the chagrin of Felix. Nora mostly exists as a comedic character to contrast with Felix, although curiously it is not a gendered battle. After the fallout of another failed exchange of vows, Nora believes that John and Elizabeth are still sleeping in the same room. She becomes deeply offended and decides to quit providing John services. The dialogue that arises is telling of culturally informed views of femininity. He catches her leaving with her things and she says, "Mr. Sloan, I've been working for you for five years and never did I believe you'd be the kind of man that---of course, I'm not blaming you entirely. It's the woman that leads the man astray." Here exists an explicit recognition of Elizabeth as the cinematic fatale; the vixen who seduces and ruins the man through her sexual wiles.

She must reject Elizabeth in order to distance herself and proclaim her feminine identity as pure, a kind of slut shaming projection. Everything changes when John informs her that she cannot leave because they need her for a witness. When she realizes they intend to get married before bedding, her entire demeanor changes and she apologizes to Elizabeth, “Oh, Miss Lane. I didn't mean it. I apologize,” and then, “Bless your heart. I might've known you weren't the kind that would...” In only a few seconds of clarity, Nora goes from thinking of Elizabeth as a mistress of ill repute to a respectable lady. The labeling of women by their sexuality is a participation in the culture that punishes women for not abstaining, the same that birthed the concept of the femme fatale.

In the vein of film noir, postwar anxieties inform the cultural issues behind the plot and setting. The babies Elizabeth and John borrow for their fauxmance are from women in the work force. These working women are unable to take care of her children because they need to supplement their families, something that defies the career Elizabeth is shamed for. The fact that women who are working are the ones lending their babies to fulfill the illusion of her housewife image makes for a compelling assessment of the film's gendered stance. When a woman arrives with a baby of a different sex and hair color to the first, Elizabeth worries her illusion will be shattered. The mother tells her the previous woman does not need her baby watched today, bringing attention to the high population of working mothers as well as the interchangeability of roles. Although both Jeff and Yardley notice the changes, she manages to convince them otherwise. This disruption in the nuclear family highlights the patriarchal anxieties of women stepping outside conventional gender roles similar to Elizabeth. The significance of these

observations is in noting how postwar anxieties inform the gendered discourse of the film.

The opening shots of the film are infused with war iconography. This aesthetic is established in the beginning so that the presence of war is felt immediate as expositional causation for the upset in gender roles. This sequence transitions into the military hospital. When the lead male, Jeff, is introduced, the division of the sexes is made apparent. The women in these sequences are nurses mending the veteran men recovering from battle. One of the men tells Jeff that if he shows the nurse affection, the food will improve. This plan backfires when the nurse assumes that his interest translates to romantic or sexual interest. Indicative of the dominant ideology of the period, the male's validation of the woman as complementary to his needs invites her to assume he desires her. The narrative does not seek to domesticate only Elizabeth, but Jeff as well. The postwar aftermath concerns not only the ejection of women from the role of homemaker, but also the decimation of the nuclear family unit. Though this analysis is primarily interested in Elizabeth's position and representation, Jeff's domestic complications are not irrelevant, rather, they are ultimately connected with hers. As such, he should be considered in his relationship to her.

Consider one of the quintessential femme fatales---Rita Hayworth's Gilda. Because film noir falls under descriptive genre, it is important to remember that not all noir women fulfill the chthonic siren. Gilda encapsulates Hollywood's views on gendered representation through her image, her narrative influence, and her big number, "Put the Blame on Mame." However, she does not actively seek the destruction of the men around her. Mary Ann Doane refers to this as "...'good-bad' girl: feminine evil is not a

fundamental condition but an accessory, an accident. It is the logic of 'if only': if only she had not..." (Doane 108). Phyllis Dietrichson is painted as a proactive sexual villain, but like Sugarpuss O'Shea, Elizabeth Lane is inherently good, though misguided. Like Sugarpuss and Phyllis, Elizabeth's actions complicate any strict reading of her character's representation. The instability of her image and deceptive methodology align with Doane's ideas on masquerade.

As is the case with most cinematic femme fatales, the entrance of the figure often establishes her type of woman and position within the narrative. In *Christmas in Connecticut*, we are treated to an ironic sequence where her narration conflicts with the image presented to the spectator. Elizabeth describes her idyllic country house while a series of shots reveal the truth of her residence---a city apartment. She operates on a system of deception, which can be viewed as one aligned with both her career and her gendered nature as femme fatale. This pronounced contrast is meant to punctuate the dramatic irony that proceeds in the narrative, but also to indicate her use of masquerade. The disparity between the image and its stability again echoes ideas concerning the femme fatale as explored by Doane. The cinematic fatale is not what she appears, and it is precisely her masking that causes the fetishizing of her image. It is worth recognizing how the film constructs Elizabeth Lane, the literary con artist, as an inverted figure to an idealized gender role. While the narrative doesn't seem to condemn her as a career woman, which is perhaps progressive in comparison to other classical Hollywood films, it still works towards a goal of heterosexual matrimony. This sequence continues to exhibit the lavish lifestyle of a single, career woman concerned with wealth, working totally against everything her fictional housewife aspires to be. By establishing the "real"

Elizabeth Lane as a kind of ideological opposite to what she pretends to be, the film emphasizes her ability to treat social roles as nothing more than performance.

Two post-workers arrive with props that accentuate Elizabeth's complications with gender roles and require her use of domestic masquerade. The two objects introduced here resurface over the course of the film because they represent the dichotomized structure of female autonomy in American culture: individual desire vs. domestic complacency. The first is a *postwoman* who brings Elizabeth her new fur coat. She remarks that the coat cost her a significant amount of her pay and that she promised herself she would get one. It embodies her success as an individual and intention to secure materials via her own means. She tells Felix, "I needed it." Her use of "need" reveals her wish to provide for herself and prove her autonomy. The second delivery is from a *postman* who arrives with a rocking chair. The rocking chair, as much a domestic device as it is a rural household icon, is another item gifted to her by her readers because she mentions it in one of her pieces. She asks one of the men around her to put it down in the basement with the rest of them, indicating her disinterest. Another rocking chair comes up again when Jeff brings it to Elizabeth as a present during his arrival, a repetition which emphasizes the gendered function of these props. The distinction, not only in the sex of the post-workers, but in the deliveries themselves, is made to emphasize her desire as it differs from the domestic. The fur coat is an entirely superficial garb that signifies wealth, while the rocking chair is a practical piece of furniture associated with infantile pacification. The coat is what she wants for herself. The chair is what she should want because her role as housewife takes precedence over her individual desire. The cinematic fatale confronts gender roles because her own desires drive her

actions, not her commitment to societal production. This aligns with Doane's suggestion that the femme fatale is represented as the antithesis to the maternal (Doane 2). Her disinterest in providing for society and investment in self-satisfaction confirms her identification with the figure.

What makes *Christmas in Connecticut* such an interesting film to explore is its conflicting methods for achieving closure. The film rejects a straight-forward reading because its Hollywood conservative ideology is not obviously painted. Like other romantic comedies, the design of the narrative has wrong partners for both Elizabeth and Jeff as a means for inevitable matching, however, the ideological concerns becomes problematic. Mary Lee, the doting nurse, believes Jeff's non-committal attitude stems from not understanding the fulfillment of a domestic lifestyle. She says, "Marriage and domesticity frighten you, don't they Jeff?" Elizabeth's wrong partner, John, also aims to convince her into domesticity, but rather for security than fulfillment. There is clearly a gendered difference in these intentions. In regards to leading down a path of matrimony, both wrong partners seem to be directing Elizabeth and Jeff in that direction. Here a strict reading becomes complicated. The wrong partners do not represent an outdated ideology or a rejection of the supposed domestic life. Rather, indicative of its generic construct, the comedic trajectory of the narrative leads to the inevitable union of the leading players.

Elizabeth and Jeff's discomfort with domesticity is remedied by their synthesis, which then might be argued that the film's pull is for the domestic lifestyle as corrected or amplified by "romantic love," marked by the couple's disinterest in their wrong partners. This is supported by the scene where Elizabeth decorates the tree while Jeff plays the piano. In this picturesque scene, they are staged as an idyllic couple. His gleeful

musicalization and her decoration of a Christmas tree, another domestic icon associated with familial unity, are meant to indicate the correctness of their collaboration as right partners. However, the jovial scene is disrupted when she drops one of the ornaments. The crash stops the music and produces an awkward pause in continuity. Once again, Elizabeth's complication with such a lifestyle is made apparent. This could also be read as narrative tension, but immediately after this, she tells him to keep playing and then lights his cigarette. By lighting his cigarette, she performs a subservient action in line with the rest of the scene. However, this action is also sexually suggestive and a common cinematic trope to develop sexual tension. While in a domestic guise, she uses her sexuality as a device to entice Jeff. Her gendered performance exposes her multi-layered approach, one of domestic masquerade and another of seduction, again following Doane and Butler's suggestion of femininity as performance which allows her to appear as one thing while acting in pursuit of another.

Like Phyllis's transformation of the Dietrichson home, Elizabeth's presence in John Sloan's home *Christmas in Connecticut* proves another ruination of sacred domestic spaces. John's farm in Connecticut provides the idyllic illusion used to fool Yardley and entice Jeff. The home and surrounding landscape are picturesque foundation for the molding of the nuclear family. Elizabeth is not only a woman out of her environment, she is an agent operating toward her desire. Under the guise of not only a married woman but a prominent housewife celebrity, she playfully engages with Jeff. The implications of this entanglement are massive. Most cinematic fatales are accentuated with close-ups and other formal conventions to remind the audience she is the prototypical bad girl. In the case of Elizabeth, her struggles are made sympathetic and the film does not seek to

demonize her behavior despite the fact that the appearance of her interactions with Jeff looks like adultery. The majority of the flirty repartee between Jeff and Elizabeth occurs in these domestic spaces with the subject of their other relationships, her faux-marriage and his promise to the nurse, in consideration. Once again, Elizabeth uses domestic masquerade to appear as a traditional housewife all the while enticing Jeff.

The first meeting of Jeff and Elizabeth conveys her cinematic fatale status formalistically while also introducing this perversion of domestic spaces. The inherently problematic designation of women, as object to the male gaze, in patriarchal culture is evident in this initial scene. The value of women is measured by their appearance and ability to attract a man, and yet, once they become mothers, they are reduced to asexual housekeepers. Upon seeing her, Jeff is taken aback by her physical beauty. Continuing with this division of women, he assumes that as mother and domestic expert she would appear homely. But this moment does not belong to Jeff internally salivating over Elizabeth alone. Although Bette Davis and Gloria Swanson may be two of the biggest cinematic fatales known for the intensity of their eyes, Stanwyck's performances are littered with striking gazes. These sexual looks may be seductive to draw in men, but they also articulate her desire. Felix notices their mutual attraction, setting in motion his duty as matchmaker. He becomes a fascinating addition to the gendered dynamics of the film because he functions as a male accessory for female desire. Through the cuts from Jeff to her medium close-up shots, Elizabeth communicates her desire for Jeff. Notice how in this moment she is supposed to be playing housewife, but seems completely unconcerned with carrying the illusion and more into eyeing him. Although she may not avoid the male gaze, the articulation of her sexual desire is clear. Their visual exchange remains

unmoved for the duration of his entrance. He brings her a gift which happens to be, once again, a rocking chair. The rocking chair, a domestic device explored earlier in this chapter, rests between them, serving as a reminder of the domestic illusion that keeps them apart and her from pursuing her desire. She playfully rocks the chair, sliding her hands along the top of its back. He asks her if she likes the chair to which she replies, “Of course I do,” while still looking at him. His entrance marks the beginning of their suggestive exchanges involving domestic spaces and props, rejecting the cultural reverence of domesticity as production, while also illuminating Elizabeth's use of masquerade to achieve her sexual and material desire.

Elizabeth is not so concerned with chairs in this moment. (Figure 2.1)

At the end of their conversation in the living room, the cry of the baby John borrowed for their charade breaks the exchange between Elizabeth and Jeff. Jeff presses her to bath the child in front of him so that he can witness her in her element. Like the rocking chair, a domestic variable disrupts her pursuit of him. A pattern begins here that continues throughout their exploration of these spaces within the Sloan house. The

postwar hysteria felt by the American nuclear family may best explain Elizabeth's displacement and unfamiliarity with domestic tasks and Jeff's enactment as guide through them. This is stressed by her ignorance of the child's sex when an exchange ensues where she clarifies her mistake of calling "Robert" by saying "Roberta." Although dressed for the part with an apron, she has no understanding of how to handle the child. The innate, nurturing brand of femininity is not a part of Stanwyck's Elizabeth, which evidences the film's identification of her as cinematic fatale. Instead, Jeff, who claims to have experience from his sister's children, takes over the bathing responsibility. Like their initial meeting, she remains fixated on him even with the babe in her arms. This domestic task becomes a conduit for their suggestive dialogue. At one point the baby splashes water, hitting him in face. Elizabeth comments, "Oh Roberta, how naughty of you." When the baby begins to eat the soap, she panics, but Jeff assures her that it is completely natural. The washing concludes with her fiddling with the cloth diaper, eventually tossing it to him under the excuse of getting the child's dinner. He folds it and gleefully resumes the task as though he's accustomed to the practice. Every occurrence in this bathing sequence positions her as the foreign figure and him as the natural, completely reversing gender roles.

As she takes the baby to the housekeeper to feed, she runs into Felix who suggests that the baby looks better on her than the mink coat, an obvious reference to her autonomous career as conflicting with a more traditional role. She immediately reaches for one of the alcoholic drinks, which serves to demonstrate her discomfort as mother; in other words, another indication of Doane's assertion that the femme fatale functions as antithesis to the maternal. The second significant domestic sequence is sparked by the

bellow of a farm animal while Jeff, Elizabeth, and Yardley are in the kitchen. Echoing the earlier incident of the cry of the baby, the cow's moo breaks up the exchange between Elizabeth and Jeff. And like the baby sequence, he once again insists she perform her domestic chore for his own viewing pleasure. He ventures off to grab her coat and brings back the mink, stating it was all he could find. As explored before in its initial narrative appearance, the mink coat serves as a symbol for her autonomy and desire, something she wants and something she obtains as a result of her agency. By having Jeff bring it to her, the film recognizes the woman she is as opposed to the one she is pretending to be at the moment when the two are about to venture outside of the internal domestic sphere.

Despite the generic and tonal differences from *Double Indemnity*, one can witness traces of Phyllis Dietrichson that become apparent in Elizabeth Lane during the cow relocation scene, confirming the narrative pattern of the representation of the Stanwyck's cinematic fatales. As they walk, Jeff and Elizabeth's conversation becomes progressively less suggestive and more explicit. Because they are walking the cow back, they begin the discussion on animals. Jeff asks, "Do all animals take to you?" to which she replies, "Oh yes, some more than others." He uses the subject of animals as a mean to probe her in the third person about her interests. Eventually he asks, "Does she like animals?" "Oh yes." "Do animals like her?" "Oh, yes." Her short replies punctuate her sexual desire in their intonation. While he throws questions her way, she rocks back and forth with the handle of the well, using her body language to be playful. This is nearly identical to the way she gropes the rocking chair during their first meeting. Finally she addresses him directly, "Jefferson Jones, are you flirting with me?" Notice how she is not the pursued in this instance, but the pursuer. She entrances him much like Phyllis Dietrichson, indirect in her

style, but active in her pursuit. She uses domestic masquerade as a role to hide her agenda, while utilizing her sexuality and image to control him. He stumbles in dialogue and then she says, "It's always intriguing to a married woman to find she's still attractive to the opposite sex." His speechlessness proves her as the authority in this exchange, using her sexuality as a tool to achieve what she wants, harkening back to Phyllis's establishment of authority with her sexuality. Another medium close-up punctuates her desire as she purrs, "Do I attract you?" The naïve, neurotic Elizabeth Lane we are treated to in earlier sequences is suddenly transformed into a figure as verbally sharp as Mae West. Again, Elizabeth operates not only in deception as part of the narrative, but it exists as an inherent part of her character's nature. This behavior for a female character would be typical of something tonally similar to film noir, and yet it appears in a romantic comedy, proving these patterns are not generically exclusive.

She may not be married in diegetic actuality, but she has promised herself to John as part of the deal for the use of his home and land. However, that element is not what makes the sequence so provocative, but rather the romantic exchange under the illusion of adultery. The subject of her marriage only feeds the fire of their courting. He mentions, "I find it hard to believe you married," and she replies, "I find it pretty difficult myself." This continues with his, "You don't act as if you were married," and her response, "I don't feel as if I was married." The undertones of their words forward the impression of adulterous flirtation, one sensationalized by its forbidden nature. She asks him, "Have you ever kissed a married woman?" When he says that he has not, her following words, "No, you're not the type," suggest the notion of type in relation to defining individuals based on their sexual activity. Usually conversations of "types of

women” involve the number of their sexual experiences, whereas with men it consists of marital honesty. The significance of her question is its place in a romantic comedy. This is Elizabeth Lane, not Phyllis Dietrichson. Following her observation about his type, he states, “I wish I was,” and she agrees, “Oh, me too.” Why do her questions and comments make the subject of her faux-nuptials more alluring than shameful? Because, like Phyllis, she has no regard for the establishment of marriage other than as a device to use to her advantage. The taboo aspect becomes the clench and again, indicates of the presence of a femme fatale. The transgeneric use of domestic masquerade as a method for the cinematic fatale is evident in Phyllis’s and Elizabeth’s utilization of their sexuality to establish authority in the guise of a domestic role.

When Elizabeth realizes they have forgotten the cow, she figures she must have dropped the rope due to her cold hands, leading him to say, “Let me warm them up for you.” She continually baits him with her antics, drawing him in closer. Another nod to her illusory nature is made in Jeff’s observation that she is not what he expected. She slyly replies, “Oh, how nice,” seeming to take pleasure in the disparity between his ideation of her and her appearance. My characterization of faux-housewife is apt here, not only because Elizabeth plays wife while drawing in Jeff, but in her utilization of the role as device to enchant him. In other words, it is not the simply a character she plays along with to suspend disbelief among the other characters, rather, it becomes a tool for her to attain higher agency.

The final part of this sequence highlights the scandal that has been building throughout their dialogue. Jeff slaps the behind of the cow and says, “Nice, firm rump” and Elizabeth makes a face thinking he is speaking to her. As Elizabeth and Jeff talk in

the barn, John appears outside looking for them. His appearance is marked with music that codes him as the bad guy, or in generic consideration, the wrong partner. The shot changes from him to Elizabeth and Jeff and immediately the score becomes upbeat, suggesting the film's validation of this couple. When they exit the barn they get hit by a snow drift. The composition of this shot proves complimentary to the previous interaction. John stands above a somewhat buried Jeff and Elizabeth. The structure of this shot positions Elizabeth and Jeff as if in bed together with John standing above them as if he has caught them in an affair. Completely distraught, John inquires if Elizabeth is alright. Her reply comes in typical vamp style, "Oh, I feel wonderful darling. How are you?" as she drapes her arm across his chest and rests on him. The implication here is that John is being cast as the cuckolded husband. The flagrant display of her disregard for John or her social role in this shot captures the essence the kind of femme fatale Elizabeth represents. Not only is she apathetic about being caught, she seems to revel in his discovery.

The follow-up scene initiates John's confrontation with Elizabeth concerning his feelings about her actions. He opens by chastising her for her display, "Of all the insane, inconsiderate things to do..." He adds, "The judge was very annoyed," and she perks up with, "Oh, was he?" as though it excites her. She does not hide her joy over the prospect of irritating the one figure capable of uniting them in marriage. Another significant prop is introduced, an aristocratic woman porcelain figurine, which represents the wealth and luxury granted by wedding John. During their conversation, she picks it up and he snatches and places it back. John holds her future security in his hands and this conversation enacts as a reminder of where she stands without him. They discuss the

sleeping arrangements for the night and she informs him her belongings have been moved to the guest room. Here Elizabeth rejects his sexual advances and proclaims her agency. Although the domestic spaces are granted by him in exchange for her hand in marriage, she makes the calls. She openly flirts with Jeff and decides when she will give herself to him, if at all. John's house is hers under the guise of housewife, which she performs so long as she needs the illusion to achieve her desire.

The fixation on props at the conclusion of her dialogue with John gives the viewer insight into her struggle. He removes the aristocratic figurine not once, but twice from her hands during their fight. Although she exhibits her agency here, he reminds her that the security she temporarily holds is dependent on him. After he leaves the room, she lingers and picks up the figurine again. She raises her arm as though she considers smashing it. This moment of hesitation captures her internal negotiation of desires, a common narrative struggle with female characters plagued by hegemonic forces. She believes she must choose between romantic love (sex) and financial comfort. This does not mean she has cast her material goals away, but that she is at a crossroads of individual desire vs. social complacency. Of course, as a faux-housewife femme fatale, she takes advantage of John's space and things until forced to make a decision. Femininity and domesticity are part of the cinematic fatale's masquerade; performances that serve the pursuit of her desires. As noted in the previous scenes, she feels no guilt for her manipulation and seems to take pleasure in it. She drops the figurine and moves to the rocking chair given to her by Jeff. The status of the prop as it exists within the film is explored in detail within this analysis, but something occurs in its third appearance here. The non-diegetic scoring indicates the rightness of her pairing with Jeff by repeating their couple melody.

She affectionately handles it and then drops into the chair with an audible moan. Harkening back to the sexually-charged how-to-rock lesson from Jeff, the chair's significance is no longer tied to her a domestic figure, as the figurine is also a domestic prop. The difference is that Elizabeth is sexually drawn to Jeff and not John. Much in the manner she invades the domestic sphere, she transforms the rocking chair from a domestic device to a sexualized prop that represents her desire. As antithesis to the mother, she sexualizes a maternal device and alters its connotation. This provides yet another example of Elizabeth's masquerade and cinematic fatale status, utilizing domestic roles and spaces and transforming them to align with her desire.

The last entanglement occurring between Elizabeth and Jeff worth noting is the dance hall scene and their subsequent rendezvous in the sleigh ride, harkening back to the cow relocation scene. The setup is initiated when a man arrives at the door inviting them to join, a plot venture purposed to allow their generic right-coupledness to thrive. Jeff asks her if she dances and she replies, "I get around," delivering yet another nod to her sexual activeness character. Recalling the outright display of affection demonstrated in their snow cuddle, Elizabeth becomes even more open with her feelings during their dance. Yardley and John try to involve themselves in the dance, but Elizabeth and Jeff eventually come together and separate themselves. John is occupied with discussions about his business venture, but Yardley, half-paying attention, notices the chemistry between the young couple in this moment. As the tempo of the action slows, a couple closely embraced saunter past them. Elizabeth looks at Jeff and then rests her head on his shoulder in the direct sight of Yardley and John. Immediately following this, the couple moves toward the back and outside of the building. Yardley notices their departure and

watches them through the windows. The beginning of the scene opens with a gradual tracking shot of the entrance of the building with people entering, then stops in front of a window, peeking in at the dancers with the war bonds poster above them. This tracking shot captures the building similar to John's country home. Although the building is not a traditional domestic space, the mise-en-scene emphasizes the dancing pairs as heterosexual romantic couples. Their exit from the romantic couple infested building is yet another instance in which Elizabeth and Jeff flee from a traditionally-reinforced establishment. And like the cow relocation scene, the meek Elizabeth Lane becomes more like Phyllis Dietrichson.

As Elizabeth and Jeff walk past the building, he informs her of their dwindling time together and she starts to say, “so this is our---” but then corrects herself, “your last night here.” Jeff may be directing their movement, but Elizabeth implicitly draws him closer. Operating in deceit beneath the surface like her faux-housewife role, Elizabeth's dialogue reveals her intentions. She comments in seeming hopelessness, “I guess I was letting my imagination run away with me.” What appears as self-defeat is actually a subtle articulation of her desire, noted and reciprocated by Jeff. Immediately after her comment, he notices a sleigh and suggests they take it for a spin. His actions mirror her words, proving her demonstration of agency through deception. He asks her for a destination and she purrs, “Where do you usually go in your dreams?” The sleigh shoots forward and he exclaims, “the horse is moving, wasn't tied up,” to which she slyly replies, “uh uh.” The insinuation is undoubtedly directed toward Elizabeth and the fragility of her marriage. Again echoing the cow relocation exchange, Elizabeth Lane transforms into a more active persona. She leads him on, “If I wasn't married, what would

you say to me?" He tells her he would refer to her as Lizka, the name Uncle Felix calls her. Following this, she tells him to say the name aloud, repeat it, and then asks him what he would say next. This approach is in line with her previous methods as she baits him seductively until he abides by her wishes. Also resurfacing is the medium close-up that communicates her attraction to him, the visual articulation of her desire. Eventually he feels foolish and says, "You're making fun of me." She responds, "I'm having fun, I'll admit that, but if I'm making fun of anybody, it's Elizabeth Lane." She makes reference to possessing a consciousness about her gendered performativity. Because she is away from the Sloan house, she does not feel a need to emphasize her domestic masquerade. That said, the deceitful degree of her performance is unknown because, like Phyllis, we are never certain whom the real Elizabeth Lane really is, which only supports her recognition as cinematic fatale in line with Doane's assertion that the figure's defining characteristic is that she is unknowable (Doane 1).

Two narrative instances in the culmination of events provide further compelling evidence for Elizabeth's femme fatale status: her direct rejection of and resistance to the patriarchal figures and their conclusive assessment of her femininity. During the confrontation of Yardley and Elizabeth, everything comes to a halt, marking the first moment of explicit defiance. As the illusion begins to diminish and the fabrications are too difficult to manage, a different Elizabeth Lane emerges. She becomes disinterested in playing up literary housewife in her pursuit of Jeff, especially with John taking the illusory reins after Yardley's business offer. During Jeff and Elizabeth's romantic rendezvous on the sleigh, one of the workforce mothers comes to collect her baby. Yardley, believing it to be Elizabeth and John's child, sees her leave with it and calls the

police, initiating the downfall of their plan. Elizabeth and Jeff arrive home in the morning after being jailed for the accidental theft of the sleigh. Yardley, who noticed her attraction to Jeff the previous night, accuses her of being reckless and gallivanting about the town. She clarifies without shame, "I haven't been gallivanting, I've been in jail." He informs her of her stolen baby and she just dismisses it calmly, "Oh that, don't get so excited." The more she replies in nonchalance, the angrier he becomes. The blocking in this scene is indicative of their relationship. Yardley stands above a seated Elizabeth, pacing back and forth with accusation. He always asserts his position of dominance over her, both in body language and words. He chastises her, "Here I believe you to be the finest, the most exemplary wife and mother." He then asks if she has fallen for the young man. She hesitates in answering, "I...I have." As she releases the "I have," she casts a sharp, mischievous grin. The soft, sweet delivery juxtaposed with her naïve look evokes the femme fatale and her signature by producing an image incongruent with her nature.

When Felix manages to convince Yardley to hire Elizabeth back, he approaches her with an offer. Her previous words were already dismissive, but in their second verbal sparring, she spits even hotter. Tired of his shenanigans, she declines his generous proposition. He tries to reason with her and she ventures into a self-empowering tirade, "Suppose you listen to me for once. I said listen to me. I'm tired of being pushed around, told what to do! Tired of writing your gall-darned articles, dancing to everybody else's tune! Tired of being told whom to marry! In short, I'm tired." Whereas before she was playful with his objections, now she addresses him with her frustrations. This mirrors their earlier dialogue at the beginning of the film when she tries to dissuade him from going through with hosting Jeff and he completely ignores her. Notice the difference in

her methods across her exchanges with him. When she needed to invest in the illusion of docile housewife, she appeared subservient to Yardley's wishes all the while working toward her own. However, when she no longer needs to role play, she refuses to restrain herself and stands her ground. The narrative's progression grants the spectator a variety of performances from Elizabeth, and although it's unclear which is closer to the real woman, her performative nature and cinematic fatale status make it insignificant.

In line with her previous behavior with John, the exposed Elizabeth Lane shows no remorse toward her husband-to-be. He voices his disapproval, "I don't know what to think." She snaps, "Think the worst. You always would anyway." In shock, he replies, "You're not even sorry for what you've done." Here she addresses him as though she is the one with authority, "No. And I think you're glad it happened." By establishing herself as figure of authority, she reverses the gendered dynamics and proclaims her agency. He begins to say, "You're not exactly behaving---" and she interrupts him, "As the wife of John Sloan the eminent architect should behave?" As explored in the section concerning John as patriarchal figure, his occupation resembles the construction of his gendered domestic role, as one who needs to control all aspects of his life. She mocks his status to humiliate him and reject his hold on her, demonstrating her agency. The aforementioned "behavior" is a culture code for designating women into a cultural bifurcation of femininity. This demonstrates the incongruence that exists between voicing her desires and inhabiting the domestic masquerade. Their dialogue becomes increasingly heated. "You've disrupted my household," he asserts, and she coyly smiles, "Yes, I have, haven't I?" It is evident to John in this moment that Elizabeth did not come to be implemented into his domestic structure, but to interfere with his order of it. She arrived under the

pretense of marriage, only to wreck havoc upon his life, and in turn, manipulate her faux-spousal role to chase another man. The characterization of Elizabeth by a patriarchal figure as a destructive force evidences an acknowledgement of her as a femme fatale. When he demands she not raise her voice, she destroys the porcelain figurine, emphasizing her resistance to hegemonic oppression.

Jeff even recognizes Elizabeth's agency in a conversation with Felix. Once Felix learns that Mary Lee married and Jeff is no longer tied to her, he informs him of the truth behind Elizabeth's faux-marriage. Jeff remarks, "You mean to tell me Lizka did all this because of me?" Unlike many passive female characters who become the object of a male's desire and efforts to "win over," Elizabeth is active, working to entice Jeff. He confronts her in the room, pretending to be unaware of what Felix told him. He chases her around the bedroom and teases that her husband should come rescue her. As he reveals the truth, her entire demeanor changes and her subdued but sharp delivery is reminiscent of Phyllis Dietrichson, "I haven't got a husband." As a deceptive agent, Elizabeth's dialogue may seem frivolous as parts of the comedic stylings of a romantic comedy, but many of the indications of a femme fatale are present. He jokes, "I'm free as bird," and she responds, "Oh, that's what you think." This retort resembles the ensnaring characterization of the femme fatale, one who reverses the gendered dynamics of a relationship and uses her sexuality to counter the male's agency. The comedic nature of their conversation almost deflates the provocative subject matter in a way that neglects to code it as pejorative. Elizabeth is not chastised for her dishonesty. Instead, it informs their sexually-suggestive repartee as a kind of fetishizing of the forbidden, which not only

mirrors the cow relocation scene, but evokes ideas of the cinematic fatale's sexuality as destructive.

Before the fade to black, Jeff and Elizabeth announce their intentions to wed to Yardley and Felix. Yardley warns Jeff, "Well young man, I suppose you know what you're doing, but I warn you, she can't cook." She confirms this and Felix defends her, "She can't cook, but what a wife." Yardley wishes her well and she kisses him, sending him into a fit of giggles. Her last gesture pacifies the leading patriarchal figure, causing him to forget all of her previous grievances against him. Her sexuality, which is usually contained, flourishes under her own terms. The implications of Felix's declaration are massive because it differs completely from *Ball of Fire*, which sought to straighten out the fallen woman through marriage. In *Christmas in Connecticut*, however, the last line suggests that Elizabeth need not conform or make amends for her sinful past, she is accepted as is, or at least, as the characters believe she is. Even if she is not fully accepted, her utilization of domestic masquerade is successful. Sugarpuss, as the girlfriend of mob boss, is painted as much more of a fallen woman archetype in need of correction, but Elizabeth is a woman who pursues a career and possessions rather than marriage, which means she would typically receive the same treatment. Here lies the most interesting difference in the characters. Sugarpuss is more broadly coded as a bad girl, therefore her character's epiphany from fallen to corrected is made apparent. Elizabeth is constructed as a material girl who lives for herself, but because she is drawn as self-serving rather than fallen, there is not a noticeable shift in her behavior by the narrative finish. One could argue that she only receives patriarchal validation for her physical appearance, meaning that she does not escape the confines of female

objectification. However, the introduction of this thesis emphasizes that the femme fatale is a product of male anxieties concerning female sexuality and has been since transformed into a subversive icon. Therefore, while her value as a woman is still object to the male gaze, her accomplishments should not be dismissed. By showing Elizabeth Lane's incompatibility with the domestic and reveal of her deceptive nature, then subsequent praises by the men around her, the film suggests that her femininity is not crucial to a successful union and Elizabeth need not entirely conform to be validated as a woman.

As per common industry practice, the conclusion of *Christmas in Connecticut* secures a conservative finish with its heterosexual unification and a yearning for domestication by both partners. However, the sum does not trump its parts. The film concludes on a note of resistance. Elizabeth's journey through the narrative as she resists dominant forces through domestic masquerade demonstrates her agency. As discussed with the transformation of the rocking chair to become symbolic of her sexual desire, it is possible that Elizabeth only yearns, or pretends to yearn, the housewife role because she wants to ensnare Jeff. The multiple instances of Jeff performing domestic tasks that Elizabeth is either unaware or incapable of doing rejects the notion of innate female instinct, or at least suggests it is not a component of her character. She repeatedly asks him loaded questions about whether or not he would settle down if he met the right person. These questions do not imply she secretly wishes to conform to traditional roles, only that she wants to be intimate with him. The articulation of her desire is also visually evident through the medium close-ups that punctuate her attraction. She dismisses John all the while using his resources to fool Yardley to keep her job in pursuit of Jeff. This

agency, which is enacted in opposition to patriarchal forces, proves Stanwyck's Elizabeth is as much a cinematic fatale as her noir counterpart, Phyllis.

Chapter 3

Drum Boogie Bombshell

Like Elizabeth Lane, lounge singer Sugarpuss O'Shea exemplifies Doane's good bad-girl in Billy Wilder's *Ball of Fire* (1941). This revisionist fairy tale subverts the delicate Snow White, an idyllic literary model of virginal femininity, and transforms the blushing bride into a saucy siren who embraces her sexuality. In the animated Disney version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) that came out not long before, Snow White cleans up the dwarfs' filthy home through her natural feminine sensibilities as a domestic figure. However, Sugarpuss as femme fatale invades and transforms the academic bastion. Professor Bertram Potts (Gary Cooper) and his seven fellow academics are tirelessly working to produce an encyclopedia for the Totten family. Funds are short after many years of study, so the daughter and head of the estate, Miss Totten (Mary Field), tells them they must finish. After a visit from the garbage man, Potts realizes that as an anglophilic linguist, his hermit habits deny him access to the language of the common people---slang. He ventures to a night club and catches the act of Sugarpuss O'Shea (Stanwyck). His attraction to her, and desire to learn her colorful speech, draws him to approach her for etymology sessions. Although she initially declines, the police's pursuit of her due to a current entanglement with a mobster boyfriend, Joe Lilac (Dana Andrews), forces her to feign interest in Potts's project in order to disappear. Upon her arrival, she immediately casts a spell over the professors and convinces Potts to let her stay there, much to the chagrin of their maid, Miss Bragg (Kathleen Howard). The presence of Sugarpuss and her open sexuality transforms the order of the household.

When mobster Joe and Professor Potts both propose to her, she knows she can no longer live a double life.

The academic setting provides more than a nervous tick for the male lead in this screwball comedy, it participates in the gendered politics of the narrative. The beginning of the film opens with text cards that muse on men and knowledge. The last bit of text reads, "But there was one thing about which they knew very little --- as you shall see..." The ambiguous setup here refers to Sugarpuss, but more broadly to women's sexuality. These ideas provide the underpinnings for the repeated circulation of the femme fatale archetype. The professors comprise an academic database in which each member specializes in a specific field. The breadth of their expertise is stressed to further exoticize her "ball of fire" character. Their encyclopedic expedition intends to capture or secure areas of knowledge in pursuit of virtual totality. As a team they become a polymathic machine that conquers all subjects, yet female sexuality evades them.

The only difference between Potts and his fellow colleagues is his youth. Their hive mentality is noted in several instances. In the scene following Potts's phone conversation and announcement of his engagement to Sugarpuss, all the professors circle around her wanting to take turns kissing her. Professor Peagram tells her, "We feel that you are marrying all of us, a little." Their collective aim is to conquer through knowledge, which explains why Sugarpuss bewitches them so. She represents what they cannot understand or possess and like Gilda, creates a kind of epistemological crisis with her image. Consider Doane's ideas about the femme fatale as an indefinable force. Sugarpuss attracts them, but they know nothing about her sex or sexuality, which only serves to further fetishize her image.

Although the character dynamic bears similarity to something akin to *My Fair Lady* or *Educating Rita*, Potts is not interested in transforming Sugarpuss. Rather, she serves as a conduit for his own research into the language of the proletariat. She exists as his entrance into the world of popular culture as he remains locked in an academic ivory tower. The faux-housewife characterization does not apply for this film like it does for *Double Indemnity* and *Christmas in Connecticut* because Sugarpuss is not pretending to be a wife nor is she actually married. However, she still utilizes gendered masquerade in a, albeit broken, domestic space in order to control others' perception of her image. This does not mean this description of her cinematic fatale persona is any less applicable. She operates on a mode of deception, both in her gendered performance and in her relationship, in pursuit of her desire while exploring and inevitably transforming the domestic spaces. Sugarpuss is useful to Potts because she knows the lingo of the common people but this definition of her character extends beyond class and into her femininity. The name Sugarpuss O'Shea alone, a musical alliteration, suggests the gendered and performative nature of her character. Sugarpuss the lounge singer, the girlfriend of a mob boss, the fallen woman. Potts dismantles the meaning of her name in the film, understanding "puss" for face, thus implying a certain sweetness about her appearance. Her name is tied to her face, the access to her understanding her image. The image she uses to control those around her. All of these ideas contribute to her femme fatale characterization and position her as the foreign invader in the domestic arena. Concerning her foreignness, the exoticism of the femme fatale is further informed by her Irish nationality, fusing a notion of class that surfaces in the comedic supporting garbage man. Her femininity, however, is what provokes and puzzles the men, including Potts.

Sugarpuss invades the domestic space because she embraces her sexuality. Also unlike the other two films, the nuclear family unit is not the focus of the domestic situation. Despite the unusual arrangement of seven men and one woman with no marriage between any of them, the structure of the household exposes traditional gender roles. The space is overly homosocial, and the only other female member is desexualized. The problem with this domestic space is not a lack of specific relationships, but its inability to produce for society. The seven intellectuals reside within the Totten estate with a subservient, asexual housekeeper who functions as more of a maternal figure. The key difference in *Ball of Fire* is that the space is absent of a traditional familial dynamic, and Sugarpuss transforms the space from homosocial into a heterosexual one. Still, like the other two films, her sexual presence upsets the order of the house, revealing compelling suggestions of the relationship between female agency and sexuality.

Despite the heavily male-populated cast, the supporting female characters provide the greatest exploration of the film's gendered discourse. There exists three representations of femininity which can be utilized to unpack patriarchal treatment of female sexuality and how the differences and similarities convey Sugarpuss's femme fatale status. The dichotomized representation is clear, and while two of the representations fall on to one side in opposition to Sugarpuss, but expounding upon them separately lends further detail to her representation of femininity. In a strict division, Miss Bragg and Miss Totten are constructed as reserved and virginal while Sugarpuss is regarded as a provocative and active. Besides the comparisons in representation, the presence of Sugarpuss alters Bragg's treatment and Totten's behavior. The behavioral

changes in the characters by Sugarpuss feed ideas concerning Stanwyck as femme fatale and by extension, my faux-housewife characterization.

Miss Totten may not occupy much screen time, but considering the few female characters and her interactions with Potts, her representation as it relates to Sugarpuss adds an interesting dimension. As the daughter of the man who commissioned the encyclopedia and the owner of the estate, Miss Totten decides the fate of the professors. They use Potts, on whom Totten has her sights set, to manipulate her into extending the deadline for the completion of their encyclopedia. She shares two qualities with Sugarpuss---her youthful appearance and her affinity for Potts. However, their conduct toward him is entirely different. Totten blushes and giggles during every interaction with him and even though she controls the fate of his career, she becomes soft-spoken and reserved in an attempt to entice him. Most of their conversation happens with her seated, looking up at him in an attempt to play demure. This is part of a gendered performance, one that dictates how women must act to appear desirable. Doane recalls Joan Riviere's assertion, "Femininity is fundamentally, for Riviere, the play of masks" in her look at masquerade. Sugarpuss, on the other hand, is direct, abrasive, and active; the contrast serves to define her sexuality. Totten's behavior shifts near the conclusion of the film when she becomes trapped by Joe's henchmen, a force brought on by the presence of Sugarpuss. After defeating them, she rides with the professors to the rescue on the back of the garbage truck. Her demeanor completely changes and she yells, "I've never had so much fun in my life." Sugarpuss's impact on the causal chain of events has not only sexually aroused the men, but liberated the impressionable Totten as well.

While Totten offers nuance, Miss Bragg exists as the antithesis to Sugarpuss. Considering my suggestion that Bragg is a motherly figure to the men, this coincides with Doane's assertion about the femme fatale's opposition to the maternal (Doane 2). Joe Lilac is the narrative villain, but the only character to take issue with Sugarpuss's appearance and behavior is Miss Bragg. Despite her sex, Bragg is the most ardent patriarchal enforcer. Like Nora in *Christmas in Connecticut*, Bragg must distance herself from Sugarpuss's "type" of woman. Her strict adherence to structure is reflected in many of her comments. She trails off in tears, "It's always been my pride to scrupulously, untiringly, efficiently..." She embodies the puritanical demonization of sexual pleasure, but especially at it relates to female sexuality. After happening upon his scholarship about sex, she tells Professor Magenbruch, "I blushed for my duster when I did your desk. You'll find everything in the middle drawer, face down." He notes her aversion to physical intimacy, "I'm just starting my article on sex, Miss Bragg. Any objection?" Her beliefs have less to do with general sexual activity and more with a declaration of her own modesty. In this way, she is positioned in opposition to Sugarpuss, whom she recognizes as a destructive force to her domain, and as a oppositional figure, Bragg is the one to explicitly identify her as a femme fatale. She warns Potts about Sugarpuss, "That is the kind of woman that makes whole civilizations topple." Her sense of duty extends beyond her domestic tasks and into her rejection of any femininity that conflicts with patriarchal understanding. She sneers, "If I were the cream for that woman's coffee, I'd curdle." Her expression of distaste is a way she distances herself from Sugarpuss. Women must not only conform to traditional ideas of femininity, they must internalize patriarchal views of their own sexuality and shun those who do not share them.

Bragg fears Sugarpuss because she threatens the order of the Totten household. She considers herself the rock of the estate and the manager of its order, which makes her a domestic warrior, but it also informs her femininity and transforms her into a mother figure. If the femme fatale is the antithesis to the maternal, as Doane suggests, then the oppositional construction of Sugarpuss and Bragg make sense. As a desexualized older woman, Bragg serves a practical function to the men in the house. She does not appeal the male gaze and is therefore reduced to her role. Potts laments her appearance when talking to Sugarpuss about his lack of visual delight before her, "Except for the singularly uninspiring underpinnings of Miss Bragg." The extent of her agency is tied to her position in the house, that of subservient housekeeper. Sugarpuss even tells the professors, "Mother is calling," when she is heard off-screen. Sugarpuss influences more than just the order of the house, her presence affects the professors' treatment of Bragg. When Sugarpuss first arrives, the men seem intimidated by Bragg's domineering demeanor. However, after she objects to Sugarpuss, their disposition toward her changes. When she stays after threatening to leave, they tease her about remaining. She responds, "A nurse does not quit her post when an epidemic reaches a crisis." The professors' allegiance belongs to Sugarpuss because she physically arouses them.

This dethroning of the mother figure from the domestic exemplifies Sugarpuss's transformation of the space. Flustered by her inability to control the house, Bragg gives Potts an ultimatum, "Either she goes or I go." Her nemesis-like relationship with Sugarpuss climaxes in a heated confrontation when Sugarpuss's identity is exposed by the hidden newspapers. Their rivalry symbolizes more than a difference in character. They recognize that one represents everything the other does not in terms of behavior and

femininity. Bragg is a lady of order. Sugarpuss is a gal of chaos, or to reference the title, a ball of fire. This confrontation is integral in showing the dichotomized understanding of female sexuality that patriarchy produces. Bragg shades her, “A gangster's moll thinking he'd marry one of my professors.” Her use of the possessive lends another example in which she considers herself a mother figure to the men. She fights Sugarpuss not only to defend the order of the house, but her own position and role. She adds, “We'll have this room fumigated when you're out of it.” This comment confirms her understanding of Sugarpuss as a tainted figure. Bragg’s dialogue influences her representation, but her actions feed into the politics of gendered performance similar to Totten. One of the contradictory elements of archetypal matriarch figures like her is that they hold women to abide by reserved feminine etiquette and yet as enforcers become somewhat masculinized in their aggression and agency. Her threats to Sugarpuss make her seem as though she is an intimidating force, but she backs down when pressed. When Sugarpuss physically knocks out Bragg, the difference between their types is made apparent. Sugarpuss, whose agency is influenced by her femininity, proves her disregard for traditional gendered performance by disabling a figure who enforces it.

The Totten estate, which houses the academic encyclopedia team, is the major domestic space that serves as the central location for the gendered discourse. The house represents a safe haven, treating the location as a naturalized, structured space that diverges from and rejects the chaotic unknown (female sexuality) of the modern outside world. Elizabeth is invited into the Totten establishment for her vernacular, but it is primarily her femininity, not only her class, which codes her as foreign and alluring to the professors.

In order to truly assess her foray into the Totten household, consider the initial portrayal of pre-invasion Sugarpuss. As a night club entertainer and femme fatale, her narrative entrance is naturally a performance, as it is an essential component to operating on a system of deception and masquerade. The musical number “Drum Boogie” is meant to ensnare Potts. The sequence begins with a tracking shot that starts with Potts seated in the back and gradually exposes the spatial depth of the club and the size of the night crowd, making a cultural division between Potts and the attendees. Her first visible moment consists of only her hand groping a curtain she hides behind, tapping her finger to the beat. In between the small crevice of the curtains, the movement of her face can be seen. Her eye peers for a moment and then she closes the curtain. Like Phyllis Dietrichson’s use of the veil and sunglasses in *Double Indemnity*, Sugarpuss demonstrates her agency by having control over her image. Unlike Rita Hayworth’s famous striptease in *Gilda*, there are not an abundance of close-ups or medium close-ups to make the face of the starlet easily accessible to the camera's gaze. Much attention is given to Gene Krupa and his band behind her, which makes sense considering his musical fame, but the spatial construction of several of the shots perhaps offer another consideration of Sugarpuss’s representation. Throughout the sequence, in several long shots and medium-long shots, Sugarpuss is positioned in the foreground and in the center of the band. Aside from the traditional setup of a female singer carried by a big band in which her physical appeal is integral to performance, the structure of the song's lyric requires a playful call-and-response to exist between the vocalist and instruments. She seems to call the shots as they follow her lead. The positioning of her as the focal point both visually and musically establish a dynamic that continues inside the professors’

domestic spaces. Potts inquires about her and refers to her as a “fascinating specimen,” which again, is as much as comment about her femininity as it is her language. The second half of the number involves Krupa doing a drum solo with matches on a match box. Although the focus is on his talent, in the close-up shots of his drumming her reflection from the table can be seen. Her presence is noted even when she remains outside of the shot. Once again, her image does not consume the sequence, even though she is always present. This introductory scene and setup gives the spectator an idea of how the denial and reveal of her image puts her in a position of authority.

In one fell swoop, Sugarpuss's entrance creates a firestorm within the house, thus setting the stage for the perversion and transformation of its spaces. She arrives at the rainy door of the Totten estate covered in a shawl and greets Potts with a chipper, “Hi-de-ho!” She makes a clicking sound and then waltzes right into the house. This clicking sound is a personal tick of hers that she repeats throughout the film. The click's sexual connotation becomes increasingly evident the more it's contextualized in suggestive situations. By clicking before entering the house, she communicates her active sexuality. The other professors appear spooked by her appearance and scurry up the stairs; they are intimidated by something that they do not understand. Their reaction to her mere presence in their safe haven indicates her brand of forward femininity as a threat. While Bragg is considered an asexualized mother figure, notice that the professors did not react at all to the arrival of young Miss Totten, which acknowledges a fear of woman who embraces her own sexuality. When Potts apologizes for his informal clothes, she casually goes, “Oh, you know, once I watched my big brother shave.” As a destructive force to patriarchal norms, she attempts to naturalize the nonchalance of gendered interactions,

the laws of etiquette which dictate how the sexes must appear and act. She complements this with a variety of seductive looks because she realizes to secure safe haven at the estate she must charm the men with her sexuality. When she enters the study room, Professor Oddly, who had been hiding behind the door, sees her and scrambles. Her presence and image as informed by her sexuality and class perplex and frighten the professors because they do not understand it. As such, any expression of female sexuality by her renders them paralyzed.

A scene in the study room demonstrates Sugarpuss's agency and infiltration of the domestic through the use of her sexuality. Potts offers to take her coat, but after removing it, he jumps back in shock. The reveal of her sparkling dress cues the seductive melody that affirms the sexualized nature of her appearance. Throughout their exchange, the reflecting light from her outfit dominates the shots. This costume, the same one from her earlier nightclub performance, is a reminder of the occupation that informs her femininity and the exotic appeal of her sexuality. In shock he says, "Are you sure you don't want your coat?" and she responds, "No, I'm fine. Except I've got a run in this stocking." Her baiting methods and feigned naiveté highlight the pattern of Stanwyck's characters operating on a mode of deception. Her transition from the book stack to the chair initiates her hold on Potts and possession of the space. The other professors peek from behind the stairs at her despite their fear because they fetishize her tabooed character. At this moment, she has not made any indication that she desires him. Therefore, the sexualized dialogue that follows is entirely fueled by her desire for his residence, not him. She suggests, "Oh, foo, Professor, let's get ourselves a couple of drinks, light the fire maybe, and you can start working on me right away." He asserts, "I wouldn't think of imposing

upon you at this hour,” and she replies, “Listen, I figured on working all night.” She punctuates the subtext to draw him in with her allure. When he resists further, she gives him an ultimatum to test his desire. “If you want me tomorrow morning at 9:30---” and he immediately jumps in, “Oh, I do Miss Shea.” Once she knows he is interested, she decides to use her body to ensnare him. He tries to object with, “We're all bachelors with the exception of Professor Oddly, who is a widower,” and “Even the most free-thinking people must respect...” She raises her leg and commands him, “All right. Go on. Feel that foot.” He says, “It's cold,” and she replies, “It's cold and wet.” She playfully attempts to convince that she is in no condition to travel, but her concern is with arousing him. Then she waves her finger, telling him to come closer to check out her throat. When he proves too shy to inch close enough, she yanks him forward, “Come on, give.”

Her forward actions showcase the versatility she possesses as a deceptive agent, the ability to alter her methods to secure what she wants. As evident from the earlier moment she frightened him removing her coat, the nearer she draws him in, the less his resistance, in true femme fatale fashion. The other professors have joined their conversation now and when Potts tries to introduce them, she stops him, “I'll get to know them.” Her delivery suggests by “know” she means control, as she realizes they are instrumental in prolonging her stay. She is confident of her abilities because she uses her sexuality as device. She manipulates the other professors into convincing Potts to let her stay. This scene concludes with Sugarpuss proving her hold over the house. Although she entered the house only minutes before, by the time she moves from front door to study room, she has them under her spell. To appeal to their intellectual interests, she mentions Issac Newton's story of the apple and gravity. She turns to Potts and says, “And I want

you to look at me as another apple,” and then repeats, “Just another apple.” Though the direct nod is to Newton, her subtle reference is the Biblical Eve, the woman who tempted Adam and brought about the evils of the world. She indirectly identifies as a femme fatale here. Considering this is the last thing she mentions before leaving them, she understands her agency through her sexuality. The shifting of formal positioning over the course of the scene only reinforces her dominion over the estate. At the beginning of her seductive pursuit she is seated in the chair looking up at Potts, playing naïve in an attempt to sway him. By the end of their conversation, she stands above them atop the stairs, then rendering them speechless, establishing herself as the authority figure.

Her hypnosis provides her dominion over the house. (Figure 3.1, 3.2)

A domino effect initiates following Sugarpuss's occupancy within the Totten estate. Her influence over the repressed household is apparent after only one night. The professors approach Miss Bragg and ask her to press all of their trousers, a comedic suggestion of their arousal. She wonders aloud, “Seven pairs all at once? What is going on in this house anyway?” She lists the odd occurrences in their behavior. As the house’s puritanical defender, she picks up on the signs of transformation of the space. Upon entering the study, Bragg notices the stocking left behind by Sugarpuss, “Professor Robinson, is that one of your socks?” A close-up of the sexualized prop elicits visual

disgust from her, a mark of the sexualized presence within the house. Sugarpuss expresses her hunger but Bragg informs her that breakfast ends at nine o'clock. Sugarpuss tells her, "Just like my Aunt Beulah that brought me up, that's why I left home." Her disregard for the household rules signals to Bragg that she does not follow orders. Sugarpuss is not provocative for her sexuality alone, but her rejection of any kind of structure that dictates what she must or must not do.

In addition to her sexual presence, her influence modernizes the house. Besides her language assistance to Potts, she brings popular culture into the realm of an old-fashioned space. The professors are captivated by dance moves she taught them and she catches them practicing. Professor Robinson arrives in a suit with records and the other professors are giddy about his spoils from the outside world. He informs them, "Well, they were all out of Beat Me Daddy, Eight to the Bar. But I got Chicka Chicka Boom Boom and Shoot the Sherbet to the Herbert." Later in the study room, the garbage man mentions the estate's recent trash collection to Potts which consists of flowers, candy boxes, perfume wrappings, and French liquor. These objects are coded as feminine to remind that the presence of a woman appealing to the gaze exists within the male-dominated house, which excludes Bragg because she is undesirable to them. In addition, the objects describe a lifestyle that allows Sugarpuss to direct her own life. These possessions reflect her ability to secure them through her career. She notes several times the value of her career and how she views Joe as a stepping stone for a bigger stage. By inviting modern culture into the house, Sugarpuss again represents a force against a tradition that is founded upon patriarchal values. This space is not a traditional domestic unit, but more of a homosocial arrangement with fixated gender roles. Therefore,

Sugarpuss's subversion is not like Phyllis in which she destroys the nuclear family. Rather, her active sexuality and provocative image are part of the modern world shut out from the safe haven of the house. Sugarpuss's utilization of sexuality as a device is more of an ideological threat to gender roles. As a result, her impact in is disbanding the purely homosocial, and possibly queer tension, of the Totten house while also working in resistance to Bragg's traditional stances.

As invader of the space, Sugarpuss first introduces a sexualized presence within the house, and then she works to eject the mother figure, Miss Bragg, from her domestic position. Mentioned previously in the section on female representation, she is positioned in opposition to Sugarpuss, so one's femininity is presented as antithesis to the other's. Bragg may not have authority over the men, but she does have authority over the household. During Sugarpuss's Conga instruction, the professors become enamored and lead a dancing line throughout the room. As she passes Bragg she makes another click sound, not only suggesting her possession over the men, but a self-awareness about it. Bragg sees this display as Sugarpuss's siren methods to hypnotize and lead them astray. This leads her to give Potts an ultimatum, knowing she cannot thrive when a destructive figure thrives. Although Sugarpuss does enjoy the company of the professors, her primary reason for staying is to secure her safety from the police. The film recognizes this and Sugarpuss's manipulation of the unorthodox spaces in pursuit of her desire and articulation of that desire in the scene where Joe Lilac's henchmen visit her at the Totten estate.

To ensure she stays loyal to him, Joe has his men offer a diamond ring for proposal. The cinematic fatale's pursuit of her satisfaction can be capitalistic,

materialistic, or even sexual. She lights up seeing the ring, unaware it is a proposition of marriage. One of Joe's men notices the ring does not quite fit and she insists, "It'll do, if I have to whittle down my finger." When they inform her of the reason for the gift by referring to her as "the future Mrs. Joe Lilac," she does not seem thrilled. It is clear she wants the ring but not the wedding. Despite his social power, Joe means nothing more to Sugarpuss than a means to provide for herself. One of them reminds her, "And he's the top, Sugie, do you realize that? He's the top." This is a gendered appeal, because a woman's agency is largely dependent on her relationship to men in patriarchal structures. Sugarpuss understands, however, which is why she uses her sexuality to obtain what she wishes. She contemplates this scenario in terms of achieving maximum wealth, so she dreams it up as a business venture, "Will I continue my night club career or bust in on the Helen Hayes racket?" Joe's unromantic gesture does not faze her because she uses him as much as he uses her. This conversation gives her new motivation to assert and secure her position in the house and exposes her true intentions in the following scene of seducing Potts.

Bragg forces Potts's hand to make him expel Sugarpuss from the house. Over the duration of this scene, Sugarpuss is forward with her attraction to Potts. However, the conversation that occurs directly before this articulates her desire for things, not anyone. In order for her to obtain her desires, she must seduce him. To illustrate his belief that Sugarpuss interferes with the productivity of their work, he muses, "...it very wisely followed an old rule of the sea, no women aboard. It chose a crew of single men with nothing to distract them from the course they were to sail." The word "distract" is attached specifically to her as a femme fatale. Though she has yet to sleep with any of

them, it is his assessment of her femininity and abrasive behavior that cause him to use the word. His neuroticism takes over and she teases him, "Say, junior, couldn't stop walking around a little, could you?" Although he recognizes her as a temptress, she proves herself the authority of the conversation with her sexuality. The fact that her sexuality is tied to her agency that makes her the femme fatale. He comments, "The needle of the compass no longer points to the magnetic pole. It points, if I may say so, to your ankles." He continues, "Make no mistake, I shall regret the absence of your keen mind. Unfortunately, it is inseparable from an extremely disturbing body." He refers to her body as "disturbing" despite his attraction because her image invokes strong feelings. Her presence and appearance disrupt his ability to think logically. The femme fatale paralyzes the capability to control oneself. O'Rawe and Hanson note, "...the fetishism of her powerfully attractive visual appearance, which is held in tension with the desire to uncover her hidden essence" (Hanson 2). Sugarpuss is able to bait him to get what she wants because she knows her ability to manipulate men's sexual desire for her grants her the agency to procure her desire.

Potts becomes defensive when she calls him a "Crabapple Annie" by retorting, "Why that implies that I'm puritanical and narrow-minded." She insinuates his aversion to her is outdated so that he will admit his attraction to her in order for her to make a move. Every part of her speech is calculated, directing him toward her capture. When he confesses, "I, too, have been acutely aware of your presence," she perks up as soon as he admits his attraction to her for two reasons. The first is that he might be interested in the prospect of becoming physically intimate with him. The second is the confirmation of his desire for her, which grants her dominion over him. She presses him for details, further

arousing him by making him recount the details of his attraction. He says, "I could feel your breath on my ear." She continues to bait him, "What'd you do about it?" He tells her he left the room and put a cold wash cloth against his neck. His admission provokes her to move toward him and he backs away. This recalls her first night in the house, when any movement in his direction frightened him. He outright recognizes her sway over the other professors, "We are all beguiled, but I am relatively young. I can suppress temptation." His resistance causes her to mock him, "A little sun on my hair and you had to water your neck." Her methods comprise her suggestive wit and the proximity of her body to his working in tandem. Aside from the dialogue, her grasp on him is supported by formal elements. A series of shots indicate Sugarpuss's authority over him. Potts starts, "I want you to..." and she walks away, then does a turn to face him. In the first long shot, she moves to the background, which cuts to a medium shot of her looking directly at him, causing him to be speechless. The seductive melodic motif, which works in conjunction with her image, is a non-diegetic indication of her sexual intentions. It codes her sexuality much like her behavior and dialogue and communicates her status as a cinematic fatale to the spectator.

After Potts admits his attraction, Sugarpuss appeals to him as the pursuer, rather than the pursued. She tells him about her reasons for coming, "I did not. I came on account of you. On account of because I wanted to see you again." He stops her to correct her to grammar, proving his obsession with structure. Sugarpuss recognizes female pleasure by announcing her intentions, which codes her further as a femme fatale because she articulates her own desire. The femme fatale serves as an emblem for Otherness (Hanson 4), including sexualities outside of male heterosexuality. "Maybe I'm just crazy,

but to me, you're a regular yum-yum type." She enunciates her desire and then she dismisses the gaze of the other professors, "I don't give a whoop whether the others went for me. You're the one I 'm wacky about, just plain wacky." In order to match his height for a kiss, Sugarpuss stands on a stack of books. Her choice of prop for this action and her physical body atop it is in itself a comment on the relationship between patriarchal understanding of knowledge and femininity as something that escapes it. By placing herself on his books, she not only proves herself as something that cannot be contained by that knowledge, but positions herself above it in order to emphasize her rejection of a system that hinders her sexuality, the same system that dictates the gendered order of the house and codes her representation as bad girl. Following this, she proceeds to exhibit her own desire by kissing him, "Come here, I'm going to show you what yum-yum is. Here's yum." He bolts from the room to water the back of his neck, a nod to the mention of his previous response to her appearance. The display of her sexuality affects his entire demeanor. When he returns, he again acknowledges her femme fatale status, "Your further presence here would be fatal." However, he finally caves to her, "It would be idle of me to deny that I, too, feel that affinity that you mentioned a few minutes ago, very strongly..." Potts then asks, "Oh, Sugarpuss, before you go...would you yum me just once more?" Sugarpuss smiles in a medium close-up with the return of her musical motif. She delights in her possession of him. Bragg notifies Potts that the taxi has arrived and he responds in hysterics, "It's all yours, Crabapple Annie." The camera then pans to a Sugarpuss in the background by a record player who clicks, communicating her sexuality and control over him to Bragg. She communicates this to Bragg to inform her of her ejection from a primary domestic position and Sugarpuss's reign over the household.

Potts behavior evidences the transformation of Sugarpuss being unleashed upon the house. The collected academic, an agent of logic, becomes silly and uninhibited. He embraces her brand of femininity, one that champions female sexuality in pursuit of its own pleasure.

The second and successful seduction of Potts sets up Sugarpuss to rule the roost and is evident in the subsequent household interactions. Though her deceptive approach thus far utilizes gender performativity, it fuses with her use of gendered masquerade following his smitten admission. The dynamics are disrupted and though Bragg usually prepares food for the men in the morning, Potts brings Sugarpuss her breakfast in bed. Although he previously identifies her as a destructive force, he treats her like the good-bad girl that Doane mentions (Doane 108), the notion that she is only bad out of circumstance, but can be corrected through settling down. And as a deceptive agent, Sugarpuss cultivates this image thereby engaging with domestic masquerade. When Joe calls pretending to be her father, she plays along as the sweet family-oriented daughter. While alone and out of earshot, she voices her true intentions, “On, no, nothing like that, it's just that one of the professors got off the beam a little. A slight case of Andy Hardy.” When she notices he stands behind her listening, she rattles off a series of familial small-talk questions, “Everything fine at home? Is Mom all right? For Easter? Well, I don't know, Daddy.” Potts wishes to speak to Joe believing it to be her father to ask for her hand in marriage. Once Joe and Potts begin to talk, the blocking of the initial shot exposes the new dynamics of the house. The other professors and Miss Bragg reside in the back. The men are all eager and excited while Bragg appears terrified, which suggests her enchantment over the men and rejection of the maternal figure. Potts and Sugarpuss

are foregrounded with him holding the phone and her standing next to him. Her dark, yet delighted expression is identical to the one she gives Bragg in the later scene, one of enjoying in her ability to possess. Their positioning indicates how Sugarpuss's agency does not rest in her own character, but in her character's manipulation of patriarchal forces via her sexuality. Her presence shifts the dynamics of the house to where she remains in control, albeit indirectly, under the illusion of being controlled, upsetting the gendered structure of the traditional space. She feigns being controlled by performing as an idyllic girl, despite Potts already being familiar to her career and seductive nature. Through some imagery father (Joe), she constructs her femininity in a new way to appeal to Potts.

The aftermath of her entrance into the Totten estate is evident in the conclusion. When Sugarpuss denies Joe's proposal, he sends his men over to hold up Potts and the professors to force her to comply with his demands. Like Eve, the figure she compared herself to earlier in the film, the presence of the femme fatale unleashes the evils of the world upon the sacred, or in the case of Sugarpuss O'Shea, the violence she brings to a traditional house that seeks to shut out her sexualized image. The previously safe haven is disrupted by the invasion of Joe's henchmen, who bring the threat of violence with them. The symbiotic relationship between female sexuality and violence/death is perpetuated by patriarchal fears and is an integral part of the figure's construction throughout her circulation. Even when she is no longer within the household, the subsequent violence is a result of her entering the space. The mafia men become weapon happy and begin shooting up the study room, literally destroying the décor of the area. This is also the same room where Sugarpuss twice seduced Potts. The professors, who appeared passive

and meek before, secure the weapons and wield them. Miss Totten, whose behavior alternated between stern and reserved, becomes excited by the ordeal, representing Sugarpuss's affect on the gender performance of another woman. Potts becomes more concerned with the performative nature of his gender, feeling he must physically fight Joe to appeal to Sugarpuss. The femme fatale threatens the masculinity of male figures (i.e. fears of castration, active vs. passive), therefore, the male feels he must masculinize himself in order to assert his own sexuality. Although hypermasculinity is not beneficial to the freedom of female sexuality and has more to do with the film's generic closure of "correcting" gendered behavior, it is still a result of her influence. The professors, including Potts, respond to the sexualized image of Sugarpuss by entertaining a gendered performance of their own---a hypermasculinized, violent one that is necessary for them to procure her.

The exploration and transformation of the gendered space in *Ball of Fire* seem to be mostly conservative in Sugarpuss's effect on others (heterosexualizing a homosocial environment, masculinizing the professors), but there also exists an understanding of the agency demonstrated and not just a figure of chaos. To assess how Sugarpuss is constructed as cinematic femme fatale, one must contextualize her actions to understand how the film articulates her character's allegiance to pursuing her own desires. There are two primary male characters who are interested in Sugarpuss, Potts and Joe Lilac. Despite being a romantic comedy and developing feelings for Potts, her character is constructed as one who operates in the service of her own individual interests. The narrative reveals her directives, and until the conclusion, it has nothing to do with romance. Joe functions as a means to receive material wealth and security and Potts

functions as a means for temporary safety in order to return to Joe. When she learns of Joe's proposal, she seems apathetic about the union and eager for the opportunities that arise and the expensive ring she is gifted. Her seduction of Potts is purely in service of meeting her immediate needs, to continue staying at the residence. His subsequent action of proposing is met with unenthusiastic discomfort. Although it may seem like her reservations are a result of internal guilt from manipulating him, the narrative has yet to communicate her desire for him. Considering her disinterested reaction to both proposals, it is evident that Sugarpuss's character is constructed as entirely self-serving, again coding her as a femme fatale. Female sexuality and agency are tied because both are seen as working within hegemonic structures as evidenced by Phyllis Dietrichson's use of traditional social role and gender performance as a device for her agency. Sugarpuss rejects the domestic because it interferes with the pursuit of her material desire. In her confrontation with Bragg, she explicitly expresses as much, "Don't worry, I'm not marrying any professor. I'm mink coat. I'm no bungalow apron." Patriarchal culture's bifurcation of female sexuality is obvious in Bragg's behavior, but it exists in Sugarpuss's understanding of her own femininity as well. She refers to herself as a mink coat because she believes that pursuing her material desires against social role tarnishes societal acceptance of her femininity. Both women exhibit a kind of internalized misogyny as they reveal thoughts that demonize Sugarpuss for her material pursuit. Even after Potts returns to save her despite her deception, she hesitates, "Remember, Pottsy, no women aboard. And now, above all women, you want to take a dizzy dame like me." Her self-deprecation is a narrative appeal to give her the appearance of regret to fulfill Doane's good-bad girl routine to the spectator, whose nature can be corrected through marriage.

For the (male) spectator to sympathize with her, she must cast away her previous material girl image.

The narrative transition of Sugarpuss's desire is marked not by societal pressure or obligation, but a recognition of the fulfillment of her own sexuality---one of the biggest markers of the proliferation of the femme fatale. Her interactions with Potts are only in service of other needs in the beginning, but during their wedding rendezvous, a curious exchange changes her feelings toward him. During their stay at the motel after crashing the vehicle en route to Joe, the professors celebrate the future union of Sugarpuss and Potts. Although her visible discomfort with the situation is likely guilt, she has yet to reveal any interest for him. After she leaves to go to bed, an interesting dialogue occurs between the men concerning Professor Oddly's deceased wife. Oddly details his youthful romance and compares his lover to a flower. His exploration of their relationship has to do with water colors and romance, a completely asexual affair. The flower metaphor is used to illustrate virginal femininity and how this made their relationship so beautiful. Later in the conversation, after Oddly departs, Potts decides to follow him to his room to continue their discussion. However, he enters the wrong room, the one containing Sugarpuss, and confides his feelings about her in the dark, believing it to be Oddly. The subtext of his rambling is an admission of sexual desire for her, "I thought because I was young, I had self-control but that's not true." He continues, "I've gone goofy, completely goofy, bim-buggy, slap-happy. Can a man like that keep his mind on the Anemone hemorosa?" The shrouded *mise-en-scene* matches the subject of their conversation concerning sexuality and desire. This moment initiates the shift in her desire for him. Realizing she was the one in the room, he appears shocked, "To say such things to a

woman. You'll have to forgive me.” But she assures him, “Don't apologize, Pottsy. It was illuminating.” Her use of “illuminating” suggests her sexual desire is ignited by his desire to have sex with her. Following their kiss, she runs to the bathroom to water her neck, a nod to their conversation in the study room when Potts admitted doing the same to combat his overwhelming urges. Like the medium close-up that articulated Elizabeth Lane’s sexual desire for Jeff, the dark mise-en-scene and sexually-charged dialogue prove that her interest in Potts is motivated by sex rather than romance. Sugarpuss demonstrates her agency by pursuing whichever man can guarantee her what she wants (wealth with Joe, sex with Potts) and the transition proves as much. Considering her character makes a shift in men following his admission of sexual desire, Sugarpuss exemplifies yet another Stanwyck character who fulfills the femme fatale by pursuing her own desire.

The acknowledgment of female sexuality as something to please rather than be used to please is a subversive notion that interferes with hegemonic structures established by patriarchy. Sugarpuss O'Shea is guided by her desire for wealth. She has no interest in Potts until he communicates his desire to become physically intimate with her. Before that discovery, she was content to remain with Joe because of the wealth, security, and opportunities provided by his company. Even if she transitions to Potts for primary reasons of material access, the timing of her epiphany suggests there is more at play than romance or wealth. The narrative has moments that make her representations of her femininity more sympathetic---revealing her guilt, her affection for the professors---but it does not set out to punish her for actions. The film does conclude with her union with Potts under the assumption they will wed as they originally planned to do, but it is a

union she chooses after learning of his interest in sexually satisfying her. Her methods in this pursuit, the how (deception) and the where (gendered spaces), provide the faux-housewife description. She may not be pretending to be a wife like Elizabeth or Phyllis, but Sugarpuss engages with an unusual domestic space through the use of her sexuality and image. Although she eventually heterosexualizes a homosocial space, this does not suggest her agency is any less subversive. Despite her sexualized presence within the house, she plays with gendered masquerade as a family girl ideal for matrimony during the phone conversation. The transformation and destruction of the house is both literal in its aesthetic damage and figurative in its structure. However, there is no nuclear family to dismantle, rather she brings a sexualized energy to combat its homosocial structure. Bragg serves as a narrative device to identify Sugarpuss as femme fatale. She is the traditional defender to Sugarpuss's subversive offender, with the division between the two being their attitudes toward female sexuality. By bringing violence and displacing the mother figure from her role within the house, Sugarpuss proves that the cinematic fatale transforms even unusual domestic spaces. Her embracement of her sexuality as something to be fulfilled and as a device to pursue other desires highlight the agency granted to the figure and her subversive narrative design.

Conclusion

The term “faux-housewife” suggests a kind of domestic mutability, one that arrives from a consciousness about gender performance. All three of these characters are aware that the perception of their femininity informs the autonomy granted or denied by their sex. Their discomfort with or disruption of the domestic space and its perpetuation of patriarchy’s constriction of female agency establishes them as foreign invaders. By operating on a system of deception, these characters appear to fulfill or oblige the demands of patriarchal structure put upon them whilst in pursuit of their own desires. Though Stanwyck may not possess a European exotic appeal like Garbo or Dietrich, her femininity codes her as a foreign entity all the same. Her persona evokes an Americanized spirit, a patriotic fighter, but women are defined by their femininity first. Instead of playing otherworldly vamps that entice men due to their alien features, Stanwyck’s femme fatales take advantage of their plain appearance and utilize it to skirt oppressive forces that hinder their independence.

The significance of exploring Barbara Stanwyck’s role as femme fatale lies within its cultural legacy and subsequent influence on female representation in film. The femme fatale does more than assist scholars in unpacking patriarchal understandings of femininity, she represents an empowering figure whose image subverts gendered restrictions and provides an icon for any sexuality or sexual expression outside heteronormative male desire. The figure is always a frontrunner in discourses concerning the representation and role of women in the film industry. Stanwyck’s Sugarpuss O’Shea, Phyllis Dietrichson, and Elizabeth Lane all contribute to a larger narrative about the femme fatale’s rise to prominence. They enrich a fascinating history that follows the

development of the tumultuous relationship between female sexuality and culture.

Barbara Stanwyck establishes herself as not only one classical Hollywood's darlings, but as a deceptive agent in the femme fatale cinematic canon.

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