Between the Violence and Virtue of Desire:

Film Noir and Family Melodrama in the Transgeneric Cinema of Hollywood's Late Studio Era

by

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Abstract

Across a century of Hollywood cinema, the scholarly meaning of melodrama shifted from action-centred sensationalism towards pathos-centred emotionalism synonymous with the woman's film or 'weepie.' Taking a position against the gender-casting of film genres, this study approaches classical Hollywood cinema as predominantly *transgeneric* and fundamentally *melodramatic*. A discourse-centred theory of genre is employed to analyse three hybrids of film noir and family melodrama produced between the mid-forties and mid-fifties. After consideration of a noiresque woman's film in lurid Technicolor, *Leave Her to Heaven*, the argument turns to an analysis of the family melodrama permeating *The Big Heat,* a more conventional, male-centred, noir narrative. The final chapter considers the layered play of noiresque and melodramatic discourses in *The Night of the Hunter*. This thesis questions the notion of 'pure genres' while demonstrating the transgeneric pervasiveness of the melodramatic mode languishing in the dark cinema of mid-20th century mass culture.

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Introduction:

A Discursive Approach to the Melodramatic Mode In Classical Hollywood Genres

In this study, I will analyse three classical Hollywood films as generic hybrids of film noir and family melodrama produced between the mid-forties and mid-fifties: *Leave Her to Heaven* (John M. Stahl, 1945), *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953), and *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955). Beyond my personal interest in the films themselves, my decision to work with examples of noir and melodrama rests with two factors. The first factor is my ambition to contribute to the current discourses around the classical Hollywood text's melodramatic roots. I am specifically interested in exploring how melodrama interacts with the dark themes in mainstream films of the mid-twentieth century. The second factor is my related desire to look beyond the limits of static, singular and 'pure' film categories in order to support a *transgeneric* and *transgendered* method of understanding classical Hollywood films. The following section will position my underlying assumptions about noir, melodrama, and film genre within the discourses from which this research project has emerged.

Perhaps the most amorphous and contentious category of the late studio-era, film noir has never ceased to inspire intrigue in film scholars and reverence from critics. The central questions that have motivated work on film noir ask when it began and why, what its defining characteristics are, and if it qualifies as a *genre* or falls into some other cinematic category. Though noir filmmaking thrived in the decade following the Second

World War, shades of noir are found throughout the dark aesthetics of early features to the 'neo-noir' of our contemporary cinema. The genre overlaps with a range of others, including the detective film, crime film, and gangster film, to the suspense thriller and the woman's film. While some researchers discuss film noir as a *genre*,[1] others stress that it should be considered a *tone* or *mood*[2]; film noir has also been studied as a *cycle* or *series*,[3] and most broadly as a *phenomenon*,[4] *visual style*, or *movement*. Because of its birth and development in various formal discourses and subsequent infusion into the vocabulary of popular culture, film noir defies a coherent, widely-accepted definition beyond a current consensus that it has never been just one thing.[5] The most common accounts maintain that film noir was born and given a name in the mid-forties by French critics who recognized the dark aesthetics in the post-Occupation backlog of American crime thrillers. While I do not wish to challenge this interpretation, its value is limited if one considers how Hollywood as a whole changed in response to the massive upheavals of the Second World War.

My approach to genre will support Christine Gledhill's proposal that if we want to understand how film and society interact, "we need a concept of genre capable of exploring the wider contextual culture in relationship to, rather than as an originating

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1 Foster Hirsch, "The City at Night," in *The Dark Side of the Screen – The Film Noir* (San Diego: A.S. Barnes, 1981): 1-21.

2 Paul Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," in Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds. *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996): 53-64; Raymond Durgnat, "Paint it Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir," in Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds. *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996): 37-52.

3 Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain, 1941-1953* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1955).

4 Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991).

5 For example, James Naremore's multi-contextual arguments around film noir in *More Than Night* strongly parallel Steve Neale's revisionist approach to noir in *Genre and Hollywood.*

source of, aesthetic mutations and textual complications."[6] We need a theoretical shift away from the construction of exclusive boundaries and taxonomic histories. The diversity of discourses around film noir illustrates my central assumption that genres are impure constructs and that films are never pre-ordained to singular, trans-historical categorization. This thesis will investigate classical Hollywood's cross-generic patterns from the position that only a transgeneric approach to mainstream narrative will open film studies beyond the confining borders of 'pure' genre criticism. My argument will question how a *discursive* approach to genre redefines film noir's borders and melodrama's role in Hollywood cinema from the mid-forties to the mid-fifties. I will demonstrate that film noir is an amorphous genre comprising predominantly melodramatic narratives with both male and female-centred discourses around love, family, morality, law, violence, and sexual desire.

My argument about film noir begins at the point where current theories of film genre meet the discourses surrounding cinematic melodrama. This critical intersection is most effectively expressed by Christine Gledhill in 'Rethinking Genre,' published as part of the 2000 anthology, *Reinventing Film Studies*. "Crucial to the development of the modern genre system," writes Gledhill,

> and to understanding the shifting borders between high and mass culture is the rise of nineteenth century melodrama. Most contemporary accounts of melodrama begin with its 'notoriously' amorphous lack of distinctive boundaries. This is exemplified in recent gender disputes, whereby melodrama, reclaimed in the 1970s-1980s by feminist critics as a women's form, is now subject to historicist revision as belonging to male action genres.[7]

6 Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds. *Reinventing Film Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 221.

7 Gledhill (2000), 222-223.

In the seventies, critics writing for the woman's movement brought the weepie to the formal attention of film scholars and it was equated with mainstream melodrama. Since the early eighties, and increasingly throughout the nineties, a number of critics have moved in two general directions with the common purpose of separating melodrama from its exclusive connection to woman-centred narratives. First, several researchers have looked back at mass culture in the first half of the twentieth century to find evidence of the co-relation between melodrama and sensationalism or 'male genres.' Second, other critical writing wishes to reposition melodrama as the fundamental *modality* of Hollywood cinema.

I will elaborate on the first sub-discourse in the beginning of my first chapter—at this point, however, it is important to view studies of genre origins with an interested, yet critical perspective. Referring to recent research by Steve Neale (2000), Ben Singer (2001), and Altman (1999), among others, Gledhill argues the following:

> In its focus on locatable origins and singular meanings, the empirical bent of the new historicism fails to grasp the productivity of such *boundary encounters and category mixing* which, amongst other things, permits the exploration of one social gender in the body of another and widens audience appeal. Ultimately, reliance on industrial and marketing categories threatens to return us to the taxonomic trap.... So while there is no doubt that melodrama is a category deeply caught up in the gendering of western popular culture – in its classing and racialising as well – there is no simple identification to be made between gender, whether male or female, and melodrama at any point in history.[8]

Gledhill's overarching position on melodrama – "Melodrama is not nor ever was a singular genre"[9] – lies at the root of the second sub-discourse separating melodrama from the woman's film, including Linda Williams's contribution to the 1998 publication,

8 Gledhill (2000), 226; emphasis added.
9 Gledhill (2000), 227.

Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History. Williams introduces "Melodrama Revised" with a concise statement explaining that melodrama is not a specific genre, nor exclusively located in the weepies: "Rather, melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie."[10] For Williams, all melodrama principally synthesizes exterior conflicts of violent action and interior struggles of desire and passion.

With this useful dialectic in mind, it is far too simplistic to divide the study of Hollywood melodrama along gender lines by aligning action-centred sensationalism with 'male' genres and pathos-centred emotionalism with 'female' genres. A fuller understanding of melodrama's role in mainstream cinema needs to be developed by addressing both the relationship between the woman's film and other genres, on the one hand, and, on the other, melodramatic representations of masculinity. To this end, my research will analyse films that cross the conventions of a commonly male-centred genre, American film noir, with family melodrama, a genre that has become virtually synonymous with the forties and fifties woman's film. The victimization of weak male characters in the range of noir films reviewed for this study has proved a fitting place to discuss the crossing of male-centred narratives with passion-centred melodrama.[11] Film noir has been explained as "blood melodrama,"[12] "crime melodrama,"[13] "psychological

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10 Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in Nick Browne, ed. *Refiguring American Film Genres* (Berkeley and L.A.: University of California Press, 1998): 42.

11 Although my work will recognize discursive and aesthetic concepts of male-centred melodrama, I will avoid the faulty pretense of labeling any film a 'masculine melodrama' or 'male-weepie.'

12 James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998): 40-95.

melodrama,"[14] and, most generally, as "dark melodramas."[15] Additionally, the work on gender and sexuality in film noir is strong and diverse, from Kaplan's edition of *Woman in Film Noir* (1998) to Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (1991). However, what requires deeper analysis is the textuality of the classical Hollywood film noir as a melodramatic genre on the one hand, and, on the other, a commonly, but not exclusively, male-centred array of discourses.

What does it mean to say that film noir is a *melodramatic genre*? In other words, what does it mean to say that melodrama is unlike any genre, that it transcends faulty, gender-defined categories, and that it lies at the heart of Hollywood's non-comic genres? The answer employs Gledhill's conceptualization of melodrama as, "a culturally conditioned mode of perception and aesthetic articulation."[16] Gledhill is among a range of film theorists who look to melodrama's nineteenth century forms in order to understand the classical film text's relationship to modernity and contemporary melodrama. What emerges as a major theme of this field is an understanding that melodrama's relation to the wider socio-cultural sphere extends beyond the concept of *genre* into what Gledhill calls a *modality*. Gledhill writes that, "The notion of modality, like register in socio-linguistics, defines a specific mode of aesthetic articulation adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national boundaries."[17] She continues by elaborating on the cinematic mode's transgeneric function:

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13 R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994): 32-70.

14 Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 169.

15 Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974): 189.

16 Gledhill (2000), 227.

17 Gledhill (2000), 229.

> [The mode] provides the genre system with a mechanism of 'double articulation', capable of generating specific and distinctively different generic formulae in particular historical conjunctures, while also providing a medium of interchange and overlap between genres.... Because of its wider socio-cultural embrace, the melodramatic mode not only generates a wide diversity of genres but also draws other modes into its processes of articulation. Thus melodrama thrives on comic counterpoint, can site its fateful encounters in romance, and keeps pace with the most recent of modes, realism, which first worked in cooperation with melodrama then disowned it.[18]

This concept of melodrama rests on an understanding of how its nineteenth century forms shaped the early cinema at the centre of the mass culture emerging around the industrialization and urbanization at the turn of the twentieth century—"a world of unprecedented cultural discontinuity and social atomization."[19]

In his mid-seventies book, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks conceptualizes melodrama as a mode of perception that arose in relation to the secularization of modern society. "Melodrama," writes Brooks,

> starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and made legible.... Melodrama is indeed, typically, not only a moralistic drama but the drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to 'prove' the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men.[20]

Gledhill takes up Brooks's challenge that we should "recognize the melodramatic mode as

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18 Gledhill (2000), 229.

19 Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2001): 294.

20 Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," in Marcia Landry, ed. *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991): 64.

a central fact of the modern sensibility."[21] She contends that, "Americanization and Hollywood in particular facilitated the *modernization of melodrama* in a transformation that depended on its relationship with realism rather than its antithesis to it."[22] In relation to wider social and political changes, Hollywood aesthetics developed within a genre system guided by the melodramatic mode; in constant tension with realism, the melodramatic mode shifted from the 'black-and-white' moral polarization of early cinema into the morally ambiguous Technicolor gloss of the forties and fifties.

Written in the early seventies, Thomas Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" (1972) was among the first essays to explore the melodramatic underpinnings of Hollywood cinema in the late studio era. A decade later, in an extensive piece for a 1982 issue of *Movie* dedicated to Max Ophuls, Michael Walker argued that "Melodrama is arguably the most important generic root of the American cinema."[23] In the early nineties, in her introduction to *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars* (1992), Jane Gaines sets up a discursive struggle between David Bordwell's brand of formalism and approaches to the classical text that emphasize its patriarchal form and melodramatic roots, among other competing discourses. The 1992 anthology begins with an essay in which Altman asks, "of what current tendencies and stresses within film theory is the neglect of cinema's debt to melodramatic stage adaptations symptomatic?"[24] Gledhill's more decisive contribution to 'the paradigm wars'

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21 Brooks, 64.

22 Christine Gledhill, "Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*," in Jane Gaines, ed. *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992): 131.

23 Michael Walker, "Melodrama and the American Cinema," *Movie* 29/30 (1982): 2.

24 Rick Altman, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," in Jane Gaines, ed. *Classical Hollywood*

prefigures her arguments in 'Rethinking Genre' and generally parallels Williams's position in "Melodrama Revised." Gledhill positions melodrama as the norm of mainstream cinema rather than just as the residual excess of early cinema's melodramatic tropes—the subject of Ben Singer's 2001 book-length study, titled *Melodrama and Modernity*. Singer investigates 'blood and thunder' melodrama within the broad phenomenon of sensationalism in urban modernity from 1880 to 1920. His groundbreaking, historical insights expand the meaning of melodrama beyond limiting associations with the woman's film while maintaining a critical perspective on "the modernity thesis"[25] and melodrama's function as a 'culturally conditioned mode of perception.' What Singer's conclusions leave open is the question of melodrama's relationship to contemporary society in a postmodern or global context.

This thesis represents an effort toward Singer's challenging questions by looking at film noir in the late-studio era with a perspective informed by Gledhill and Williams. In this study's three main chapters, I will analyse the textuality of film noir and family melodrama as two sides of the same coin of classical Hollywood narrative. Though the specific borders of film noir are inevitably contentious, the dark genre, along with family melodrama and the majority of Hollywood's non-comic genres, is rooted in the melodramatic mode. The film noir/family melodrama hybrid challenges assumed borders between 'female' and 'male' genres while exploring the *transgendered* subjectivity of *transgeneric* cinema. The question, however, of what the film noir/family melodrama hybrid means in relation to the socio-cultural tensions of modernity in the mid-twentieth

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Narrative: The Paradigm Wars (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992): 14.
25 See Singer, 9.

century is beyond the scope of this study. My analysis of three hybrids will provide the framework for an arena in which to consider the merits of a revised theory of genre outlined by Stephen Neale nearly twenty-five years ago.

Neale's proposal for a theoretical shift in his 1980 publication, *Genre*, proves useful in light of my position that there is no value in thinking of feature films as instances of 'pure' genres, that the majority of Hollywood cinema is open to transgeneric interpretations, and that the melodramatic mode is the locus of genre-mixing. My analytical approach to the noir/melodrama hybrid is rooted in Neale's central point about cinema as a *social institution*. He writes:

> The focus of the cinematic institution, of its industrial, commercial, and ideological practices, of the discourses that it circulates, is narrative. What mainstream cinema produces as its commodity is narrative cinema, cinema as narrative. Hence, at a general social level, the system of narration adopted by mainstream cinema serves as the currency of cinema itself, defining the horizon of its aesthetic and ideological possibilities, providing the measure of cinematic 'literacy' and intelligibility. Hence, too, narrative is the primary instance and instrument of the regulatory processes that mark and define the ideological function of the cinematic institution as a whole.[26]

To summarize Neale's argument about genre and narrative, two points are important. First, the author writes that the narrative process begins with the *disruption* of a balance of diegetic elements and that closure comes about through the refiguration of these elements to overcome disequilibrium and restore order. Second, any Hollywood narrative is composed of multiple discursive systems that include specific registers of sexual desire, violence, law, family, and morality, among other themes of social, political, cultural, and religious life. Neale simply states, "Genres are modes of this narrative

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26 Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980): 20.

system, regulated orders of its potentiality," and he explains:

> [I]t is necessary to consider the modes in which equilibrium and disruption are articulated, and the ways in which they are specified, represented differently and differentially, from genre to genre. In each case, the marks of generic specificity as such are produced by an articulation that is always constructed in terms of particular *combinations* of particular types of categories of discourse. The organisation of a given 'order' and of its disruption should be seen always in terms of conjunctions of and disjunctions between multiple sets of discursive categories and operations.[27]

This study rests on the key hypothesis that the primary or secondary plotlines in most Hollywood narratives revolve around the processes of sexual desire and discourses on romantic or familial love. With the moral and emotional registers that articulate themes of desire and love, the melodramatic mode is a hub of genre-mixing. Melodrama plays a role in the establishment and dispersal of equilibrium in the majority of classical Hollywood genres, from the western and gangster film to the musical and woman's film. Though not always the primary agent of narrative closure, the melodramatic mode refigures the specific emotional and moral balances in a range of generic worlds. My analyses will explore the complementary and contradictory tensions in film noir and family melodrama's discursive registers.

The first chapter of this study will analyse the noir/melodrama hybrid in relation to the narrative discourses in the woman's films that proliferated in the forties. In the noir film, a male character is often victimized by the steely, cold-hearted femme fatale; in the family or maternal melodrama it is often the opposite case, with the female character depicted as a self-sacrificing victim of emotionally detached family members and an

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27 Neale (1980), 20-21; original emphasis.

unsympathetic patriarchal society. By starting with a transgeneric film emphasizing a female character's perspective, I will establish how film noir intensifies melodrama's discursive registers before the following chapter considers the narration of male-centred emotional frustration and abuse. The hybridity of *Leave Her to Heaven* is typical in occupying a position between, on the one hand, action-centred, sensational melodrama with masculine protagonists whose heroic capabilities preclude any reason to pity them and, on the other hand, pathos-centred, family or maternal melodrama with the virtuous sufferings of feminine protagonists. The melodrama in *Leave Her to Heaven* engages with noiresque aesthetics to express the illicit nature of Ellen Berent's incestuous sexual desire. The taboo is so strong, its nature so unspeakable, that it cannot be articulated within the plot; the narrative can only manifest the taboo's negative energy through the lethal gestures of the femme fatale and the lurid Technicolor framing her. Film noir aligns the viewer with the agency of desire in a dangerous woman who not only commits melodramatic transgressions of social mores and codes of behavior, but who totally disregards legal mandates and moral decrees to get what she wants. *Leave Her to Heaven* is held together by attempts to articulate and resolve the disequilibrium surrounding Ellen's incestuous sexual desire and it struggles throughout to contain the lethal potency of her will.

In contrast to *Leave Her to Heaven*, what is remarkable about *The Big Heat*, the subject of my second chapter, is the way in which pathos is negotiated by the male-centred narrative of a melodramatically viable plot. Dave Bannion cannot express what he most desires as a family man and tries to satisfy his emotional turmoil through the

avenging actions of a renegade cop. The unrelentingly linear course of revenge ostensibly drives the violent noir plot. Nonetheless, Bannion's impossible desire to recover his family life marks the film with pathos-centred melodrama and leaves it without a strong sense of closure, even after his wife's killers are defeated and he regains his detective status. Melodramatic emotionalism is suppressed by Bannion's hard-boiled detachment as a cop; however, this aspect of his character is subordinate to the superseding importance of his role as a father, husband, and protector of his home's sanctity in a city of corruption. Like many noir films (but unlike the classic detective film), the law discourse in *The Big Heat* is secondary to the personal and emotional motives of cops and criminals.

In *The Night of the Hunter*, the subject of my third chapter, the law discourse has little prominence and the violence of the noir plot intensifies the narrative's diverse processes of desire. My analysis of the film will draw from recent criticism on Hollywood melodrama – especially Williams's fundamental principles of the melodramatic mode – to interpret how mixing specific codes and conventions affects each genre's discursive registers. For example, Williams's principles of melodrama include the Manichean conflict of good and evil in a narrative that begins and strives to end in a space of innocence. In the prologue of *The Night of the Hunter*, an elderly mother-figure played by Lilian Gish reads from the Holy Bible, introducing a bipolar theme of good vs. evil, challenging the narrative to return to this extra-diegetic space of heavenly virtue. The prologue and the main plot-line, fueled by a psychotic serial killer, recalls a melodramatic form that Singer labels *classical* in contrast to the forties and

fifties Hollywood melodrama represented by the work of Sirk, Minnelli, and Fassbinder, among others. However, *The Night of the Hunter* is more concerned with processes of sexual desire and familial love rather than discourses around law and violence. The film's noiresque aesthetics challenge Williams's all-encompassing principles of melodramatic narrative by illuminating the differences between the discursive registers of classical melodrama and later family melodrama. Finally, noir renders impossible the return to a space of innocence by raising cynical questions about love's triumph over hate—classical melodrama is overshadowed by the ambiguity enshrouding hope in the constellation of discourses surrounding the familial crisis.

Neale's proposal for a discursive approach to genre in narrative cinema explains the transgeneric effect in *The Night of the Hunter*. In his second chapter, the author discusses how various narrative forms maintain coherence in the multiple layers of positions that are inscribed through the plurality of discourses in any given film. He explains how disequilibrium never exceeds the limits of dramatic conflict within the diegesis, and that this conflict "is always, ultimately, articulated from a single, privileged point of view."[28] Neale continues with the following explanation:

> Fundamental, then, to the economy of the subject in mainstream narrative, to the economy of its mode of address, is the achievement of the maintenance of a coherent balance between process (enunciation) on the one hand, and position (enounced) on the other. But this economy can be structured in a variety of ways. *Genres represent systematisations of that variety.* Each genre has, to some extent at least, its own system of narrative address, its own version of the articulation of the balance. Each genre also, therefore, engages and structures differently the two basic subjective mechanisms which any form of the balance involves: the want for the pleasure of the process, and the want for the pleasure of its closure.[29]

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28 Neale (1980), 25.
29 Neale (1980), 25-26; emphasis added.

The Night of the Hunter balances the pleasure of the process of film noir and sexual desire (centred around Preacher and Willa) with the pleasure of closure facilitated by the power of love's discursive dominion (centred around Rachel). The film defies affiliation with any singular genre because the disorder of the family constellation is composed of a diverse array of themes connected by competing discourses. The narrative is about many character-types and the familial and communal ties that bind them legally and morally and the Depression serves as the causal setting of the hard times that test the true nature of these ties. *The Night of the Hunter* is both a dream-like melodrama of a child's lost innocence and a nightmarish plot driven by Preacher's noiresque attack on love and family. In this study's conclusion, I will return to a discussion of hybridity in the tension between process/desire and closure/fulfillment. The following chapter examines Ellen's lethal combination of melodramatic passion and noiresque actions in *Leave Her to Heaven*.

Chapter 1:

A Femme Fatale's Incestuous Desire and Duplicity

In *Leave Her to Heaven*

In "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," published in the 1978 edition of *Women in Film Noir*, Pam Cook argues that the story of Mildred's failure to achieve success as both a business woman and a mother is paralleled by the film's generic hybridity:

> It seems that a basic *split* is created in the film between melodrama and film noir, between 'Woman's Picture' and 'Man's Film', a split which indicates the presence of two 'voices', female and male, which in itself is a mark of excess since 'classic' film is generally characterised by the dominance of a metadiscourse, which represents Truth. *Mildred Pierce* is constituted as a sexually ambiguous film, an ambiguity founded on duplicity which is eventually resolved by the reassertion of the patriarchal metadiscourse. In the process of resolution, melodrama, Mildred's point of view, is displaced by film noir (in which female discourse is suppressed but remains in the form of threatening shadows and man-killing Amazonian women)... The consequences of the retreat from patriarchy are represented as the complete upheaval of social order leading to betrayal and death, in the face of which the reconstitution of the patriarchal order is seen to be a necessary defence.[30]

Cook's ideological reading of *Mildred Pierce* as a discursive struggle was a necessary contribution to feminist film criticism in the 1970s. However, her central premise has limited value in the current context of genre theory because it fails to explain other hybrids of film noir and family melodrama. Cook's split – "melodrama with women and film noir with men"[31] – demands an essentialist concept of film noir and perpetuates the assumption that the full range of melodrama in classical Hollywood cinema can be subsumed under the category of 'the woman's film.' In contemporary film studies, this

30 Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed. *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1998): 72-3; emphasis added.
31 Cook, 79.

"split" is a false dichotomy.

Cook introduces her discussion of film noir in *Mildred Pierce* by positioning the film outside the "self-contained, homogeneous world created by those formal strategies now accepted as characteristic of film noir."[32] She notes the fluidity of the genre's boundaries, yet assumes an uncomplicated definition of film noir for her analysis of how the film's explicit manipulation of formal conventions establishes a hierarchy of discourses. Film noir defies specific coherence and universal meaning across all its manifestations—or as James Naremore suggests: "it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse."[33] Naremore's contextual approach in *More Than Night* – as he positions the development of noir in seven widely varying social and cultural frames – strongly parallels Steve Neale's revisionist approach in *Genre and Hollywood.* Just as Naremore stresses that film noir needs to be examined as a discursive construct lacking essential features, Neale states that noir is ultimately a critical category that defies definition and inevitably generates contradiction.[34]

Film noir as a critical and popular concept overlapped with several established genres, from the detective film, crime film, suspense thriller, and gangster film to the woman's film, and family and romantic melodramas. Throughout its development in various formal manifestations and infusion into the vocabulary of popular culture, film noir has been claimed as a cinematic genre and style, tone and mood, series and cycle, movement and phenomenon, among other conceptualizations. Film noir has been a long-standing area of interest in film studies precisely because researchers can find evidence

32 Cook, 69.
33 Naremore, 11.
34 Neale (2000), 153-4.

within its vague borders, and even among its central films, for widely contrasting arguments and generalizations. At a textual level, film noir's hard-boiled, morally ambiguous detectives and anti-heroes commonly undermine the narrative trajectory in classic detective fiction towards a patriarchal metadiscourse representing truth. Moreover, the crisis of masculinity in many noir narratives is often unresolved. From discursive contexts to individual texts, Cook's unqualified association of film noir with a male and patriarchal metadiscourse is faulty.

The association of melodrama and female discourse is also problematic. Since the emergence of feminist scholarship on the woman's film in the 1970s, the meaning of melodrama in film studies has narrowed from a wide range that included action-centred sensationalism to a genre that denotes the pathos-centred emotionalism of the weepies. This division of melodrama into two broad categories of action and passion constructs useful boundaries for historical surveys. However, the action/passion division leads many critics to align presumptuously the former mode with male genres and the latter mode with female genres. As part of his revisionist approach in *Genre and Hollywood*, Neale questions the correlation of melodrama with the woman's film. In a survey of the use of 'melodrama' and related terms in *Variety* from 1938 to 1959, he points out how the term was used to describe more action-centred films or 'male' genres and rarely equated with the woman's film. He concludes that film studies has overemphasized the importance of the woman's film as the quintessence of melodrama and that the diversity of nineteenth century melodrama, "was both a fundamental progenitor of nearly all of Hollywood's non-comic genres, and a fundamental source of many of its cross-generic

features, devices and conventions."[35] The history of Hollywood melodrama is more complex than often assumed in film criticism. Cook neglects this history when she uses the woman's picture as a synonym for melodrama. Similarly, she limits the study of the "woman's film" by confining it to melodrama and assuming a direct link between female discourse and thematic problems of passion, desire, emotional excess and the domestic sphere. Cook's hierarchical split of gender and genre hinders interpretations of transgeneric texts with non-traditional representations of femininity and masculinity.

John M. Stahl's *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) is about the insatiable desire of a beautiful woman who self-destructs trying to get what she wants. Ellen Berent, played by Gene Tierney, is among the most complex female protagonists in studio-era Hollywood. As a duplicitous hybrid of a woman's film protagonist and a film noir *femme fatale*, she shifts between a passive and nurturing quality and a violently self-serving extreme. The film is centred around Ellen's attraction to a man, Richard Harland, whom she is convinced resembles her dead father, thus marking their relationship as *incestuous* and ill-fated. She manipulates Richard's attraction to her and proposes marriage, sealing her fate as the transgressor who must be repressed or destroyed in order that narrative resolution be achieved. The immorality of Ellen's marriage lies in how she seeks to possess her husband not as Richard Harland, but as a surrogate for the father—an immorality that becomes explicit when she drowns Richard's younger brother, Danny, for whom Richard fills a paternal role in the absence of the brothers' real father. Danny's

35 Neale (2000), 202.

presence positions Ellen as his mother and she cannot love Richard as a substitute for her father. Similarly, Ellen destroys her own unborn child, the maternal responsibility that would require Ellen to let go of her father and see Richard as a husband. Richard develops a legitimate relationship with Ruth, Ellen's *adopted* sister who does not see him as a father-substitute. Realizing the impossibility of possessing Richard as a father, Ellen kills herself in a way that frames Ruth for the death. A court case interrogates the dynamics of love and romance until Richard's confession demonstrates the self-serving and violent nature of Ellen's 'love.'

With its transgeneric conventions and excesses, the film is exemplary of classical Hollywood's fundamental hybridity. *Leave Her to Heaven* is a hybrid of film noir and family melodrama that contradicts the central premise of Cook's feminist reading of *Mildred Pierce*: that film noir represents a male discourse which suppresses the female discourse of the woman's picture. In *Leave Her to Heaven*, noir is the agent of feminine sexuality and transgressive desire. The *femme fatale* represents the dark extreme of Ellen's nature and violently releases her repressed emotions, magnifying the central contradiction of melodrama: "the impossibility of an individual reconciliation of the law and desire."[36] In the marked absence of a patriarchal metadiscourse until the trial after her death, Ellen's discourse is the narrative's controlling 'voice.' Film noir remains at the margins of family melodrama until Ellen's *hyper*-femininity breaks surface tensions and drives her to murder. Through the tone and violence of film noir, the viewer anticipates and witnesses Ellen acting upon self-serving desires that contradict patriarchal and moral

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36 David Rodowick, "Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s," in Christine Gledhill, ed. *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987): 273.

laws. The consequences of the father's absence are represented as the intensification of emotional excess into the femme fatale's dangerous action, resulting in the disavowal of maternity and the self-destruction of unchecked feminine sexuality. The resolution of excess is not achieved through a struggle of generic conventions representing gendered discourses. The excess of repressed emotions is darkly intensified by the excess of violence until the central protagonist self-destructs under the ideological contradiction of combining a world in which women are the repressed victims of patriarchy with a world in which dangerous women manipulate weak masculinity. *Leave Her to Heaven* does not resolve its transgeneric excess and spills over a dichotomy between action/masculinity/male genres and passion/femininity/female genres.

The film opens on a dock at Deer Lake, Maine, where Richard 'Dick' Harland is greeted by the sympathy of Glen Robie, his lawyer, and the pity of onlookers before he steps into a canoe and paddles away alone. Glen's comments during this brief scene raise curiosity about the court case he lost, why Richard spent two years in jail, and who the woman is waiting for Richard across the lake. Assuming a position of authority, Glen recounts the story to his friend and initiates the flashback that constitutes the narrative: "There were things that couldn't be told in the courtroom. Yet, of all the people involved, I suppose I'm the only one who knew the whole story. See, it was through me they first met... They met on the train." Unlike many central noir films, such as *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard*, the male protagonist does not control the flashback or maintain voice-over narration. *Leave Her to Heaven* is not Richard's story. Glen serves as a narrator with a privileged position as the one who knew the central characters before their

meeting. Omniscience is invested in the lawyer, the film's only successful patriarchal figure, and the viewer trusts that the unfolding narrative presents the truth of events. He does not, however, interject his presence during the flashback and the female protagonist's point of view displaces this framing metadiscourse. The intensity of Ellen's desire symbolically castrates Richard in the flashback's first scene, then takes over the narrative's point of view in the following sequence. Ellen moves the plot through three sequences by violently taking action to release repressed emotions and fulfill her desire for the father. Her all-consuming subjectivity reaches beyond her death and the flashback's final sequence struggles to resolve the excess she represents in a court of law. The following textual analysis will work through the flashback's six sequences to illustrate Ellen's central role in producing the transgeneric excess of family melodrama and film noir.

As a common noir element, the film's flashback structure casts a fateful tone over past events as Glen's narration dissolves to the over-determined meeting of two strangers on a train. The scene begins with Ellen holding a book with the dust jacket photo of the author's head covering her face. The reverse shot reveals the author, Richard, sitting across the aisle. On a formal level, these shots signify Ellen's duplicity as the actual protagonist of the story: she emerges from behind the male author's image and takes over the conventionally masculine role as chief mover of the plot. The brief scene also establishes her resistance to objectification, her control over her performance of femininity, and Richard's effeminate traits. Ellen's long and intense gaze at Richard after

he picks up her dropped book inverts conventional subject/object gender relations in classical Hollywood cinema; the awkwardness of this inversion is the exception that proves the rule. Ellen maintains her castrating gaze and Richard self-consciously lights a cigarette, burning himself on the match's orange flame when he is paralyzed by Ellen's piercing, cool blue eyes. Ellen apologizes and explains that Richard looks like her father. By Ellen's conviction, their flirtatious exchange and future romance are coded as incestuous and ill-fated. Richard's apparent resemblance to Mr. Berent is the immediate cause of Ellen's seemingly harmless social gaffe and the root cause of all future outbursts and violent transgressions. Ellen displaces her love for her deceased father onto Richard rather than giving into the pain of her loss. The narrative is grounded in a common feature of melodrama: desire that always focuses on unattainable objects and impossible goals.[37] Ellen's emotional and psychological energy is relentlessly directed toward fulfilling the irreconcilable desire to possess her father through Richard as a lover substitute. Her duplicity wields control over both the surface image of feminine beauty and passivity and the masculine act of looking, taking strong action, and motivating the plot.

The flirtatious exchange on the train revolves around Richard's book. As a novelist, Richard occupies a place outside traditionally masculine spheres of employment. His book's title, *Time Without End*, and the romantic lines he quotes from it further emasculate Richard by conveying his empathy with 'feminine' notions of love and romance. Ellen initially voices distaste for the novel, but later changes her opinion when

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37 Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in Marcia Landry, ed. *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991): 85-6.

she learns Richard is the author. The book also heightens the meaningful coincidence of the strangers' meeting by bringing them together before they arrive at the train station where Glen formally introduces Richard to Ellen and the remainder of the Berent family, Mrs. Berent and Ruth, whose eyes noticeably linger on Richard. The viewer anticipates the consummation of the fated couple's mutual attraction at their common destination, Glen's "Ranch Jancito," and identifies Ruth's role as the secondary romantic interest.

Ellen's gaze during the train scene subverts the framing metadiscourse at a formal level of subject/object gender positions. At the end of the sequence set at the ranch, this formal subversion is paralleled in the diegesis when Ellen inverts traditional gender roles by boldly proposing to Richard. Until this final ranch scene, the narrative is restricted to Richard's point of view of Ellen; he raises questions as an outsider to the Berent family and learns answers along with the audience. Although the viewer follows Richard through several days at the ranch, the final scene each day positions Richard as the object of Ellen's manipulative sexuality and desires. His actions and decisions are ultimately subordinate to the driving force of her needs and wants.

During dinner following their arrival at the ranch, Richard is seated between Ellen and Ruth. The conversation presents four critical points about the Berent family: Mrs. Berent does not like New Mexico; Ellen and Mr. Berent used to come to the ranch every spring without her; Ellen is the only one with strong convictions about Richard's resemblance to Mr. Berent's appearance, voice, and manner; and the Berents are in New Mexico for Mr. Berent's funeral. With this last fact, the scene dissolves to a black-and-

white portrait of Mr. Berent that recalls Richard's dust jacket photo held by Ellen on the train. Louise Robie confirms the likeness between Mr. Berent and Richard. Neither Ruth nor Mrs. Berent ever substantiates the connection; their relations to Richard are not coded in terms of a replacement for Professor Berent. Richard proceeds along a seemingly predestined path with Ruth playing the piano and then Mrs. Berent on the porch, each immediately informing him of Ellen's whereabouts. He is visibly puzzled by their presumptuous gestures and moves on to find Ellen looking out over the desert landscape. She relates her memories of being inseparable from her father and happiest when they were together. Richard notices her engagement ring before she abruptly ends the exchange and starts back toward the house. For the remainder of the ranch sequence, every scene cuts on Ellen's movement with Richard static or following closely behind.

The scenes that unfold the next day follow a similar trajectory. The viewer is positioned with Richard as a curious outsider interacting with the Berent family. He has no significant point of view shots and Ellen motivates the dynamic camera movement. From a distance, Richard watches Ellen on horseback scatter her cremated father's ashes on the desert floor. Later that evening Ellen's absence from the family setting prompts Richard once again to venture into the desert to find her. When he expresses his concern for her whereabouts, Mrs. Berent informs him, "Nothing ever happens to Ellen." Richard meets Ellen on the desert plateau where he saw her that morning. During this second meeting, Ellen again relates fond memories of the surrounding desert area and how her father "used to say it was like riding across the front lawn of Heaven"—this barren and expansive wilderness is the "Heaven" of the film's title to which Ellen's cremated body is

returned near the plot's end. Her monologue continues: "We made a pact to bring our ashes here when we died. If you die first, I told him, I'll bring your ashes here. If I die first, you'll bring mine." With this explanation, she implicitly makes a new pact with Richard as the proxy for her father. The last line of her monologue – "Yet, I know now, people you love don't really die" – develops the romantic themes of timeless love and irreversible fate. This line marks Ellen's emotional and psychological transference of the excessive love for her father onto Richard. He follows Ellen back to the house where she recites from memory the information under his photo on the novel's dust jacket, rendering him an 'open book' and remaining the focus of the viewer's curiosity. The noiresque pattern of dark lines and shadows behind Ellen represent her duplicity; she erases the lighting codes by turning on a lamp. After she remarks how much fun it is to hunt wild turkey that are "so big and clumsy they hate to take wing," Richard asks: "You knew I was coming up there tonight. You were waiting for me, weren't you?" Her parting reply – "Yes, and you came, didn't you?" – ends the scene and summarizes how Richard is the pawn of Ellen's desire, lacking control of his fate and the direction of the plot.

The following day again begins with Richard and follows his actions until he is interrupted from above by the *angelic* Ruth as she prunes pink roses on a trellis set against a rich blue sky. Immediately after Ruth leaves, Richard's pool-side writing is again interrupted, this time from below by Ellen who has covertly approached, swimming just below the surface of the water in a lime-green bathing suit. To develop her ruthless competitive spirit and establish her proficiency as a swimmer, the scene ends with Ellen racing Glen's children across the pool. Glen appears behind Richard and informs him,

"Ellen always wins." This notion is carried into the following scene in which Russell Quinton comes to the ranch on a rainy night in urgent response to Ellen's telegram. As a lawyer running for public office, Quinton is a conventional patriarchal figure. However, with Ellen's decision to break their engagement, he is reduced to a pathetic appeal and will leave in silence minutes after his imposing entrance. While pleading his case, he states, "I always knew you'd never marry me while your father was alive. But after he died I thought there might be a chance. What happened?" Her response is an emotionless statement of fact: "I'm in love." What happened is that Ellen met a man who she believes looks like her father while Quinton does not—the most clear point of contrast between these suitors. Richard also has a greater capacity for the kind of romance that Quinton concedes to Ellen as his weakness. Most importantly, Richard is the kind of man she can love with a possessive force that Quinton would resist.

Ellen's transgression of gender roles continues the train scene's subversion of subject/object positions. The seemingly harmless hints of her aggressiveness – such as the pool-side flaunting of the removal of her engagement ring – now register with Richard as a tangible effect of her capacity to fulfill directly strong desires. When Richard starts to question her moments later in a private exchange, she silences him with her hand, asking "Darling, will you marry me," and initiates their first screen kiss while he is in mid-sentence with, "You unpredictable little—." Her next line ends the ranch sequence: "And I'll never let you go. Never, never, never"—the line she will repeat on her deathbed. The kiss consummates the acceptance of her bold marriage proposal and contradicts the common equation of passivity and femininity in melodramatic protagonists. Ellen's

character fuses "two different initial standpoints for melodrama" described by Laura Mulvey in "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama":

> One is coloured by a female protagonist's dominating point of view which acts as a source of identification. The other examines tensions in the family, and between sex and generations; here, although women play a central part, their point of view is not analysed and does not initiate the drama."[38]

After the ranch sequence, Ellen's point of view both dominates the narrative as the locus of family tensions and "initiates the drama." The narrative arrives at this subject position after formally subverting the patriarchal metadiscourse that initiated the flashback, then by displacing Richard's innocent subjectivity. The film's second half externalizes Ellen's emotional and psychological conflicts after the brief Warm Springs sequence that generates further excess by counterbalancing Ellen's aggressive proposal with a *hyper*-femininity.

The Warm Springs sequence introduces Danny and confirms the irreconcilability of Ellen's family situation and individual desire. The tension of her duplicity is amplified by challenges to her maternal facade that bring repressed emotions to the surface in a revealing outburst. Danny disrupts Ellen's temporary fulfillment of her desire for a father/daughter relationship with Richard. As 'twin' brother of the crippled Danny, Richard's masculinity is impaired and Ellen's conviction of his resemblance to her father is disrupted. Additionally, Richard's role as a paternal figure to Danny, in the absence of their real father, positions Ellen as Danny's mother and Richard's husband, not his daughter. Any relationship between Richard and Danny is incompatible with Ellen's

38 Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Movie* 25 (Winter, 1977/78): 76.

uncompromising desire. During the only scene set in their Warm Springs cottage, and the only time Ellen wears a frilly pink blouse, she serves Richard dinner. Their conversation explains Ellen's means of fulfilling her desire for the father through *hyper*-femininity. Her marriage proposal created excess by transgressing the patriarchal rule that women are not to demand anything from the men they love.[39] Ellen counterbalances this excess with an equally excessive *hyper*-femininity. She overtly denies herself and devotes her energies to serving his needs: "I have no intention of hiring a cook, or a housekeeper or any other servant... Ever. I don't want anyone else but me to do anything for you. I'm going to keep your house and wash your clothes and cook your food... Besides, I don't want anyone in the house besides us." Richard asks about a baby and about Danny, thereby challenging her maternal responsibilities, and Ellen hesitantly notes them as exceptions to their privacy. Danny and her unborn child will become the first two casualties of her violence. As Danny's condition improves, Ellen believes he will hinder her love for Richard and her mute expression of discontent dissolves to the office of Danny's doctor. Pretending concern for Danny's health, she desperately solicits the doctor's support in preventing Danny from joining the couple at 'Back of the Moon.' The Warm Springs sequence ends when Ellen's gaffe in front of the doctor – "Besides, he's a cripple" – renders direct conflict an inevitable consequence of her failure to manipulate the doctor's authority.

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39 R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994):160.

The Back of the Moon sequence heightens family tensions to the limits of domestic melodrama and channels Ellen's repressed emotions into film noir violence. The sequence begins with the film's most intimate and peaceful scene between the couple. Ellen slides into Richard's bed and wakes him with a kiss before Danny calls good morning, disrupting their intimacy and visibly frustrating her desire. Ellen relates her nightmare – in which Richard drowns while she watches from a boat, inexplicably paralyzed – to Thorne as Richard and Danny are swimming in the lake, foregrounding the brothers' symbolic status as twins. Danny's physical disability represents Richard's weak masculinity and impedes Ellen's perception of Richard as father in two ways: by emphasizing his incongruity with Mr. Berent's patriarchal authority and by casting her as Danny's mother. When Ruth and Mrs. Berent arrive at the cottage, the family is closed off from the world. Their isolation amplifies tension and forces confrontation; the only release from rising pressure must come from within the family. The emotional excess of the situation is captured in the mise-en-scène of the only cottage scene in which the whole family appears. Richard, Ruth, Danny, and Mrs. Berent are gathered around Thorne playing his guitar when Ellen enters to clear the nearby table. She joins the group when she notices Richard talking to Ruth, but remains on the margins, pretending to attend to the fireplace. The cool blue of Ellen's dress contrasts with Ruth's warm pink dress and the camera isolates Ellen while the others are framed in groups of two and four. Ellen turns her back to the family as Danny performs a trick and she hastily leaves the room in silence when his crutch falls to the floor. When Richard later questions her, she accuses him of paying too much attention to Ruth and emphasizes that she is not her sister. Her

hysterical outburst – "or wake up Danny" – suggests to Richard the irreconcilability of Ellen's desire and the family situation. Ellen apologizes and explains she just cannot bear to share Richard with anybody else; the theme of possessive love is cemented. Ellen's problem, however, lies on another level. She cannot bear to share Richard with anybody who destroys her perception of him as a father-substitute.

When Richard asks Mrs. Berent about his wife, she explains: "Nothing's wrong with Ellen. It's just that she loves too much. Perhaps it isn't good. It makes her an outsider of everyone else, but she can't help it. You must be patient with her. She loved her father too much." Mrs. Berent's explanation attempts to contain excess by recourse to Ellen's 'feminine' lack of control over strong emotions; although accurate, this diagnosis underplays the imminently fatal consequences of Ellen's love for her father. Ellen's hysterical outburst in front of Richard creates excess that domestic melodrama struggles to contain. Ruth and Mrs. Berent leave Back of the Moon, releasing some of the pressure on barely repressed emotions. When Ellen asks Danny if he would like to visit the Berents in Bar Harbor, he insists on staying with Richard. Ellen immediately becomes cold and aloof, her silent gaze anticipating the rise of violent feelings she cannot express within the family setting.

To accommodate the amoral fulfillment of her desire – and the transgression of family melodrama's conventions – the mise-en-scène subtly marks a shift to film noir. At the moment she puts on black sunglasses, the darkness behind Ellen's cool blue gaze is externalized, the heartless, self-serving extreme of her duplicity surfaces, and she becomes a *femme fatale* watching Danny drown. Upon seeing Richard on the shore,

Ellen hastily removes the sunglasses, calls for help, and jumps into the water, though with no intention of finding Danny. Rather than using the phallic weapons of other fatal women in film noir, Ellen has killed with *passivity*—ironically, a feminine virtue in melodrama's patriarchal world view. The violent capacity of the film noir heroine seemingly provides an outlet for the emotions Ellen represses in the setting of family melodrama; yet the violence to the family that occurs in the absence of patriarchal control ultimately amplifies Ellen's duplicity and adds sharp irony to the excess of her attraction to Richard as a surrogate for the father.

In *Leave Her to Heaven,* generic hybridity is not a struggle of gendered discourses. Film noir is an agent of the female discourse. Hybridity structures Ellen's duplicity as a unique product of crossing a world in which women are passive sufferers or repressed victims of patriarchal ideology and a world in which women act on their desires by exerting a strong feminine sexuality over weak male characters. This hybridity creates a rare character in classical Hollywood: a female protagonist moving the plot of her own story while dominating the point of view as the locus of narrative tensions. The impossibility of Ellen's desire – to possess her father through Richard – fuels her duplicity and is fueled by the similarities and differences between film noir and family melodrama. The role of desire and violence in this narrative must be understood in the context of these similarities and differences.

In "Tales of Sound and Fury," Thomas Elsaesser contrasts the open spaces, externalized conflicts and directly active protagonists of westerns and adventure films with domestic melodrama's closed worlds, internal crises and repressed characters. He

aligns the melodrama in film noir with the former mode, stating that the male protagonist is coerced by the *femme fatale* into bad situations, "that usually lead the hero to wishing his own death as the ultimate act of liberation, but where the mechanism of fate at least allows him to express his revolt in strong and strongly anti-social behavior."[40] He continues:

> Not so in the domestic melodrama: the social pressures are such, the frame of respectability so sharply defined that the range of "strong" actions is limited. The tellingly impotent gesture, the social gaffe, the hysterical outburst replaces any more directly liberating or self-annihilating action, and the cathartic violence of a shoot-out or a chase becomes an inner violence, often one which the characters turn against themselves. The dramatic configuration, the pattern of the plot makes them, regardless of attempts to break free, constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves. The characters are, so to speak, each other's sole referent, there is no world outside to be acted on, no reality that could be defined or assumed unambiguously.[41]

Elsaesser's distinction suggests how *Leave Her to Heaven* most overtly shifts between family melodrama and film noir: social gaffes precede direct acts of violence; the former punctuate "the social pressures, the frame of respectability" that the latter transgress. In *Leave Her to Heaven*, film noir does not suppress family melodrama, as Cook argues with *Mildred Pierce*. Cook adds an explicit gender division to Elsaesser's distinction between active/exterior and passive/interior modes of melodrama. In his explanation of action and passion as the two broad categories of melodrama, Michael Walker assigns film noir to the latter, arguing that its action components are, quoting Gledhill, subordinate to the exploration of female sexuality and male desire.[42] Given noir's transgeneric history and lack of essential features, it is not useful to label the genre as

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40 Elsaesser, 79.
41 Elsaesser, 79.
42 Walker, 20.

either strictly melodrama of action or of passion. There is no pure film noir nor singular interpretation of the genre—Elsaesser and Walker each cite *Double Indemnity* and *Out of the Past* as examples of the divergent modes of melodrama they see operating in film noir. Just as the unqualified association of film noir with male discourse is faulty, Elsaesser's equation of film noir with action melodrama fails to explain the generic hybridity of *Leave Her to Heaven.*

In *Leave Her to Heaven*, film noir violence channels tensions into direct action; however, the course of action heightens the melodrama of passion rather than resolving unfulfilled desires. As a femme fatale, Ellen externalizes the excess marked by mute gazes and brief outbursts; but rather than catharsis, her actions ultimately magnify her duplicity and result in self-destruction. Film noir intensifies the melodramatic principle articulated by Elsaesser in the following passage:

> The mechanisms of displacement and transfer, in an enclosed field of pressure, open a highly dynamic yet discontinuous cycle of non-fulfillment, where discontinuity creates a universe of powerfully emotional but obliquely related fixations. In melodrama, violence, the strong action, the dynamic movement, the full articulation and the fleshed out emotions... become the very signs of the characters' alienation, and thus, serve to formulate a devastating critique of the ideology that supports it.[43]

The pattern of calculated violence following hysterical outbursts is a representation of excess that ironizes the film's depiction of how the father's absence inevitably results in amorality and disorder. To elaborate how film noir operates within the family melodrama's mode of passion, it is helpful to reference Steve Neale's *Genre*. Neale's narrative-centred theory is especially useful for analysing the role of film noir – most

43 Elsaesser, 85.

often characterized by black-and-white cinematography and the urban street at night – in a Technicolor film set in sun-drenched rural locations.

In his 1980 publication, Neale explains generic specificity not as a product of exclusive elements, but as "an articulation that is always constructed in terms of particular *combinations* of particular types or categories of discourse" shared across genres.[44] He compares the role of violence and heterosexual desire in westerns, gangster films, thrillers and detective films, on the one hand, with, on the other hand, melodramas and musicals. The role of sexual desire in the latter two genres is distinctive for how it generates narrative conflict, motivates the action of protagonists and "occupies a central as opposed to secondary or peripheral place in the discursive ensemble mobilised and shaped by these particular genres."[45] He explains:

> In the musical and melodrama, violence may figure in an important way... but it is not a defining characteristic as such, either in terms of the register of disruption or in terms of its diegetic specification... In the melodrama and the musical, the eruption of sexuality is not inscribed primarily across the codes of legality, as it can be in the thriller or the detective genre, and even occasionally in the western (eg. *Stagecoach*). On the contrary, the disequilibrium inaugurating the narrative movement is specified as the process of desire itself and of the various blockages to its fulfillment within an apparently 'common sense', established social order. In other words, the process of desire in melodrama interrupts or problematises precisely the order the discourse and actions of the law have established in the face of 'lawlessness' and social disorder. Melodrama thus puts into crisis the discourses within the domain circumscribed by and defined as the legally established social order, the kind of order instituted at the end of westerns and detective films. Melodrama does not suggest a crisis of that order, but a crisis within it, an 'in house' rearrangement.[46]

The status of the legal discourse, of violence, and of sexual desire varies widely in noir films, according to the genres overlapped. Noir films centred around private detectives

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44 Neale (1980), 21; original emphasis.
45 Neale (1980), 23.
46 Neale (1980), 22.

and organized criminals overlap with detective and gangster genres and with a melodramatic mode in which disequilibrium is inaugurated by violence and resolved by linear action. Noir narratives focused on lonely or psychotic characters are motivated by unfulfilled desires and overlap with the mode of passion in the woman's film, and romantic and family melodrama.

In *Mildred Pierce*, a violent murder inaugurates disequilibrium and overtly inscribes narrative conflict across the codes of legality represented by the police officer who finds Mildred contemplating suicide. However, frustrated desire and family tension constitute the majority of the narrative and are revealed as the source of Veda's impulsive crime of passion. *Leave Her to Heaven* is a less ambiguous hybrid. The lawyer's narration representing the metadiscourse of truth does not overtly initiate the drama as a mystery about Ellen's criminal acts and his authority proves impotent in the court room scene that ends the flashback. In addition, violence is introduced late in the narrative and does not create a murder mystery that must be solved for the viewer. Although Ellen's murder of Danny does signify the eruption of sexuality across the codes of legality, the following Bar Harbor sequence emphasizes the disruption within the family—the legal discourse employed in the trial scenes is secondary in marking the moral order disrupted. The opening shot of the Bar Harbor sequence shows Richard grieving. The viewer's sympathy for the innocent victim is immediately undermined by the cut to Ellen watching him from a distance. The disequilibrium in the family situation perpetuating the narrative movement is first marked by Mrs. Berent's silent exit when her daughter sits next to her. In keeping with the domestic melodrama of earlier sequences, disequilibrium is specified

as the process of Ellen's desire and the blockage to its fulfillment. Richard's grieving is subordinate to the fact that it disrupts Ellen's time with him, perpetuating her unhappiness. The excess created by Ellen's duplicity reaches a peak in the Bar Harbor sequence. Sympathy is elicited for Ellen as the powerless sufferer of family melodrama while, as a noir convention, the viewer is aligned with an amoral protagonist who must ultimately be perceived as unsympathetic.

To ease Richard's grieving for Danny, Ellen acts on Ruth's suggestion of giving Richard a child of his own. Her conception of a child with the 'father' is the film's most overt mark of the incest taboo that over-determines their fate. Scenes of Ellen's pregnancy are all restricted to her point of view and set in claustrophobic interiors that contrast with the barren and expansive desert 'heaven' of her past with Professor Berent. By its alignment with Ellen and the unborn child – who she complains is making a prisoner of her – the sequence fosters a noiresque tone of paranoia. The plot does not follow Richard and Ruth on their day trip to town and the viewer takes Ellen's cues in speculating about the nature of the relationship. When she looks in a full length mirror while talking to Ruth, Ellen utters, "I hate the little beast. I wish it would die." Moments later, after Ruth leaves, Ellen again turns her gaze upon herself in a vanity mirror; from her sudden expression of a plan conceived, the viewer anticipates the imminent danger of the femme fatale's violence turned inward to her unborn child. According to the pattern of the previous sequence, violent action inevitably follows the gaffe that reveals Ellen's repressed feelings to her family. Thriller suspense is interjected into domestic tensions as the plot builds up to "an evidently catastrophic collision of counterrunning sentiments"

with a string of delays for greatest effect.[47] The irony of the situation and Ellen's duplicity is captured by the mirror's reflection of Ellen's dressing and primping in preparation for the self-inflicted miscarriage to end her maternal 'prison.' The rise and sudden drop of emotional energy is played out along the height of a staircase, panned obliquely from a high angle just before Ellen takes her fall. The viewer hears Ellen's scream as the camera maintains a close framing of the instrument of her violence. The high heel shoe positioned in a snag turns femininity into the femme fatale's weapon of deception and murder.

Ellen's next scene shows her energetically swimming in the sea, freed from lying on the couch and waiting by the window in her prison of forced passivity. As the fulcrum of the film's compressed swing of emotions, her cheerful energy this day festers into a malicious intensity conveyed by her glare. Whereas Ellen's frustration in previous sequences anticipated disruption, her happiness at this late point in the narrative is the mark of disequilibrium in the family situation. Mrs. Berent's silence, however, is equally important in marking the imbalance. The scene's shift in mood begins with Ellen's discovery of Richard's book dedication to "the Gal with the Hoe." Ellen questions Ruth about why their mother keeps to her room and will not talk to Ellen, saying she "can't imagine what's come over her." Ruth exclaims that Ellen's self-serving nature has caused disorder. During the ensuing confrontation, Ruth explains she is leaving Bar Harbor to escape Ellen's hate that has filled the house and, when aggravated, she tells Ellen: "With your love you wrecked mother's life. With your love you pressed father to death. With

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47 Elsaesser, 83.

your love you've made a shadow of Richard.... You're the most pitiful creature I've ever known."[48] She makes no explicit incriminations about Danny's murder or Ellen's intentional miscarriage. Whether Mrs. Berent and Ruth know the whole truth, the legal discourse mobilized in the trial scenes does not have a 'voice' in the Bar Harbor sequence. The former's silence and latter's sharp accusations inscribe the process of Ellen's desire as a crisis "within the domain circumscribed by and defined as the legally established social order."[49]

Only then does Richard, overhearing Ruth's impassioned words, come to suspect Ellen's role in his recent losses. He stares at his wife in long silence, gaining power over the gaze and reasserting classical Hollywood subject/object gender positions. At this moment of climactic tension, Ellen cracks under the pressure of his accusing eyes and confesses to killing Danny. Richard immediately breaks his stare, sits down, casts his eyes to the floor and releases his guilt: "I knew it. I must've known it all along. I kept pushing it out of my mind. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. Could I? You loved me you said, wanted only to make me happy.... I'm leaving you, Ellen." He cannot understand, much less accept, his wife's nature and leaves without raising his voice or even looking at her again. Ellen stands alone in the living room and re-appropriates power over the gaze with an intense look at the 'Gal with the Hoe' in the book lying open on the floor.

The following three scenes complete the narrative's pattern of melodramatic

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48 With the film's lack of details about Professor Berent's death, Ruth's line can be interpreted to imply that Ellen drove her father to suicide out of shame for his incestuous relations. Though the specifics of his death are relatively insignificant, his suicide would add significance to Ellen's decisive recourse to taking her own life.

49 Neale (1980), 22.

tension and hysterical outbursts channeled into noir violence. The ominous overtone of Ellen's gaze at the book dedication carries over to the noiresque play of dark lines and shadows in the scenes depicting Ellen writing to Quinton, retrieving arsenic from the basement, and planting the poison in Ruth's bottle of bath salts. The plot turns to Richard at the airport where his will to leave Ellen is undermined when he receives notice of her severe illness and returns to her side. On her deathbed she requests to be cremated and have the ashes scattered in the same place as those of her father. She then repeats to Richard the same line used after her proposal at the ranch: "I'll never let you go. Never, never, never." At this point, it is clear that she is not referring to Richard as her husband; with her last words, as before, she uses him as a medium for the real father. She wants to be returned to the place where she shared her happiest moments with her father: the 'lawless' desert wilderness where her incestuous passion can be satisfied. Ellen's 'heaven' is an escape from the claustrophobic setting and stifling milieu of family melodrama, an escape to the open space that Elsaesser discusses as the dynamic domain of the Western's active hero.[50] On another level, the Heaven of the film's title is an imperative to leave Ellen to the judgment of the highest power—her transgressions are unspeakable and her true nature is unfathomable, beyond the grasp of our moral codes. While the title allows the viewer to anticipate Ellen's downfall, it also excuses the narrative from the responsibility of explaining her discourse and finding a place for her within the reaffirmed social order.

The trial sequence removes lingering excess by establishing that Ellen is beyond

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50 Elsaesser, 78.

the obligation of the patriarchal metadiscourse because she is not a woman, nor even a human—she is a "monster." Because Mrs. Berent, Ruth, and Richard could only react to Ellen's transgressions without ever directly condemning her incestuous nature, the trial sequence removes the crisis from its confines within the domestic sphere. The court represents an objective setting for the reaffirmation of the family order and it officially sanctions the love affair between Richard and Ruth. This reaffirmation, however, is an indirect and incomplete process. With Ellen's letter to Quinton, the district attorney becomes a pawn of her discourse, rather than an agent of the innocent victims. The drama and intensity of the sequence is generated by Ellen's deception of Quinton and his scorned love for her. The trial's central evidence explains the means of Ellen's deception, including the contents of her letter to Quinton and the mix of arsenic with her coffee sugar. The film's strongest representation of masculinity persistently attacks Ruth's innocence while Glen, as her defense attorney, remains powerless against the prosecutor's damaging evidence. When Richard finally reveals the truth of Ellen's suicide and attempt to frame Ruth, Quinton facilitates the narrative's explanation of her actions with his rhetorical question, "You actually want the jury to believe that she was that sort of monster?" Richard's response is the final word of the trial and the flashback:

> Yes, she was that sort of monster. A woman who sought to possess everything she loved, who loved only for what it could bring to her, whose love estranged her own father and mother, whose love possessed her father until he couldn't call his soul his own, who, by her own confession to me, killed my brother, killed her own unborn child and is now reaching from the grave to destroy her own innocent sister. Yes, she was that sort of monster.

Richard's monologue first describes Ellen's transgressions in terms of family melodrama, then lists her acts as a femme fatale. "Self-interest over devotion to a man is

often the original sin of the film noir woman and metaphor for the threat her sexuality represents to him."[51] Ellen's sins as a femme fatale illustrate the threat her self-interest represents to the men in her life, Quinton and Richard; but this self-interest is rooted in extreme devotion to the first man in her life, Professor Berent, her deceased father. This incongruity generates the film's overtones of irony that diminish the reassertion of the patriarchal metadiscourse. The trial sequence facilitates narrative closure by working out Ellen's deception, vindicating Ruth's innocence, and sanctioning her romance with Richard; however the trial cannot fully contain the ironic excess of Ellen's discourse. It explains the process of her desire, but cannot articulate the objective of this process. Ellen's deceptiveness is part of her nature, but not the essence of her duplicity, and never a true mystery for the viewer. Ellen's duplicity is not a duality of good and evil, like a mixture of arsenic and sugar. Ellen's duplicity is a pure synthesis of the multiple forces working through her for the common, but impossible, goal of an incestuous relationship between father and daughter. The taboo is so strong and pervasive the film cannot name the incest driving the melodrama of passion. Thus, it cannot fully explain and contain the excess of Ellen's story. It can only explain Ellen as a "monster," or as Ruth says, "a pitiful creature," better left to heaven.

As the flashback's final scene dissolves to Glen in the present, his representation of the patriarchal metadiscourse that frames Ellen's story is undermined by his impotence in the trial, explaining his opening remark, "Some would say I lost the case for him." His final words on the case – "Ellen had lost. I guess it's the only time she didn't come out

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51 Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed. *Women in Film Noir* (London, British Film Institute, 1998): 57-8.

first" – are unconvincing. In the opening scene, Glen attributed Ellen's downfall to envy, "the deadliest of the seven sins." Although his story proves that she was a jealous woman, a possessive lover, and a killer, he is unable to articulate the driving force of her character. This weakness is the failure of the metadiscourse to fully resolve the excess of Ellen's discourse. The narrative works around the irony of Ellen's desire toward a sense of closure, but does not disarm her symbolic threat to the patriarchal metadiscourse that frames her story. The film contains no stronger image than the femme fatale in dark sunglasses watching Danny drown in the lake surrounding the cottage—an image that hangs over the final silhouette of Ruth and Richard embracing on a dock at the same lake.

This textual analysis of *Leave Her to Heaven* has focused on aspects of narrative form, while stylistic points about editing, lighting, and mise-en-scène have been secondary. The film's Technicolor cinematography, for which Leon Shamroy won a 1945 Academy Award, requires elaboration. As a generic hybrid, the film employs family melodrama's lurid colour contrasts and noir's expressionistic use of high contrast black-and-white. The unified effect illustrates domestic disharmony and Ellen's duplicity. The film's dominant colour motif is established in the flashback's first sequence with the train's entirely light blue interior and its orange accent lighting and Ellen's piercing blue eyes that distract Richard from the orange match flame burning his thumb. The ranch sequence links the desert's wash of orange/amber to Ellen's desire for the father. As she obliquely gains control of the narrative during the ranch sequence, the contrast of warm and cool colours composes noiresque patterns of line and shadow that are repeated most

prominently in the final scenes of the Bar Harbor sequence. The colour motif introduced on the train is inverted in the ranch sequence's final scene after Ellen has proposed to Richard: the embracing couple are engulfed in an amber glow that creates a faint blue tone on Ellen's white dress. To counterbalance Ellen's bold possession of Richard, the Warm Springs sequence colours her *hyper*-feminine discourse with the only pink she wears in the film. The Bar Harbor sequence continues the dominant colour motif of interior scenes, beginning with the orange glow of the morning sun that fills the couple's bedroom and bathes the light blue sheets. In later scenes, warm and cool colour contrast marks the dissonance between Ellen and Ruth. The Bar Harbor sequence continues these elements of the film's colour system and marks an extreme imbalance in Ellen's character with the complete dominance of light blue in the dress and decor during her fall down the stairs. The trial scene is devoid of the flashback's dominant colour motif; the film's contrast of orange and blue, warm and cool, light and dark, ends with Ellen's death. The green wash of the court aligns the scene with the innocence of Ruth, the "Gal with the "Hoe" and the *green thumb.* Ruth's fondness for gardening suggests her maternal instinct and her status as the right romantic partner for Richard. Green is the antithesis of orange/amber in the barren desert wilderness representing Ellen's 'heaven.'

Through the flashback's six sequences, film noir and family melodrama work together for a unified formal effect in both narrative and stylistic components. Conventions of the former genre do not suppress those of latter. If the use of film noir and melodrama in *Mildred Pierce* causes "sexual ambiguity"[52] in the film's structure, the

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52 Cook, 79.

transgeneric condition of *Leave Her to Heaven* creates a *transgendered* film. Cook argues that *Mildred Pierce* "deals explicitly with questions of genre as part of its project, that the ideological work of the film is to articulate the necessity for the drawing of boundaries and to encourage the acceptance of the repression which the establishment of such an order entails."[53] *Leave Her to Heaven*, produced the same year, challenges these boundaries and invalidates a simple dichotomy between action/masculinity/male genres and passion/femininity/female genres. Ellen's duplicity as both the woman's film protagonist at the centre of family melodrama and the sexually active femme fatale creates a synthesis that transcends each role's conventions. Ellen is the centre of the story and the chief mover of the plot. Her discourse exceeds the patriarchal metadiscourse that opens and closes the flashback because the latter cannot fully articulate, at a thematic level, the irreconcilability of the family order and her incestuous desire.

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53 Cook, 69.

Chapter 2:

The Private Life of a Renegade Cop and Family Man

In *The Big Heat*

In *The Films of Fritz Lang*, Tom Gunning provides a strong auteurist reading of *The Big Heat*. His approach looks for the roots of the film's form in Fritz Lang's directorial decisions throughout his body of American and German films. For example, Gunning compares a scene in which Wilks washes his hands in his office to how Lang showed Lohmann washing up in *M*, noting "the design of the lavatories in the two films even seems similar."[54] Gunning also considers the film in the context of 50s American cinema and discusses extra-filmic elements, such as William P. McGivern's source story of the same title. While he passingly notes aspects of genre, his essay, consistent with the book's project, always centres the film's meaning on Lang as an auteur. After his introduction, Gunning arrives at the following point:

> Thus, a tension between placid surface and hidden corruption structures *The Big Heat*, and the drama deals with a struggle between those forces which try to keep the lid on, and those which want to force the hidden violence out into the open. In most 50s films, this melodramatic pattern of righteous violence overcoming evil repression is paralleled by an emotional drama of self-realisation and self-expression, usually represented by a love affair.[55]

This kind of emotional breakthrough, Gunning stresses, is of little importance to Lang's characterization of Dave Bannion—Gunning's first denial of melodrama. His central argument is that *The Big Heat* eschews the *melodrama* of the irreconcilability between society and self, between the law and individual desire. For Gunning, the film is not

54 Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang* (London: British Film Institute, 2000): 419.
55 Gunning, 409.

about Bannion's multi-leveled role or the emotional resonance of his personal struggle. "Instead," he explains, "the drama of surface and depth focuses mainly on social structures and roles, the system of corrupt order and the violence it takes to expose it."[56]

Gunning's commitment to an auteurist reading of the film handicaps a fuller development of its significance, specifically in relation to how narrative form constructs meaning through Bannion's character. Gunning interprets the opening scene as establishing "the theme of the astray message present in Lang's films from the beginning of his career, the jamming of the communication systems so that a message cannot be delivered to its address."[57] Although this link between the film's opening and Lang's body of work is a strong observation, Gunning overreaches when he calls the questions surrounding Tom Duncan's suicide note "the plot's central enigma."[58] He elaborates by explaining, "It is precisely this blocking of communication that supplies the motive for the film's plot, which can only be resolved when, after Bertha Duncan's death, the letter finally surfaces."[59] The investigative plot-line opens the film to capture the viewer's curiosity and is resolved at the film's end. However, the end of this plot-line fails to lend the film a strong sense of closure because it is not the principal concern of the narrative. Because of his attention to the auteur-text and reverence for Lang, Gunning misses what lies at the heart of *The Big Heat*.

In *The Films in My Life*, François Truffaut notes Lang's escape from Nazi Germany before summarizing a common plot element in his American films:

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56 Gunning, 409.
57 Gunning, 412.
58 Gunning, 409.
59 Gunning, 412.

> [A] man becomes involved in a struggle that is larger than any one person; perhaps he is a policeman, a scientist, a soldier, a resister. Then someone close to him, a woman or a child he loves, dies and the conflict becomes his individual fight, he is personally affected; the larger cause moves into the background and what takes place is personal vengeance.[60]

Bannion's individual struggle is why *The Big Heat* means something to Truffaut and why it ranks among the best fifties Hollywood cinema. Gunning's auteur language comes closest to articulating the personalized core of the narrative when he states:

> The same question persists in this film that occurs in all of Lang's films involving mourning: is the one left alive capable of working through the mourning process and realising ultimately that they are, in fact, still alive?... This question, so vital to Lang in his works in Weimar Germany, surfaces with a new intensity in 50s America.[61]

Gunning, however, cannot fully analyse the narrative and explain Bannion's personal story due to his insistence that "Lang's dramaturgy avoids the methods of melodramatic portrayal"[62]—his second denial of melodrama.

Gunning's take on Glen Ford's character is consistent with his sociological reading of the narrative; yet he misses some critical features of the Hollywood product while stressing aspects of the auteur-text. In his analysis of Bannion's line about the fall of the 'big heat,' voiced before he almost strangles Bertha Duncan to death, Gunning asserts, "Bannion no longer seeks simple revenge, but a transformation of the city. His scope and imagery is apocalyptic. Resembling Kriemhild, he dreams of a world scorched and leveled by the fire of justice."[63] Despite the film's title and Bannion's single utterance, Gunning's interpretation of Bannion, with links to Lang's mid-twenties German films, is

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60 François Truffaut, "Fritz Lang in America," in *The Films in My Life*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994): 65.
61 Gunning, 422.
62 Gunning, 420.
63 Gunning, 425.

forced. If Bannion wants to bring down the 'big heat,' it is for the sake of his family, not the welfare of society. Bannion is not a "lone wolf" or an "avenging angel," and he is not above all a "crusading detective"[64] or "a rogue cop."[65] He is a husband who has lost his wife and a father without a mother and home for his child. No viewer can ignore this circumstance of his character formation and simply believe that Bannion is driven by a cop's desire to eradicate organized crime and transform the city. He wants revenge, and that means bringing down Lagana; but the public disclosure of Tom Duncan's suicide note is primarily for the honor and memory of his family and secondarily for the purpose of destroying evil forces affecting society as a whole.

Gunning explains Bannion's character as the "archetypal 50s action hero" through the "genre logic" of the scene in which he confronts Lagana in his house and punches out his bodyguard.[66] After his analysis of the film's penultimate scene, in which Bannion tenderly describes his wife to the dying Debby, Gunning summarizes his position on Bannion as follows:

> In constructing Bannion, then, Lang invoked the typical action hero of the 50s, the man who takes the law into his own hands, restores justice and in the process gains (or regains) a new sense of community and an ability to love, the drama... of rehumanisation and reintegration. However, a close examination of the author-text rather than the genre-text... shows Lang resisting the emotional catharsis and psychological approach of most such films.[67]

He notes Lang's elimination of the happy ending in Sydney Boehm's original scenario to arrive at the final point: "Rather than portraying a romance of transformation and

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64 Alain Silver & Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, third edition (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1992): 30.
65 Gunning, 421.
66 Gunning, 415.
67 Gunning, 432.

redemption, Lang maintains a distanced observation, highlighting moral ambiguity and social *gestus*."[68] This conclusion is his third denial of melodrama.

In addition to melodrama, Gunning's auteur approach necessarily downplays other generic conventions. Film noir is provided two paragraphs in which Gunning discusses the differences between the private eye and femme fatale of forties noir and the rogue cop and redeemed sexual woman of fifties noir films. What is *noir* about *The Big Heat*? The narrative is not structured by flashbacks and has no voice-over. It is black-and-white, but rarely employs chiaroscuro lighting, dutch angles, or high contrast expressionism. (The only scene that comes to mind in this respect portrays Debby's emotional turmoil with diagonal patterns of sharp lines from the light sneaking into her darkened hotel room through partially open venetian blinds.) One could argue that film noir is created by the film's tone of violence and the representation of corruption in the urban underworld. What are the signifiers of the city? The sounds of the street accompany the visual cues of the sidewalk settings and the cityscape backdrop seen from Vince's balcony. Newspaper headlines announcing major events represent the interest of the public sphere, bars and clubs provide spaces for social interaction between the public and private domain, and the police headquarters overtly locates the tension between the law and individual desire. But, one must ask, why does Lang focus the majority of the first act on tensions and conflicts in the home lives of a police detective and his criminal adversaries? When asked by Peter Bogdanovich about why his films have held an appeal longer than similar films made with social commitment, Lang responded:

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68 Gunning, 432; original emphasis.

> Maybe it's because my films deal with eternal problems. For example, *The Big Heat* is an accusation against crime. But it involves people—unlike other good pictures against crime which only involve gangsters. In *The Big Heat...* Glen Ford is a member of the police department and his wife gets killed. The story becomes a personal affair between him and crime. He becomes the audience."[69]

Lang uses a discourse around domesticity to illustrate the direst consequences of criminal forces in urban society. *The Big Heat* is about the corruption of social structures and roles, as Gunning emphasizes; but, most importantly, it is about how this darkness affects direct, but complex, links between social well-being, economic class, family values, and the emotional lives of individuals in public and familial roles.

Why does Gunning, from his introduction to his conclusion, make such a strong point of proving that melodrama has little place in this narrative? Perhaps he believes concessions to melodrama and other generic conventions would detract from his goal of illustrating Lang's prominence as an auteur working in Hollywood. Perhaps he shares many critics' knee-jerk reactions against the pervasive melodrama structuring many of the most respected works of classical Hollywood, as if melodrama can only be understood as failed tragedy or a degenerate mode of realism. Gunning insists that "moral ambiguity" distances the film from melodrama. But melodrama cannot be defined by monologic interpretations—one only needs to look at the end of *Stella Dallas* to see the moral and emotional complexity of a melodramatic narrative. Quite simply, Gunning has to deny persistently the melodrama in this film in order to accommodate his auteur approach. As I will show, melodrama is central to the narrative.

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69 Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1967): 84.

That family melodrama undeniably fuels the narrative engine, in conjunction with film noir, is a blindspot of criticism surrounding the *The Big Heat*. The only kind of melodrama that Gunning, with reference to Peter Brooks, clearly defines and then discounts from the film more appropriately describes the sensational melodrama of early cinema:

> While the theme of *The Big Heat*, the exposure of hidden corruption, corresponds to the basic logic of melodrama as Peter Brooks finds it in the work of Balzac – the exposure of signs of evil and the restoration of the signs of virtue through the exertion of pressure or violence,... [e]vil has no single representative in this film, and overt actions like Bannion barging into Lagana's mansion yield nothing but trouble.[70]

The narrative is not concerned with the moral polarization of action-centred melodrama, in which the hero defeats the enemy and saves the day in the nick of time. On the other hand, an element of passion-centred melodrama runs through the narrative to create what Linda Williams sees as a central feature of all melodrama, the "dialectic of pathos and action."[71] Yet, it is clear that *The Big Heat* is not a woman's film or a 'weepie.' There is no scene in which Bannion explains to Joyce that her mother is dead, no teary-eyed reunion of father and daughter, "no reunited family to find happiness in its promise of a new life."[72] Rather than appealing to Brooks, the melodrama operating here is better explained by reference to Elsaesser's central essay on the family melodrama of the forties and fifties:

> The family melodrama, by contrast [to Westerns and adventure pictures], though dealing largely with the same Oedipal themes of emotional and moral identity, more often records the failure of the protagonist to act in a way that could shape the events and influence the *emotional environment*, let alone change the stifling

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70 Gunning, 420.
71 Williams, 69.
72 Gunning, 432.

> *social milieu*. The world is closed, and the characters are acted upon. Melodrama confers on them a negative identity through suffering, and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment ends in resignation: they emerge as lesser human beings for having become wise and acquiescent to the ways of the world.[73]

Gunning concludes his "Construction of Authority" section by asking, "In a corrupt city dominated by a system that operates as a Destiny-machine, what effect can Bannion's personal revenge actually have?"[74] Gunning's auteur approach and sociological focus has its strengths, but he cannot analyse the depth of Bannion's "emotional environment."

In this respect, the author's most objectionable point is that Bannion "employs violence not as an emotional expression but as a tool of instrumental reason"[75] and that

> there is no scene that shows an emotional passion beneath his methodical behavior. Bannion's ego and his desire (other than for revenge) seem to have perished with his home life. Even his obsession is remarkably unemotional and inexpressive. He in many ways resembles a dead man walking, and perhaps recalls Kriemhild more than any other Lang character.[76]

Gunning misses the essence of Bannion due to the effort to find his likeness among other Lang characters. Bannion's resistance to outward expressions of feeling is the strongest indication of the emotional repression driving his actions, the repression most strongly conveyed during the moments in which he barely fights back his tears while surveying his empty house before leaving, and again after turning away from Debby in her hotel room when she first asks him to describe his dead wife. As a hard-boiled noir film detective, Bannion effects substantial change in the city by applying pressure to individuals. He does succeed at changing the "stifling social milieu," diverging from Elsaesser's description of melodrama. However, this element of the narrative cannot be separated

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73 Elsaesser, 79; emphasis added.
74 Gunning, 421.
75 Gunning, 428.
76 Gunning, 422.

from the melodrama of Bannion's private struggle. He cannot resolve the emotional turmoil resulting from the violent loss of his wife and domestic sanctuary. Just as this narrative does not unfold along a linear course of action based on solving the enigma of Tom Duncan's suicide note, Bannion is not the archetypal fifties *action* hero; the release of his anger through violence betrays the lonely desperation beneath the cop's surface, and violence fails to resolve the disorder of his emotional life.

The film's first act revolves around a tension within and between families and defines the borders between public and private spheres, between Bannion's role as a cop and as a father, between film noir and family melodrama. The film's opening shot directly conveys the violence of a man shooting himself in his home. When it is learned that he was a police sergeant and his wife is affiliated with a crime boss, the narrative disequilibrium becomes a crisis of the social order that partially unfolds according to the conventions of the detective film noir or noir thriller. Mr. Duncan's past corruption and his wife's criminal connections overtly inscribe the "process of desire" across the codes of legality, as is common in action-centred genres.[77] However, the location of this suicide in the home and the unemotional reaction of the man's wife – her glib remark about being "Tom Duncan's widow" – introduce a layer of tension beneath the surface facts of the investigation: a disequilibrium of the family order that is causally related to the social disorder. When the viewer realizes Mrs. Duncan's deception about the history of problems within her family setting, the history of desire in the domestic sphere becomes

77 In *Genre* (1980), Neale discusses the differences in the narrative functions of the legal discourse, violence, desire and sexuality to differentiate between melodrama and action-centred genres, such as the western, gangster film, detective film and thriller.

the object of the investigation and the pulse of the drama. The questions that arise from this opening scene suicide create both the mystery of a noir thriller and the complexity of emotional relations in a family melodrama.

The mystery at the centre of the noir plot – the cop's death and suicide letter – are superseded by the hints of family melodrama: the unfulfilled desire and absence of love in the Duncan marriage that led to Tom Duncan's corruption and fatal attack of conscience and that later become the object of Bannion's investigation. The viewer is introduced to Bannion as a detective. But, as he points out, he has come from home, not the police headquarters, to investigate the death in the Duncan home, not a noiresque city street at night (such as those in earlier B-film noirs like *Detour* (1945) and *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)). When the content of Duncan's letter is suppressed by the agreement between Mrs. Duncan and Lagana, the family crises within the corrupt social order becomes the locus of narrative tension. Bannion's pursuit of information about Mr. Duncan's alleged health problems and infidelity to his wife is juxtaposed with scenes of Bannion's own home life. The story shifts focus from the resolution of the social disorder to the drama surrounding Bannion's individual struggle.

The three scenes of Bannion's home life serve at least three purposes. First, they depict the nature and priority of his desire. Several small gestures indicate his concern, consistent with a cop's character, for order and discipline in the home. For example, upon arriving home from the precinct, he parks the car and moves his daughter's toy carriage from the walkway to the porch. (In a later scene, in which movers finish clearing everything from his house for storage, he sets the carriage aside and asks his cab driver to

take it.) Additionally, Bannion twice directs his wife to treat their daughter, "according to the 'book'... with great kindness and great firmness." The first home scene's playful banter about sharing everything in their "perfect marriage" is evidence of the strong and comfortable love binding husband and wife. Lang provides a close-up of the couple in the kitchen in which Katie insists that her husband, to paraphrase, "keep leading with his chin and never compromise," despite the pressure from Wilks. During the closest framing of the couple, she tells him, "I love you," and he kisses his wife until their restless daughter interrupts their intimacy. Most telling is how Bannion responds to the threatening phone call received by Katie. Against Wilks's cautions, he goes to Lagana's home and confronts him about the Chapman murder and harassment of his family, later asking Wilks, "What am I supposed to do when a cop-hater phones my home and insults my wife?" The three home scenes in the first act clearly establish Bannion's desire for domestic harmony, his love for Katie and Joyce, and concern for their safety above all else.

The family dynamic defines every character in this narrative. Like Mrs. Duncan, Debby compromises her morals for the comforts of domestic wealth provided by her connection to Lagana through Vince. Lagana is constructed not just as a crime boss, but as the guardian of his estate and the proud father of his sixteen-year-old daughter, whom he talks about in several scenes. Further, several minor characters are defined in relation to familial roles. For example, Wilks's character develops around the issue of his pension and responsibility to his wife, and Atkins dismisses Bannion by saying, "Cops are paid to take risks. I'm not. You see, I've got a wife and kids too." The common denominator

between all characters is the desire for domestic peace and prosperity, not social power, fame and fortune. Narrative disequilibrium results from the inevitable dissonance generated when each social group approaches this common goal from divergent moral positions. When the criminals control the official authorities and enjoy domestic tranquility, the virtuous and powerless citizens cannot. Lagana represents both the locus of criminal power and the greatest domestic prosperity. Although each central character has a family, the narrative most fully images Bannion's domesticity. There is no mention of Mrs. Duncan's children, if she has any, nor Lagana's wife, and the narrative gives us no reason to sympathize with any other than Bannion's family situation.

The second related purpose of the home scenes in the first act is to establish the constraints and pressures around Bannion's desires and actions throughout the narrative. The prominence of the Bannion family scenes establishes a tight moral framework that is absent in other noir films, such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Unlike other loner male characters in film noir, Bannion's free will is constrained by something other than malevolent fate and dangerous women. The narrative persistently commands Bannion to conduct himself according to social constraints that conflict with domestic pressures. He acts against Wilks's official orders initially in protest of their corrupt source, but more importantly for his family's safety. Even after his wife is killed and his home is destroyed, Bannion must maintain his moral composure for the sake of his daughter's innocence, her memory of her mother, and her future with her father. He is not just a rogue cop. Despite the crisis of the social order, Bannion can never unleash the "big heat," an apocalyptic rage bent on burning down the entire system. Quite simply, he

cannot go on a killing rampage. He uses his detective and interrogative skills in instances such as tracking Larry to his apartment and forcing information from him. However, he does not employ these skills with the goal of single-handedly breaking up the crime syndicate.

Bannion is driven by the emotional intensity of his loss; his toughest decisions, especially when holding a gun over the fallen Vince, are informed by the memory of his family and his responsibility to his daughter. Every decision he makes is directed toward resolving the crisis of the family order within the corruption of the social system. The narrative reminds us of his familial obligations when Bannion visits his daughter. The first visit shows Joyce playing with the carriage Bannion brought from their empty home. During the second visit, she asks him to tell her a bedtime story, 'Three Little Kittens,' the nursery rhyme he began just after the last time she saw her mother, before the explosion interrupted the telling and tore apart Bannion's life.

The third purpose of the lengthy Bannion family scenes is to build both the anticipation and the shock of his home's destruction—the fuel for the narrative engine. With the dramatic impetus provided by the opening scene, one can ask, *why does Bannion's family need to be blown apart a third of the way into the film?* His home is so quiet and peaceful that it threatens to bring the narrative movement to a stop, creating the anticipation of its destruction. The explosion personalizes the film's sociological moralizing by exposing Bannion's home to the depth of corruption in the city, making the drama of his individual struggle more emotionally accessible to a wide range of viewers. As Lang states in the quotation above, Bannion "becomes the audience." He can separate

himself from the scum of the city and the corruption of the system. He can deal with the fact that the police force is under Lagana's control, but not when that control extends into the family he is raising "by the book," with firmness and patience. Bannion is never so driven as when the disorder of the city invades his sanctuary from dark forces.[78] His descent into the depths of the corrupt underworld begins when this sanctuary is destroyed.

As the opening act traces a path through four domestic spaces and the official, the private, and the criminal links between them, it becomes clear that Bannion's domestic innocence is out of place among the corrupt foundation of the other homes. The sickness of the Duncan marriage sharply contrasts with the Bannion marriage. The excess of Vince's apartment and Lagana's mansion – the opulence of interior furnishings, the large portrait of his deceased mother – marks the immoral source of their wealth and sharply contrasts with Bannion's humble house in the suburbs. Because the official constraints on the detective's actions will not allow him to solve the Duncan and Chapman cases and resolve social disorder, the drama creates a crisis within that disorder. Noir thriller conventions give way to family melodrama when Bannion invades Lagana's home, not as a detective seeking the truth of his investigation – not to serve and protect society – but as a father protecting his family. Katie's death is a direct effect of this invasion. Bannion brings the stress of his working conditions into his modest home and topples Joyce's toy castle while conveying to Katie the moral toll of his work. He destroys his home trying to protect it from dark forces controlling the city.

Though the car explosion leaves the *house* intact, the filming of this central scene

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78 Jans B. Wager makes a similar argument in his online article, but fails to develop sufficiently the point.

conveys the destruction of the *home*. Rather than following Katie to the car and recording an explosive spectacle, the camera remains indoors where Bannion tucks Joyce in and begins to tell her a bedtime story. The explosion occurs off-screen and is heard in the bedroom. The framing of Bannion and Joyce is momentarily shaken. The home is rocked to the foundation and the viewer experiences the disruption as a guest inside the house. With the sound of the explosion, the lyrical strings of the score abruptly change to ominous jabs. The viewer follows Bannion's panicked rush outside and experiences the extreme injustice of the accident with the wrenching pathos of watching Bannion pound on the unbreakable window until he finally finds a way to extricate his wife's limp body.

Several critics writing about Lang and film noir have noted irony and weakness in *The Big Heat*'s sketches of domestic tranquility, dismissing them as the least interesting part of the film. The most dismissive in this respect are those who approach the film from an auteur angle, such as Gunning, and Bogdanovich before him:

> "[I]t could be argued that... *The Big Heat* is marred by several 'average family' scenes (Glenn Ford, his wife and child) that ring false because Lang has little interest in anything approaching normality—in fact he denies its existence... The finest scenes in *The Big Heat* – in all his pictures – are the ones that deal with the insulted and the injured."[79]

Of those writers who approach the film as an example of noir, few note the central importance of the film's discourse on domesticity. Others interpret noiresque cynicism or hopelessness in the representation of the family values. Jans B. Wager notes "film noir's complicated relationship to the family," but can only conclude that *The Big Heat*,

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79 Bogdanovich, p. 10.

"represents family life as a sham, as a relationship of convenience, as perverse, and finally as so fragile and threatened that even an icon of domesticity becomes a weapon."[80] I want to stress film noir's complicated relationship not only to the family, but to family melodrama as well.

The home scenes in *The Big Heat* are central to the film as a whole. As noted above, the family dynamic defines most major and minor characters in the narrative. Bannion's home is blown to smithereens as a sacrifice for the future of social and domestic order. Katie's death scene inverts the emotions surrounding the destruction of the family in the opening scene and corrects the moral perversion of Mrs. Duncan's indifference to her husband's death. After the destruction of the virtuous family to end the first act, Bannion takes every chance to prove his love for his wife and child and struggles to redeem his lost sanctuary. The impossibility of this desire drives the melodrama of passion and leaves the film without a strong sense of closure.

Although Bannion's home is blown apart, it is short-sighted to say that "domesticity has been definitively effaced from this film."[81] The private sphere remains the locus of plot action and develops the film's discourse around domesticity. First, critical information is revealed during the exchanges between Vince and Lagana in each of their homes. Additionally, narrative tension rises with Bannion's unwelcome visits to the homes of his adversaries: the return to Mrs. Duncan's house in which he nearly strangles her and the shootout in Vince's apartment to end the film. One must also note Debby's visit to Mrs. Duncan's home in which she shoots the merry widow in the same

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80 Jans. B Wager, "Percolating Paranoia: *The Big Heat, Bright Lights Film Journal* 27 (January 2000) <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/27/bigheat1.html> (7 September 2004).
81 Gunning, 426.

spot where Mr. Duncan ended his life. Finally, the most shocking acts of violence in the film occur when Vince scalds Debby's face with a pot of boiling coffee and she later finds revenge by doing the same. What is most memorable about this film is not the generic shootouts, nor the phallic weapon of the femme fatale, but the domestic abuse. Violence occurs not only in the home, but with everyday icons of home life: a pot of coffee and a family car, the fifties symbol of suburban prosperity.

In addition to the film's discourse on domesticity, several factors make it clear that this narrative diverges from the unrelentingly linear course of the action melodrama. The most significant in this respect is Debby's role as a substitute for Katie. In "Women in Film Noir," Janey Place discusses two generic types of female characters, the "spider woman" and the "nurturing woman":

> On the rare occasions that the normal world of families, children, homes, and domesticity appears in film noir it is either so fragile and ideal that we anxiously anticipate its destruction (*The Big Heat*), or, like the 'good' but boring women who contrast with the exciting, sexy *femme fatales*, it is so dull and constricting that it offers no alternative to the dangerous but exciting life on the fringe.

Debby can be labeled a noir femme fatale – she is a dangerous beauty who kills – but her relationship to domesticity and the desperate protagonist is unconventional. Rather than lure Bannion with her confident femininity into the darkness of an underworld that destroys him, he never returns her sexual advances, Debby's previously unfailing currency in her male dominated surroundings. The narrative positions Debby as a substitute for Katie. She reaffirms his principles and commitment to his wife's memory, but the former does not displace the latter from Bannion's heart. In addition to the matching sounds of their names, Katie and Debby are aligned by the fact that they are both burned by intense

heat. When Debby's beauty is destroyed, she loses her ticket to the easy life as a trophy girl of organized crime. The scalded half of Debby's face ironically represents the goodness beneath the surface. In her hotel room, as she sits in darkness after her disfigurement, she asks Bannion to describe his memory of Katie, perhaps to calm him or to learn what kind of woman can be his wife. After he stalls, choking on the pain of memory – as in the first hotel scene when she asks him if he has ever told a girl pretty things – he turns towards the window and tells Debby, "You know, I almost killed [Bertha Duncan] an hour ago," then utters, "I should have." She immediately responds, "I don't believe you could. If you had, there wouldn't much be difference between you and Vince Stone." In Bannion's feelings for his deceased wife, Debby sees the capacity for a kind of love she has never experienced. She becomes increasingly more interested in how she can reach him.

The order of scenes in the film's last third makes it clear that Bannion does not coerce Debby into killing Mrs. Duncan; rather, she acts upon her own desire to do something for the greater good, to help Bannion, and to make the self-sacrifice of a nurturing woman, if not also to purchase redemption for her past sins. The viewer learns of the threat to Joyce's life when Lagana and Vince decide to "take something Bannion values more than himself" by calling off the police security at Joyce's refuge. The following scene shows Bannion's unsuccessful attempt to kill Bertha Duncan before returning to the hotel room where Debby is contemplating the darkness before beginning to see the fragile strength of Bannion's character. Bannion receives a call from his brother in-law's apartment about the end of the police detail. Although he leaves her with one of

his pistols, giving Debby the means to kill, he never implies that she use it. After rushing over to ensure his daughter's safety – reminding the viewer of his moral responsibility – he leaves the apartment and hesitantly assures Lt. Wilks on the sidewalk that he is not going back to see Mrs. Duncan. The following scene begins inside Mrs. Duncan's home, testing the honesty of Bannion's answer until Debby enters, concealing Bannion's pistol. She finishes what he could not. As a substitute for Katie, Debby reinforces Bannion's ethical integrity through self-sacrifice. She will die for revenge, for redemption, and for Bannion.

In addition to Debby's duality, the film's hybridity of noir and melodrama is represented by Bannion's internal struggle. Debby's self-sacrificing virtue and violent femininity are fully realized in the climactic scene set in Vince's apartment. Bannion similarly plays out the full range of his character: first, through physical domination over Vince that yields to his moral composure; second, through the emotional tension released when he finally talks to Debby about his wife. As he stands over Stone at the end of the shootout, he cannot kill him, perhaps thinking of his daughter or recalling what Debby told him about the difference between himself and the criminals. It must be emphasized how little violence Bannion actually commits in the film. This balance between revenge and righteousness is an additional aspect of this melodrama of passion that cannot be ignored. Bannion talks tough and roughs up one of Lagana's goons, but he does not—cannot kill anyone. *The Big Heat* has little in common with the unrelentingly linear course of action melodrama.

Like Katie insisting to Bannion that he must stick to his principles, unknowingly

at the cost of her life, Debby reminds the widower of his values and dies helping Bannion retain this virtuous disposition. She provides Bannion an opportunity to express the kinds of emotions previously only shared with his wife. When she asks him, "Remember how angry you got when I asked you about your wife?" he finally tells Debby about Katie as she lies fatally wounded on the floor of Vince's apartment: "I wasn't angry. No, you and Katie would have gotten along fine." He fondly describes the details of their shared dinner in the first home scene saying, "she was a sampler.... We got a big kick out of that." He continues,

> Sometimes when I came home from work, she'd have the baby dressed up like a, well, like a little princess. One of the most important parts of the day was when I came in and saw her looking like something that just stepped down off a birthday cake. I guess, I guess it's that way with most families.

At the end of the narrative, Bannion resolves the corruption of the police force and as a reward is given his detective position and the respect of his colleagues. He could have had the girl, as well; however, after witnessing Bannion's moral struggle and fractured love, Debby gives up her currency in the only world she knows. Her moral awakening betrays the virtuous heart of this femme fatale—the good side of her duality as the spider woman and nurturing wife. She covers the burn scars in her coat before her final breaths and it is only the surface half of external beauty that dies for the viewer. Rather than the conventional goals of detective films and noir thrillers, the unqualified object of Bannion's desire throughout *The Big Heat* is just to be like "most families." Despite the impossibility of this goal, the narrative achieves a sense of emotional closure: through the dying Debby, Bannion can say goodbye and finally let go of his dead wife.

Gunning's chapter dedicated to the film notes Lang's avoidance of the emotional

catharsis and the happy ending of Sydney Boehm's original scenario (in which Lagana shoots Vince, Debby's scars will heal, and it is implied that Bannion will take her as his wife before the story ends with father and daughter having breakfast).[82] In the end of Lang's film, the newspaper headlines announce the public victory, but the film does not visualize the masses celebrating the good news. The final scenes do not fully resolve the excess born from the uncertainty surrounding Bannion's emotional state. The plot avoids a release of the tears Bannion choked back in earlier scenes; however, it is faulty to believe that "the hero remains in love with a dead woman, and, through her, with death itself."[83] The strength of Gunning's auteur analysis comes at the expense of insights that construct a divergent interpretation of the film as a generic text. I want to emphasize that *The Big Heat* is a hybrid of a noir thriller and family melodrama and, although film noir can be analysed as a deviation from classical Hollywood norms, the noir in this hybrid serves melodramatic conventions. This hybridity is why this film is important as an individual text, as an example of the best Hollywood cinema in the fifties, in addition to its importance as the work of a great filmmaker. The homes scenes in the first act depict the nature and priority of Bannion's desire for domestic harmony, establish the constraints and pressures comprising his moral struggle, and build both the anticipation and the shock of his home's destruction.

The threat to family values and domestic tranquility is how the film conveys the direst consequences of corrupt forces in urban social systems. The pre-plot problems in the Duncan home are causally related to corruption of the police force. The film does not

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82 Gunning, 432.
83 Gunning, 424.

detail the direction of this relationship, but it makes it clear that the moral foundation of Bannion's home, including his wife and her substitute, rises above and restores health to the police force. The violence throughout the narrative always occurs in domestic spaces, not dark city streets. Interior settings are anything but a refuge from the outside world. However, rather than uncovering "the hollow core of the dream of the suburban home, the centre of 50s ideology,"[84] the film communicates its critical role in the healthy functioning of society. Katie's sacrificial death apologizes for Mr. Duncan's desperate suicide and provides the dramatic impetus for the remaining two-thirds of the narrative while Bannion's reaction corrects Bertha Duncan's glib amorality in the opening scene. The viewer learns from Lagana himself halfway through the plot that his crime syndicate is responsible for the deaths of Lucy and Katie. What motivates this narrative is the interest in seeing how Bannion can defeat the bad guys and avenge his wife's death through a public disclosure of the truth while denying the dark influences of the corrupt system and remaining within the moral parameters set by his responsibility to his daughter. The viewer's interest lies in how the crisis of the system can be resolved according to the process of Bannion's desire and his crisis within system. The restoration of social order is overshadowed by the slower healing process of Bannion's personal loss. With a discourse on domesticity, with Debby as substitute for Katie, with his daughter forever Bannion's moral compass, and with an ending that leaves something unresolved beyond the solution of murder and corruption, *The Big Heat* tells the story of a widower's passion and the emotional excess underlying the surface of the revenge plot.

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84 Gunning, 422.

Chapter 3:
The Transgeneric Narration of Love and Hate
In *The Night of the Hunter*

Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) is an eccentric fusion of talent at the twilight of studio-era Hollywood. The film tells the story of a struggling family's collapse and two siblings' fall from innocence as the Depression takes their desperate father and a deceptive preacher murders their mother. *The Night of the Hunter* is considered a classical Hollywood masterpiece by numerous critics, though relatively little has been written about the film by these critics.[85] As Laughton's only credited work as a director, *The Night of the Hunter* falls outside the interests of auteur criticism. As a transgeneric feature, the film challenges critics looking for the purest examples of generic cinema. Laughton's film is an oddity among the best classical Hollywood creations—greatly revered by the critical establishment, yet relatively invisible to the academic community.

My analysis of *The Night of the Hunter* will illustrate my contention that it is impossible to interpret the fullest meaning of Hollywood features by invoking the conventions of genres in isolation – all is hybridity. *The Night of the Hunter* is a classical melodrama filtered through the formal and discursive conventions of two prominent genres in the late studio era: film noir and family melodrama. What does it mean to call the film melodramatic and where is the melodrama located? Is noir found only in the style of the film and melodrama only in the narrative?

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85 For example, the film is included in Jonathan Rosenbaum's "Alternate One Hundred" best American films, listed in *Movie Wars* (2000) in comparison to the American Film Institutes Top 100 (pp. 100-106).

Simon Callow's treatment of the *The Night of the Hunter* in his BFI Film Classics edition emphasizes the film's eclecticism. Throughout the short book, the author analyses how the production was a true collaboration of rare talents while emphasizing that Laughton was finally responsible for creating a cinematic fairytale. For Callow the story is about John and he concludes that the translation from novel to film compromises much of this focus:

> We end with the Christmas card image of Rachel's snow-covered house, which is a poor-substitute for the novel's return of John to his shadow-filled bedroom and his understanding that the nightmare has finally ended. It is harsh to accuse a film which has dared so much of not quite going the final lap. The achievement of Laughton and his team is exceptional and enduring, the imagery original and haunting, tapping into the subconscious and a world of fears and longings; the story-telling is assured and compelling. It was one of the first, pioneering independent productions, and it remains a fine example of a film which defies all formulas, as well as a supreme example of the integrated work of a team.[86]

Despite his conclusion that the film "defies all formulas," the author notes throughout that multiple styles and forms emerge in the film – from horror to slapstick comedy – and he indicates the obvious: that naturalism and documentary realism are not among these styles. Film noir and family melodrama are ignored in Callow's interpretation.

The Night of the Hunter does not have an entry in Silver and Ward's *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*, though with its black and white chiaroscuro, it is at least as noiresque as any film in the volume. In their first appendix, the authors discuss "various types of American films that, while predominantly genre pieces, do reflect to a greater or lesser degree the same narrative and visual preoccupations, the same style, as film noir."[87] The period film is among these various types and it is here that Silver and Ward provide a

86 Simon Callow, *The Night of the Hunter* (London: British Film Institute, 2000): 76-77.
87 Silver & Ward, 323.

brief note on *The Night of the Hunter* by explaining that it "goes beyond the 'realism' of the noir world. It is a period film precise and absolute in its portrait of evil, yet preserving throughout a strong moral framework." Here, and elsewhere, it seems as if the authors argue that a concrete division of good and evil – a plot that lacks moral ambiguity, a *melodramatic* narrative – cannot be properly classified as noir. Additionally, the authors observe that noir films must be constructed around an urban environment with characters whose existential anguish holds societal implications. They cite Ellen Berent as an example of a femme fatale who influenced the subtle adjustments of female characterizations in the period film; *Leave Her to Heaven*, however, is certainly as isolated from urban or social context as any of the period films noted. It is not inconceivable that *Leave Her to Heaven* could have been set in the late 19th century, for example, without losing its particular form as a hybrid of film noir and family melodrama. Urban context, like moral ambiguity, is not a fundamental convention of film noir. It has been a central position of this thesis that, just as film noir can be shot in Technicolor, so the genre lacks any singularly defining elements.

Where is this troubled film's place in the history of Hollywood genre filmmaking? With all the clear and much-referenced aesthetic influences on the film, why can it not rest comfortably in the realm of either melodrama, film noir, horror, slapstick comedy, or something akin to a gothic or fairytale aesthetic? Given the narrative and visual complexity of *The Night of the Hunter*, it will prove useful for the moment to put aside the film's formal properties for a conceptualization of genre more suited to analysing hybridity. In *Genre*, Neale proposes a discourse-centred theory rather than one based on

narrative, character development, iconography, style, or other visual aspects of film form. The transgeneric quality of *The Night of the Hunter* can be explored with the following query: what discourses are mobilized in the construction and resolution of the narrative's disequilibrium? Like most Hollywood creations, *The Night of the Hunter* contains an intricate array of discourses on myths and ideologies about American ways of life. Themes of *morality* and *religion*, *law* and *order*, *capitalism* and *poverty*, *love* and *hate* compose the discursive constellation.[88] Throughout the narrative, certain discursive themes momentarily shine brighter than others and connect to show new ways of seeing the constellation as a whole. For example, law and religion intersect at times to create an argument about holy matrimony and the role of love and sex between a lawfully wedded husband and wife. Morality, law, money, and love comprise the range of the film's discursive themes; they configure the discursive constellation into a representation of family—as most often, *family in crisis*.

Like Callow's references to various genres and styles, Margaret Atwood attempts to explain the complexity of her qualified favorite film by proposing a "double framework."[89] In March, 1999, at London's literary festival, "The Word," Atwood introduced a screening of a new print of the film. She explained how it invokes "the world of bedtime stories and dreams" as well as a social framework: "the Depression,

88 The themes invoked by the film can be conceptualized as stars and the narrative's dynamic arguments about these themes as the discursive lines that connect the stars to each other, creating an ever-shifting constellation. The themes are 'real' and pre-exist the film, but the discursive lines that connect these themes are 'imaginary'; they are drawn, in part, by what the film is saying and, in part, by how the viewer interprets the film. The themes are not necessarily bipolar opposites but no discourse can exist in isolation.

89 Margaret Atwood, "Why I love Night of the Hunter," *Guardian Unlimited,* 19 March 1999. <http://film.guardian.co.uk/Feature_Story/Guardian/0,4120,31223,00.html> (7 September 2004).

cause of the desperation that drives the film's initial robbery."[90] The period setting of the Great Depression is the frame of the narrative's familial and moral crisis; it adds poignancy to these themes and opens them to a wider social relevance. Atwood's observation indicates both the intricacy of the film's narrative and the structuring role of the Depression; however, the discursive constellation avoids any specific socio-economic or political comment about America in the Depression years. The majority of the film's critics interpret the film's constellation of discourses as a story about the condition of infancy and adolescence in moral struggles between good and evil and the nature of love, sex, and marriage. While the narrative focuses on the children's fall from innocence, shadows of the past linger in the present of the grown-up characters. The conditions of their personal histories represent disequilibrium in dynamic relation to John's crisis. Although the childhood perspective – the melodramatic "world of bed-time stories and dreams" – dominates the centre of the family constellation's constantly shifting shape, it is not the totality of the film's narrative point-of-view and stylistic conventions.

What is the narrative and how can it be summarized? Two overlapping sequences unfold before the Depression setting and the central child characters are introduced. Firstly, the narrative opens with a prologue. This sequence's biblical quotations and the music's lyrics about the fear of children in 'nights of hunters' evoke themes about coming of age in an unfriendly world. Secondly, the plot begins with a sequence that introduces Preacher's duplicity. Contrary to the tendencies of the film's critics and reviewers, a plot summary should start with Preacher's leisurely escape from a murderous act. Although

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90 Atwood, online.

the film opens with themes of classical melodrama, the first three scenes of the plot establish the noiresque duplicity of Preacher's character. To further develop the generic hybridity of the film's discursive constellation, I will turn to a look at how these discourses are formally represented.

The Night of the Hunter evokes the conventions of classical melodrama, but the film subverts simple mimicry by employing aesthetics more aligned with fifties Hollywood melodrama than with its nineteenth-century progenitor. To find meaning in the melodrama pervading *The Night of the Hunter*, it is appropriate to reference Linda Williams's early-nineties essay, "Melodrama Revised," in which she uses Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920), starring Lilian Gish, as a case study for her general proposal of melodrama's five fundamental features. My analysis will also include a look below the melodramatic artifice of the period setting to consider the dark undertones – the noiresque elements – that engender moral ambiguity and complicate what Williams calls melodrama's "Manichean conflicts between good and evil."[91]

The narrative opens with a prologue. The image of Lilian Gish as an elderly lady fades into the centre of a cosmic background, providing a heavenly frame for the Holy Mother figure and her 'flock.' The woman is introduced in the narrative's final third as Rachel Cooper, a self-described "strong tree with branches for many birds." For the prologue, however, she remains an anonymous maternal figure – with the persona of Lilian Gish – preaching biblical morality tales to a group of nameless children without diegetic roles. Walter Schumann's opening music positions the viewer amongst the

91 Williams, 77.

children surrounding Gish/Rachel with its lyrical bidding: "Dream, little one, dream. Fear is only a dream. So dream, little one, dream." In her monologue, Gish/Rachel warns the children, "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits." For this line, the narrative dissolves to a helicopter shot encompassing a sleepy village along the Ohio River, the setting for much of the film's action. The plot begins as the camera descends from the sky and the scene cuts to a closer aerial shot of a second group of anonymous children playing hide-and-seek. The prologue and the god's-eye view of the sleepy town create a "moment of virtue taking pleasure in itself,"[92] a moment that aligns the film with Williams's first central feature: that melodrama "begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence."[93]

It is also a moment that abruptly concludes when the score introduces preacher's ominous motif as the playing children stumble upon the crooked legs of a murdered woman lying just beyond an open cellar door. The camera pulls back again to the helicopter's extreme long shot now following a car speeding along a country road and Gish/Rachel's voice-over concludes with the following: "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit; neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them." The score punctuates the end of this maternal caution with its second instance of Preacher's motif while the visual track provides the viewer with a medium shot introduction to Rev. Harry Powell, Gish/Rachel's polar opposite. Together with the prologue, the plot's first scenes both introduce and complicate Williams's second

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92 Williams, 65.
93 Williams, 65.

principle: that melodrama "presents characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichean conflicts of good and evil."

The beginning of the plot immediately undermines the moral polarization central to classical melodrama with the scene of a 'preacher' driving along a quiet country road in a stolen car while talking aloud to his god about the morality of murder: "Lord, I am tired. Sometimes I wonder if you really understand—not that you mind the killings. Your book is full of killings. There are things you do hate, Lord: perfume-smelling things, lacy things, things with curly hair." Preacher references the same Holy Bible that Gish/Rachel uses to teach the young, forcing the viewer to anticipate a shift in where the power lies at this early point in the narrative. Herein lies the beginning of disequilibrium in the film's discourse on religion and morality. This antagonist is not the uncomplicated representation of evil found in classical melodrama. He is evil, but he is also psychopathic – a false prophet – not a conventional petty criminal driven by lust and greed. He is a killer with an unquiet mind who believes in the overall good of his hate binge—a lethal hatred guided by, as he explains to Ben Harper, "a religion that me and the Lord worked out betwixt us." Preacher believes his duplicity as a gentleman friend and killer of widows serves the higher purpose of a sort of savior only he can ever fully understand. The film's first three scenes have introduced themes of light and dark, love and hate, good and evil creating the beginnings of a religious discourse. These themes will generate various other discourses and displace the prominence of religion while casting shades of moral ambiguity that will remain after order has been restored.

The most efficient of the early plot scenes unfolds during fifty-two seconds of a burlesque dancer's performance; it establishes the precise nature of the diegetic and discursive threats posed by Preacher. The economy of storytelling in this scene is exemplary of how the remainder of the narrative evokes the conventions of film noir within slight melodramatic gestures that are over-determined by the mise-en-scene's geometric shapes of white space framed by rich black shadows. At the end of Preacher's country road 'dialogue' with his god about their mutual disgust for all things feminine, the scene cuts to long shot of a woman dancing for Preacher among an audience of gazing men. What is the source of Preacher's hateful convictions and why does he attend a bawdy display of 'perfume-smelling, lacy things with curly hair'? Preacher leers at the dancer in silence and the camera cuts to a close-up of H-A-T-E tattooed on his left hand's knuckles. The plot brazenly demonstrates Preacher's sentiment of pure evil by showing his HATE hand reaching into his jacket pocket to grasp a concealed switchblade. The blade violently rips open through the jacket's material in a highly suggestive moment of phallic imagery that eluded censorship's concerns. Preacher's unambiguous gesture, a gesture for which intent equals the act, conveys the impression that his aggressive dependence on the knife compensates for his sexual impotence, as later scenes will confirm. The killer's only line during the telling scene comes after he trips the blade and tilts his head as if to hear some private communication from his god. He pauses for a moment to listen before responding with subtle desperation: "There are too many of them. *Can't kill the world.*" Preacher Powell represents a perverse sexual threat to the lives of woman everywhere. More generally, he represents a threat to anything or anyone

preventing him from carrying out his holy mission.

Later scenes will reveal that this general threat has no mercy for the innocence of youth; the viewer would be correct in questioning the nature of Preacher's own youth and his past relationship with the opposite sex, especially with his mother. The narrative, however, adds no psychological depth to his character nor provides any hint about his past. Preacher remains throughout the film a pure force of hate and an unmerciful representation of evil beyond redemption. In this sense, he is a conventional character-type of classical melodrama – he is the *immediate* cause of discursive disequilibrium. He is not, however, the sole cause and his duplicity creates the moral ambiguity of a film noir plot. He is evil incarnate, but the Depression setting and the related weakness of law and order subvert classical melodrama's conventions by slightly qualifying his character. In addition to the role of elemental evil, the desperation of the Depression years (that victimizes Ben Harper) and a jail cell coincidence are equally significant causes of disequilibrium.

The end of the burlesque house scene recasts questions the narrative raised during the country road scene, questions about the extra-diegetic struggle of moral authority between the bible-quoting Gish/Rachel and the lethal false prophet. The terms of the struggle are shifted from moral to legal authority when a police officer enters the dark theatre, grabs Preacher's shoulder, and asks him about a stolen touring car. The film's first vertical wipe takes the viewer from the burlesque house to a courtroom complete with Lincoln's portrait over the judge's left shoulder. Preacher makes an appeal to the court as a 'man of God,' but the judge ensures that the stenographer strike "Preacher" from

the sentencing of Harry Powell. Regardless of the judge's skepticism toward Preacher's criminal and burlesque perversions, the court of law fails to convict him of anything more than car theft – a theft facilitated by the murder uncovered earlier by the playing children – and it fails to resolve the disequilibrium of a noiresque plot in which a psychopathic 'man of the cloth' freely murders lonely, vulnerable widows to fulfill each holy mission and finance the next. Along with the coincidence it facilitates, the law discourse inadvertently casts Preacher's dark spell over the mise-en-scene of the Harper family melodrama.

The narrative dissolves from the courthouse to an extreme long shot moving away from the Moundsville penitentiary where Preacher is serving his thirty-day sentence. A bell tolls and the brief shot dissolves to another helicopter shot closing in on a riverside community. Finally, the camera cuts to a crane shot – a god's-eye view – almost directly above and descending down upon children playing with a doll in a grassy yard. This sketch of innocence, accompanied by light orchestral strings, is composed of a young boy and girl in a tree's partial shade and surrounded by dozens of daises extending to each corner of the frame. The camera completes its descent directly in front of the children, revealing more natural shadows in the background. This introduction to the Harper family is the only scene containing the whole family and parallels the plot's first scene. It begins with the film's third heavenly descent from an aerial shot and, similar to the second instance, it moves toward playing children. Like the nameless children who stumble upon a corpse during a round of hide-and-seek, the innocent play of John and Pearl is interrupted by the grown-up world of desperation and corruption.

A car driven by the siblings' father, Ben Harper, speeds into the yard with police sirens in pursuit. Ben robbed a bank and unintentionally killed two people, yet the narrative does not depict him as evil. He is a family man and has sacrificed his own virtue for that of his children, though his fractured relationship with his wife is beyond redemption. If there ever was happiness and serenity in the Harper house, the narrative offers no hint of this idyllic past. The Harper's story begins with domestic discord. The man on the run from the law makes no attempt to embrace his wife one last time; the couple is never framed together, not even at a distance. Ben makes his boy swear never to reveal the money's location to anyone: "not even your mom... you got common sense—she ain't. When you grow up that money will belong to you." This scene in the yard of the Harper home begins to reveal the film's discursive constellation of a family in crisis. The equilibrium of this configuration means the necessary balance between the money, love, and morality required to sustain domestic harmony and raise a family with as wholesome as possible a transition from infancy into adolescence and beyond. Despite the absence of love between husband and wife, Ben's love for his children has driven him beyond morality and any respectable chance of providing for his family the money it needs. He hides the cash and swears his children to secrecy, thus providing potential financial stability; he fails, however, to provide the moral guidance needed to maintain equilibrium in the family constellation.

The plot attempts to resolve the crisis by positioning John as a father-substitute for Pearl. Although the boy has discipline beyond his years, the responsibility is too great. John has to be the protector not only of his younger sister, Pearl, but of Miss

Jenny, as well. As the viewer later learns, Ben has invested the doll with power by stuffing it with the current equivalent of millions of dollars and recreating Miss Jenny as the silent sibling of John and Pearl. The policemen take Ben away from his infants and the narrative clearly sides with the father, the virtuous (though not innocent) sacrifice in this melodramatic plot. The narrative provides John's perspective of the arrest, from which the law lacks compassion and forgiveness. It matters not that his dad has robbed and killed two people—a boy needs a father. The Harper yard scene, including Ben's arrest, begins by paralleling the first plot scene as described above; it continues by setting up a graphic match to the scene in which Preacher tells John his is going to be his father; it ends by choreographing the mise-en-scene of the film's climactic scene.

Through the first five scenes, the narrative has shown the viewer two homicidal men. To contrast these two killers, the Harper yard scene dissolves to Ben's stand before the same judge that convicted Preacher. Before cutting to the same framing of the same courtroom used for Preacher, a similar helicopter shot briefly shows the Moundsville penitentiary and the same bell that tolled before Preacher's trial scene now tolling for Ben. The judge sentences Ben to death and tells him, "May God have mercy on your soul." With this sixth scene, the narrative has completed a parallel between Ben and Preacher. In the seventh scene the two men share their only screen time together, wearing the same prison uniform and moralizing in circles around the stolen money. At this point, the Depression-era setting is made clear by Ben's following line of prison dialogue to Preacher:

> I robbed that bank because I got tired of seeing children roaming the woodlands without food. Children roaming the highway in this here Depression. Children

> sleeping in old abandoned car bodies and junk heaps. And I promised myself I'd never see the day when my children would want.

The discourses configuring the constellation of the family in crisis reach the greatest disequilibrium during a scene towards the narrative's end in which Pearl and John are "roaming the woodlands without food." Ben's key lines, repeated in slight variations later in the narrative, establish how, as Williams describes, melodrama "focuses on victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue."[94] The most innocent and victimized characters are clearly the children, yet the film does not ignore all the other families and individuals suffering through the Depression years. The unaddressed, grand forces that caused the massive upheaval (two decades prior to the film's release) frame the film's discursive disequilibrium and its pessimism about faceless, uncharitable social systems. Every character is depicted as a victim of the Depression, even Bart the Hangman, to whom I will return shortly.

With Ben and Preacher in the same jail cell – the former sentenced to death, the latter soon to be free – discursive disequilibrium arrives at the hybridity of film noir and family melodrama. At this point of intersection, disequilibrium is the effect of *coincidence*. In the film's brief eighth scene, the camera reveals L-O-V-E tattooed on Preacher's knuckles as he clasps his switchblade between praying hands and thanks his god for the divine intervention: "Lord, you sure know'd what you was doin' when you put me in this very cell at this very time—a man with ten thousand dollars hid somewhere and a widow in the makin'"—the perfect plot summary for this generic hybrid. The viewer can only see such a plot-line as a sick twist of fate, an unholy coincidence. This

94 Williams, 66. It is also significant that Ben's earlier line in the scene, "And a little child shall lead them," is repeated later in Rachel's Bible stories.

over-determined moment sends the story into its second act, although the narrative punctuates the end of the first act with a short vignette featuring the home life of Bart the Hangman.

Bart, a worker within the system, is depicted as a mild casualty of social malaise and the consequences that trickle down to the family unit. (He almost seems dejected that Ben took his lucrative secret with him when Bart dropped him.) His family situation represents the consequences of the Depression for all but the wealthiest minority of families; it reinforces the themes surrounding family crisis obvious in the central characters and opens them up to social relevance. Bart's wife expresses the same concern for the family's financial welfare that tore apart the Harper household by driving Ben to theft and murder. Bart's wife believes her husband is a prison guard and he never tells her of his role in the hangings—the unsavory position he has found himself in after leaving his mining job (a job to which his wife does not want him to return). Further, the couple has two young children shown lying asleep in a shot that parallels the framing of John and Pearl in a later scene. Bart stands over his children without expression as the soundtrack brings in the children's chant of the following scene – "Hing, Hang, Hung, see what the hangman done..." – suggesting Bart's recollection of a policeman's earlier line about Ben's hanging: "They say he left a wife and two kids."

In just over twelve minutes of running time, the narrative has taken the life of a family man and murderer, granted freedom to a psychopathic killer, and questioned the conscience of the state's official 'killer.' Discursive disequilibrium is the combined effect of the force of evil, the flaws of systemic law and order, the despair of abject poverty, and

a malevolent coincidence. Rachel's extra-diegetic Bible stories in the prologue are the narrative's only clear demarcation between good and evil. The three scenes that follow the prologue complicate such a plain and simple opposition of light and dark, good and evil, and the dramatic rise of disequilibrium struggles to regain the viewer's faith in the power of love over hate.

Although I have argued that the film is centred on Preacher and the Harper family as much as John himself, the narrative fate of women – the sexual and emotional frustration/abuse endured by female or feminine characters – is as central to the film's emotional tide as it is in any melodrama. The film's most sexually repressed character is Icey Spoon—her name alone (a reference to her ice-cream vocation) suggests frigid bedroom relations. In an interview conducted by Preston Neal Jones for his book-length study of the film's production, titled *Heaven and Hell to Play With: The Filming of The Night of the Hunter*, Davis Grubb talked about Evelyn Varden as one of his favorite actors in the film:

> I thought she was perfect as Icey Spoon. She put things into that characterization which she should have got paid *extra* for... Because, she got across the very subtle way of middle-aged women who are promoting the marriage of a younger woman to an attractive male, they are themselves very sexually excited by the whole thing. It's a sixty-year-old *yenta*'s way of getting off. The way she'd look at Preacher, practically licking her lips. She did more with a little sigh...[95]

Icey is Preacher's accomplice in the sense that she renders his fatal seduction of Willa all but inevitable, even before the two sides meet. Icey's first line in the film comes shortly after Ben's hanging as she is folding napkins in the ice-cream parlor with Willa: "Willa

95 Preston Neal Jones, *Heaven and Hell to Play With: The Filming of* The Night of the Hunter (New York: Limelight Editions, 2002): 170; original emphasis.

Harper there are certain plain facts of life that add up just like two plus two makes four and one of them is this: no woman is able to raise growing youngsters alone. The Lord meant that job for *two*." Willa replies, "Icey, I just don't want a husband" and the scene cuts to an extreme-long shot of a train silhouetted against a dark sky, billowing smoke, and traveling left to right across the screen, accompanied by the score's short blast of Preacher's motif. The train shot dissolves back to Spoon's where Icey and Willa are performing another task, similarly framed in a frontal, static two-shot. The former tells the latter: "Ain't a question of wantin' or not wantin.' You're no spring chicken. You're a grown woman with two little young'ns. It's a *man* you need in the house, Willa Harper." Again, the scene cuts to a train, this time speeding directly past the camera at an oblique, low angle, spitting black smoke and screaming on the rails in harmony with the score's dark motif. To punctuate Icey's adamant advice and to foreshadow Preacher's arrival in the sleepy town, the dark train's image dissolves over a long shot of the front of the Harper home illuminated in the darkness by the gaslamp near the fence. Icey is the loudest mouthpiece for the narrative's early complication of order in the family constellation.

The most telling moment in this respect comes during the picnic scene when Icey forces a meeting of Willa and Preacher before delivering her harangue about the 'true' nature of love and sex, marriage and morality. "She's moonin' about Ben Harper," Icey begins,

> That wasn't love, that was just flapdoodle... When you've been married to a man forty years, you know all that don't amount to a hill o'beans! I been married to my Walt that long, and I swear in all that time I'd just lie there thinking about my *canning*.

The scene cuts to a reaction shot of Walt discarding his piece of chicken on the table, looking slightly embarrassed and clearly perturbed. Icey concludes her monologue by insisting, "A woman's a fool to marry for that. That's something for a man. It's all just a fake and a pipe-dream," rolling her eyes with that little sigh Grubb admires above. More than any impure sexual urges, excessive material desires, or her dead husband's crimes, it is Icey's sexual repression that kills Willa Harper; the former's vicarious sex drive delivers the latter into the duplicitous hands of Preacher Powell.

Margaret Atwood summarizes the river sequence with an illustration of Noah's Ark carrying the two innocents through the deluge that has taken the children's mother: "That this particular deluge is all mixed up with adult sexuality and also with the repression of it, is quintessentially American as well – it being the nature of Puritanism to produce a world which repudiates sexuality but is also thoroughly sexualised."[96] This contradiction is part of the essence of this and other noir/melodrama hybrids; it drives the narrative of *The Night of the Hunter* from below the plot's surface.[97] The sexual energy pervading the narrative becomes a lethal force when combined with the moral power of Christian guilt. Preacher is so easily able to harness this lethal force as a means to his evil ends because his duplicity is rooted in impotence. While maintaining the facade of a holy man, Preacher finds a release from sexual tension in unholy ways of 'love' that no mentally stable person could understand, much less accept. After reaching up with his HATE hand to hear his god's private commands, he approaches the prone Willa with his

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96 Atwood, online.

97 For example, *Leave Her to Heaven*, the subject of my second chapter, as well as *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourner, 1947), *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955).

switchblade held high in the hand of LOVE. She is blinded by the contradictions within and between Icey's loud discourse and the Puritan guilt played upon by Powell; Willa is sacrificed for the old lady's destructive repressions and Preacher's psychopathic transgressions.

In the narrative's second half, Rachel and Ruby correct the discursive terrain traversed by Icey and Willa in the film's first half. Rachel becomes a mother-figure to John, as she is to Ruby, and Ruby substitutes for Willa in the narrative's thematic treatment of love, sex, and morality. Ruby's blind desire for love is tempted by Preacher's charming deception and the girl's parallel to Willa is made apparent when the viewer hears Preacher's switchblade snap open in his pocket as Ruby fishes for one more compliment after he has already retrieved the desired information about John and Pearl. Like Willa, Ruby's ignorance nearly results in the deaths of John and Pearl. As Preacher walks away, the scene ends with Ruby's blank stare past the camera and her line, "I've been bad," a confession that recalls Willa's prayer that earlier concluded the passionless honeymoon scene as follows: "Help me to get clean so I can be what Harry wants me to be."[98] Without Rachel's intervention, Ruby's sexual energy, combined with the moral force of guilt, would make her easy prey for Powell and a shared fate with Willa.

Ruby's desperate image dissolves to a two-shot of Rachel and her oldest orphan falling into the woman's lap, crying, overwhelmed by her adolescent forays between the worlds of innocence and experience. Before the scene ends, the discursive terrain represented by Ruby expands to include the years of maternal love: "You were looking

98 Together with Ruby's "I've been bad," these are two of the very few memorable lines of dialogue written by Agee or Laughton that are not found in any form in Grubb's novel (Callow, 28)—two lines that add melodramatic, rather than personal or purely psychological, depth to both characters.

for love, Ruby, in the only foolish way you knew how. We all need love, Ruby. I lost the love of my son. I found it with you all. You're going to grow up to be a strong, fine woman. And I'm going to see to it that you do." Rachel takes over Icey's role as the narrative's vocal authority on the morality of love and sex. Whereas Icey, though perhaps good-intentioned but (likely) childless, killed Willa, Rachel proves her strength in rearing the young and impressionable girl on the edge of womanhood. Like Willa absorbing a slap to await Harry's ritual stabbing in blissful ignorance, Ruby is blinded by infatuation for Preacher. The strongest visual parallel between the two characters lies in the matching chiaroscuro pattern of Willa's last living moments and Ruby's midnight call to death when she hears Preacher singing outside the house. Unrelenting in her infatuation, Ruby stares at the courthouse after Preacher has been sentenced to death; she proclaims, "I love him. You think he's like them others. You were so mad you shot him." During the final scene between the woman and the girl, Rachel gives Ruby a broach as a consolation for her trying experiences and as a reward for life lessons learned—a symbol similar in function to John's gold pocket watch, which I will return to at the end of the following section.

The film includes only two scenes in which Willa and Preacher appear together without others: the passionless honeymoon scene and Willa's murder scene. The first scene depicts Preacher's successful manipulation of Willa's conscience and the second provides the fatal effect. In the honeymoon scene, the viewer sees Willa and her reflection in a full-length wardrobe mirror as her newlywed husband stands on the far side

of the bed, preaching about love, lust, sex, holy matrimony and child conception. Rather than any deep part of Willa's character, the mirror suggests, yet does not actually reveal, one cause – perhaps the root – of Preacher's mysterious duplicity. Nothing appears to be wrong with Willa's reflection and the man says as much. It is Preacher who is aberrant and he speaks against Willa's desire in order to cover his impotence. The narrative renders Willa's death inevitable and the scene's scarred expressionism fades to black over the image of her face. How can the viewer discern the virtue of the Puritan values in Icey's sickly-sweet sayings and Preacher's 'sermons'? The former's sexual repression betrays a subconscious agenda; the latter parrots her moralizing with faith, but only as a compensation for his impotence and vehicle of his murderous 'holy mission.' The narrative spirals downward toward grave disorder in the family constellation.

In the tent revival scene, Willa shouts to the congregation about driving Ben to theft and murder because of her desire for clothes and make-up. Immediately after she describes how the Lord told Ben to throw the money in the river, the narrative undermines this line of the religion discourse by dissolving to a close-up of scattered bills 'bleeding' out of Miss Jenny lying face down in dirt. The viewer learns of the money's actual location as the tight shot holds for six seconds before panning to Pearl's lap where she finishes cutting a bill into the shape of a girl. The rag doll is the offspring of film noir and family melodrama. It embodies the pathos of the poor, helpless child, yet its contents fuel the action and suspense of the noiresque plot elements. The money itself is not evil, but is borne of a father's desperate disregard for morality; it holds the power to fund Preacher's bloodthirsty crusade of hate or, later, Rachel's longing to raise a family

encircled by love. Miss Jenny is the epicenter of the family constellation's discursive storm of conflicting themes: innocence vs. experience, poverty and desperation vs. wealth and vitality, the naivety of makebelieve vs. the dilemmas of real power. The children's fate rests with Miss Jenny's safety and the narrative propels forward from the suspense in this scene toward the most extreme disequilibrium to come in the wake of Willa's death.

Consummating the dark tone rising from the heavy fog of Willa's last exterior shots, the murder scene begins with a long shot of Preacher standing with his back to the bed on which Willa lies with her arms crossed like a corpse in a coffin. He inquires about her knowledge of the money's location. After Willa's expressionless face absorbs Preacher's sharp slap, the scene cuts to a longer shot that reveals the full symmetry of the mise-en-scene's chiaroscuro—the film's most memorable moment of noiresque expressionism. Willa remains motionless, smiling queerly, staring into the light that casts a halo about her face and body; she delivers with an eerily quiet monotone what what will prove to be her last words. Preacher moves toward the window, extends the arm of his HATE hand to hear his god's commands before suddenly reaching into his jacket pocket to retrieve his switchblade. The strings of the waltz theme swell in unison with the rise of the phallic blade in Preacher's LOVE hand high above Willa's head. The long shot of the room cuts to a high-angle, medium-shot of Willa just before she closes her eyes to await her fate. The fatal slashing is signified with a vertical wipe from left to right across Willa's image, a transition that reveals John, Miss Jenny, and Pearl asleep in bed.

In the film's most original composition, the viewer sees Willa one final time as she rests in the Model-T Ford serving as an open coffin in her river-bottom grave. With

her eyes closed and throat 'smiling,' her hair flows in time with the score's waltz and the long fingers of seaweed surrounding her grave. Preacher's 'Leaning' hymn overlaps with the end of the underwater scene for just over ten seconds before dissolving to a shot of the killer leaning against a tree outside the Harper home in daylight. This brief scene punctuates the narrative's temporal mid-point. Both of John and Pearl's parents are dead and the discursive lines of the family constellation reach the worst state of disequilibrium in the first sequence of the narrative's second half.

In the wake of the suspense preceding the river journey, *The Night of the Hunter* fully realizes Williams's fourth principle of melodrama, summarized in "Melodrama Revised" as follows: "Melodrama involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of 'too late' and in the 'nick of time.'"[99] The significance of the film's dialectic is how it relates to the hybridity of film noir and family melodrama. *The Night of the Hunter* is not a gently frightening fairytale in the mode of the Brothers Grimm. The noiresque layers of the plot and mise-en-scene are not dedicated to serving the melodrama of a boy's fall from innocence. *The Night of the Hunter* captures the child's point of view, but the narrative also reveals, in two ways, what lies beyond its limited perspective in the world of grown-up experience and corruption. First, several of the most striking scenes in the film are not accessible to the infants, nor narrated from their perspective: the burlesque scene, the passionless honeymoon night, Willa's murder, her underwater grave, and – in between innocence and experience – Ruby's unaccompanied night in town. Second, several scenes that maintain a child's optical point-of-view include details beyond an

99 Williams, 69.

infant's total grasp—details that constitute trying experiences and compromise pure innocence. In the plot's first scene, for example, the viewer follows a child's discovery of a murdered woman. The details of the murder are obscured by a door and the narrative avoids exposition, yet the bare and crooked legs are enough to suggest a depraved combination of sex and murder—depravity that the following two scenes attribute to Preacher. Compared to interpretations of the evil father's whip in Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Preacher's switchblade is a much more obviously coded phallic weapon. Towards the film's end, the symbol gains such potency that, during the public interaction between Preacher and Ruby, the spring-released click of the concealed blade is enough to suggest the intentions of Preacher's perverse, criminal thoughts.

The film's much praised form and effect derive from the hybridity of film noir and family melodrama—specifically, how this generic hybrid creates a particular synthesis of *action* around the dark motives of evil and *pathos* around victimized innocence. Tension is relieved as the siblings escape just beyond the fatal point of Preacher's blade, but the viewer realizes that they have already lost too much to ever return to the full innocence of summer days spent playing in the Harper home's daisy-covered yard. Film noir expresses the dark nature of Preacher's character and intensifies the film's melodramatic impulse to end in a space of innocence. The consequences of failure are represented as (1) the children's melodramatic loss of innocence as they wander, tired and hungry, and (2) the noiresque loss of their lives at the hands of a psychopathic, sexually-deviant serial-killer. The river sequence images both possibilities.

If the river represents a "poetic transformation" for John and Pearl – a "healing by

nature,"[100] as Callow suggests – why do the boy's repressed feelings about his father come back so violently during the film's climactic sequence? The river is a trying experience for the siblings that deepens pathos for their condition before the climactic action of the plot's last third. It can only be a healing journey in the sense that it carries the siblings to Rachel as a source of maternal love and moral guidance. The narrative does not suggest nature as a medium of God's will. It is not the river that carries the children to the mother-figure, but the mother-figure who finds the children as they sleep in the stalled skiff. The final act begins when Lilian Gish re-enters the film as Rachel Cooper and directs the narrative back toward the prologue's space of innocence. Whereas the wretched riverside woman only had one potato to spare each of the kids, Rachel's gardens are full and healthy—she literally teaches her children how to 'bear good fruit.' She takes the siblings into her home, washes the dirt from their bodies, and gives them everything they need to grow and learn.

Considering Rachel's prominent role in narrative resolution, one must ask what her relation is to the law and religion/morality discourses in the film's final act. Rachel is a God-fearing, bible-quoting Christian who represents the virtuous discourse of the religion theme. She *is* love. Although the quality of her love reflects a sacred respect for integrity and charity, Rachel does not represent the victory in Cain and Abel's abstract struggle in the Old Testament. She is driven by her need for love and the feeling of importance acquired through the children's strength and purity of heart. While in town with her adopted children bearing the fruits of their labor, she tells the village shopkeeper,

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100 Callow, 72.

"I'm good for something in this world, and I know it, too." In the loneliness of her old age, Rachel needs to be needed. As noted earlier, she tells Ruby about the loss of her grown-up son and simply states, "Everybody needs love." Rather than law, money, or religion, the agents of equilibrium are the discursive registers of Rachel's maternal love and practical ethics. The family constellation is restored to order by the mother-substitute who represents the hope of light at the end of the longest night of the hunter—she embodies the love required by John and Pearl and the moral integrity required by Miss Jenny's contents.

Using *Way Down East* as a case study, Williams describes how melodramatic pathos is generated by a narrative suffused with "a nostalgia for lost innocence associated with the maternal."[101] Notwithstanding the narrative's prominence of thematic and emotional struggles centred around the feminine, and perhaps unlike the majority of family melodramas, *The Night of the Hunter* is about the father as much as it is about the mother. The narrative gives the siblings a mother-substitute, but it does not replace Ben. In the plot's climactic scene, Preacher's capture by the police re-enacts the events of Ben's arrest in the first act. John lets go of his hard-hearted resolve and finally cries for his father. Preacher's arrest releases the tension between desire and reality[102] by showing the former to be futile. The emotions of John's last day with his father are refracted through the actuality of the events leading to the present situation. John remembers his father's arrest and just wants him back, but he deeply realizes that it is just too late—his father is never coming back to him. He calls out to his father, runs toward Preacher, and displaces

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101 Williams, 65.
102 Williams, 69.

his emotional frustration onto the killer, hitting him with the doll and causing the money to explode from within. The boy cannot endure the parental responsibility imposed by Miss Jenny and Pearl and he cries out, "Here, here. Take it back, dad, take it back. I don't want it, dad. It's too much. Here, here." Miss Jenny's safety no longer matters to John. The doll has represented a lasting bond between father and son, a secret pact that John had made great sacrifices to maintain. Upon remembering Ben's arrest and fully understanding the loss of his father, Miss Jenny and its contents lose their importance for John and he passes out from the weight of the emotional revelation.

The suspense and uncertainty surrounding the stolen money pushes the narrative to a climax, but Preacher's noiresque plot-line ends abruptly after the secret is revealed. The remainder of the third act brings closure to the film's melodrama by restoring equilibrium to the family constellation. Immediately following the climactic moment, the law re-enters the narrative, but only after the restoration of order has been initiated by Rachel's authority. The matriarch does not call for the police until after the violent threat is removed and she prevents the cops from entering her house from concern that they will 'track dirt all over her clean floors.' In the following sequence, the court is granted no prominence in its power to condemn Preacher to death. The family home is more sacred than the courthouse and maternal love is more valued, more powerful than the official system of law and order.

Throughout the film, the mise-en-scene saturates several prominent gestures with meanings that signify moral choices, foreshadow downfall, reward virtue, and represent the repressed desires and difficult emotions beyond direct articulation by any given

character. In a way that is fundamental to melodrama, each common object and gesture interacts with the film's formal system and moves beyond the denotations of the thing itself to bring complex emotional relations to the surface. In *The Night of the Hunter*, these symbols have a particular importance in terms of how "Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue."[103] The unmistakable recognition of virtue in the film's final third comes through the apples that recall Gish/Rachel's last lines of the prologue: "Ye shall know them by their fruits." When she asks John to bring her an apple and get one for himself, Rachel's role as the boy's moral guide is crystallized. Later, in the final scene, John gives Rachel an apple as a makeshift Christmas present and the elderly lady replies, "That's the richest gift a body could have." The watch, much like the apples, expresses what John cannot articulate and what Rachel is tentative about telling him (as she earlier told Ruby): that each one cares about the other and needs a family's love. The gold pocket watch also represents a consolation for John's painful experiences in his passage toward responsibilities, obligations, and the increasing importance of the time of day. During the film's final scene, John admires his new gold pocket watch as he once did from afar in the film's first half. When the boy gazes at the watch on display in Miz Cunningham's pawn shop window, the old lady steps out to ask John, with no pretense of sincerity, "How is your poor, *poor* mother?... And did they ever find out what your father done with all that money he *stole*?" The fullest meaning of the scene lies in the fact that John, though not the viewer, knows he can buy the entire inventory of the pawn shop with the money in the rag doll Pearl is carrying beside him.

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103 Williams, 67.

The contradictions of material desires and moral necessities will begin to weigh heavy on the boy from this point. After the trial scene near the film's end, in which there is no certainty about the exposed money's final destination, Rachel hints that she is getting John a watch when someone asks him about his Christmas wishes. The question of the money is now of secondary importance, though one has reason to believe it has provided the relative affluence of the Christmas season in the Cooper home. After John receives the watch, Rachel tells him: "it'd be nice to have someone around the house who can give me the right time of day... A fella can't just go around with rundown, busted watches." As the coming-of-age process becomes comprehensible to the overwhelmed infant, John seizes from the watch some semblance of control over his days, his life, and his family; it makes him the man of the Cooper house (and not only by default, since he is the only male).[104] The watch represents domestic prosperity for John's new family, his first victories over the tribulations of growing up, and his serenity in the acceptance of Rachel as a mother-substitute.

The final sequence brings closure to the principle that "Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence;"[105] however, this closure is not without qualification. From the prologue to the Christmas scene, the narrative travels full circle back to a medium shot isolating Rachel's face in the centre of the frame and she says, "Lord, save little children... My soul is humble when I see the way little ones accept their lot. Lord, save little children. The wind blows and the rains are cold, yet they abide." The key line positions not only the children, but Rachel, too, as melodrama's victim-hero; it is

104 In the novel, John is given a mini-soliloquy as he ascends the stairs: "I ain't afraid no more! I got a watch that ticks! I got a watch that shines in the dark!" (Jones, 318).
105 Williams, 65.

the elderly mother-figure who provides for the young and innocent through her pragmatic compassion epitomized by her memorable testimonial to an owl preying on a rabbit: "It's a hard world for little things." I suggest that the narrative is more ambiguous than the hopeful final sequence suggests. After developing the evil suspense and dark gestures of the noiresque plot-line, how can the viewer wholeheartedly believe in the ultimate power of love over hate, especially since it is Preacher himself who recites the most impassioned version of "left hand/right hand," conveying a personal, primal conviction in his version of the Cain and Abel story? The dominant portion of the story follows John's fall from innocence in his struggle to rebuild his family by honoring his vow to his father, by denouncing Preacher as a step-father, and by embracing Rachel as a mother-substitute. Although the apples and the watch affirm his success in this journey – the latter a reward for passing tests to his moral strength, the former a virtuous symbol of his resistance to corruption – the final Christmas sequence, nonetheless, qualifies the prologue's biblical ideals with an inevitably lower ratio of childhood innocence to coming-of-age experience. John could grow up to be either his father, Walt Spoon, Uncle Birdie, or Preacher himself. Most significantly, the film gives us no positive image of a family man, nor any portrait of the idyllic fifties nuclear family at the centre of the ideological climate during the era of the film's release.

When Preacher's character is removed from the film as a force of evil beyond redemption, the killer himself has a minimal role in the spectacle surrounding his end. One could argue, that it has been John's story all along,[106] however, such an argument

106 See, for example, Callow, 20-21 and 76-77.

would deny the film its generic complexity and visual richness. The film is John's story, Preacher's plot, and Rachel's discourse, too. *The Night of the Hunter*'s noiresque registers evoke the emotional fallout of viewers' nights of hunters in childhood *and* adulthood—the trials of anxiety and doubt in the rites of passage through all life's stages. The narrative's noir achieves much by opening up the story beyond the focus on the children, giving it wider relevance, even while maintaining the child's perspective for the majority of the narrative. There is something that viewers of any age can relate to, something about youth and desire, love and family, growing up and growing old, as well as issues of class, gender, and morality—something that speaks to the pathos of the past, the nervous excitement of the present and uncertainty of the future.

Before the film cuts to a long shot of the snow-covered Cooper home exterior and fades to black, Rachel stops her kitchen work and, for one last time, thinks aloud about the state of childhood, telling the stillness around her, "They abide and they endure." The narrative's end, however, leaves open the question of how well the adults abide and endure. In counterpoint to the film's discourse about hard times for "little things," *The Night of the Hunter* reflects on the fear of growing old, alone and vulnerable, in an unfriendly world of grown-ups in which both the daylight and the darkness set forth threats from the emotional and physical violence of very real, grimly fatal hunters. Whether the issue is John's wish to have his father back or Uncle Birdie's pathetic attachment to his wife's portrait, the desire to reverse the irreversible or recover the irrecoverable is the pulse of the narrative's melodrama. "At its deepest level melodrama

is an expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast."[107] Rachel rescues the kids in time to save them from a tragically premature fall from innocence or, in the worst case, death. The children save her from the possibility of passing her late years in the crippling isolation of an empty farmhouse. The narrative implies that survival in the adult world requires the virtuous innocence and unconditional love of the young at least as much as infants depend on the shelter and guidance of adults. The film provides little hope that the grown-up characters, such as Uncle Birdie (whom the film leaves passed out in drunken sorrow on his houseboat's floor), will endure with the strength expected from the children. Finally, the discursive hybrid questions what hope there is for the infants if they subsist through childhood's struggles only to be imprisoned in the desperate and lonely world of the film's adult characters. *The Night of the Hunter*'s complex dialectic of pathos and action is rooted in the discrepancy between Rachel's conviction that children abide and the uncertainty that the narrative will ever return to the space of innocence established in the prologue—that even if children abide, adulthood holds no promise of better days.

At a general level, one can observe that the film's narrative follows the structure of classical and family melodrama while the visual style is noiresque. However, the film's hybridity, how the melodramatic story and noir style are put together, creates meaning beyond what either genre alone could communicate. *The Night of the Hunter* is a hybrid of noir and melodrama—neither one nor the other, but both genres (with shades of others) brought together by a rare collaboration of Hollywood talent. This transgeneric aspect

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107 Williams, 74.

greatly lends to the appeal of the film; yet this appeal is beyond the interpretive capacity of contemporary critics if they insist on discussing Hollywood classics as works of the great auteurs, as key examples of pure genres, or as somehow beyond generic conventions.

Before their dismissal of the noir aesthetic in *The Night of the Hunter*, Silver and Ward argue, "Many period films reflect an aura of ever-present evil, balanced by narrative retribution and the restoration of order. The split between *good and evil* is well defined, creating a moral stability that many noir films work against."[108] In the film's prologue the split between good and evil is well-defined – almost too well-defined to be sustained – then it is *well-complicated* by the noiresque duplicity of the plot's first sequence. The moral polarization of the melodrama is more ambiguous than it appears on the level of the children's story. Dark undertones of film noir subvert classical melodrama's ethical polarity to create the shades of irony and ambiguity common in Hollywood melodrama at the end of the studio-era. The narrative appeals to the viewer's interest with the strong moral and sexual tension running through a diversity of major and minor characters: an impotent psychopath murders lonely widows to avenge his condition and grow rich; an elderly lady married forty years finds satisfaction in pushing together a young woman and handsome 'preacher'; a desperate father robs and accidentally kills two innocent men to provide for his children; a lonely old man talks to a portrait of his long dead wife and cries into the bottom of a bottle; a naïve adolescent girl stands alone in front of a jailhouse proclaiming her love for a condemned killer who told her she was pretty; a

108 Silver & Ward, 328; emphasis added.

weathered elderly lady curses the mailbox for failing to deliver her son home to her; a young boy overwhelmed by life cries out to his dead father while running to the man who killed his mother. It is the "process of desire itself"[109] that drives the narrative toward the final sequence's qualified tone of hope—hope in grasping the nature of things in the undying truth of good vs. evil and love vs. hate. "It's a hard world for little things," and innocence must give way to experience, but fortitude carries the long night to morning's light. At the film's end, however, shadows of unresolved crises in the grown up world cast doubts on whether the passing years will strengthen or defeat the pure in heart.

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109 Neale (1980), 22.

Conclusion:

Looking Beyond Classical Hollywood's Transgeneric Cinema

The three films analysed in this study illustrate a transgeneric approach to classical Hollywood narrative in the late studio-era. I began with a discussion of a 'woman's film/noir,' then moved on to a male-centred hybrid, and concluded with an example of how noir and melodrama blend through the emotional reactions of diverse character-types in grave situations. By way of conclusion, I will review my interpretation of the three film noir/family melodrama hybrids and recast several key questions of this thesis. Is noir a style or a genre? Is melodrama a genre or something more appropriately discussed as a master genre or mode of Hollywood cinema? Most generally, how does one define *film genre*? In order to extend my position on these questions beyond my main examples, I will briefly discuss two other cross-generic films. *A Woman's Face* (George Cukor, 1941) and *Cape Fear* (J. Lee Thompson, 1962) were released a few years before and after the mid-century period of my three examples and represent the range in both form and years encompassed by the noir/melodrama hybrid. All five films speak to the primary assumptions of this study: that the melodramatic mode, in all of its historical forms, lies at the heart of classical Hollywood cinema and provides the emotional pulse for a range of genres, including film noir.

Any Hollywood film can be interpreted as a generic hybrid of aesthetic and discursive conventions. This thesis has illustrated how film noir is an essentially contradictory genre comprising both male and female-centred melodramas around the

discourses of love, family, law, morality, violence, and sexual desire. The narrative function of sexual desire is not exclusive to melodrama, but the role it plays in pathos-centred films is specific and distinct. Desire is often more than just one theme among others in the discursive constellation; it is the driving force that, in conjunction with thematics of love, disrupts and refigures equilibrium. Film noir functions, as Naremore suggests, less as a conventional genre with a consistent semantics and syntax and more as a "discursive construct" comparable to broad concepts like "classical" and "romantic."[110] It is the dark melodrama at the core of film noir that lends it the character of a "discursive construct": noiresque films are unified as an amorphous genre across the examples of the form in the generic hybrids created under the melodramatic mode. Melodramatic discourses around morality, family, and sexual desire, among other themes, combine noir's dark aesthetics with a range of other genres. For example, in Raoul Walsh's *Pursued* (1947) the melodramatic romance of unrequited desire and forbidden love connects a noiresque plot structure and western iconography. Similarly, the melodramatic mode brings together film noir's aesthetics and family melodrama's conventions in my study's central examples. Film noir lacks any singularly defining convention and there is no pure example of a noir film; yet, only the most insular theory would position noir as a style and deny its dynamic meaning as a genre.

George Cukor's *A Woman's Face* (1941), was produced four years before the subject of my first chapter in the same period as the earliest noir films (such as *The*

110 Naremore, 6.

Maltese Falcon (1941)). Through extended flashbacks, the film reveals the central character's *scarred* history while building tension between hope and frustrated desire. The narrative switches from noir to melodrama during a key moment in which the protagonist's wide hat brim moves away to display for the court and the viewer the healed beauty of Joan Crawford/Anna Holm's face. Anna immediately loses her edge as the dangerous woman of the film noir plot, compromising her agency in the narrative while enabling the resolution of disequilibrium. At this narrative mid-point, the trial judge begins narrating her story in which the man she loves tells her what to do and the boy she is hired to care for says, "you can't be difficult... you're too pretty." When scarred, Anna is the subject of her story and controls the narrative flow as the spider woman of film noir. When her scars are healed and she is made beautiful, she becomes the central figure of the film's melodramatic core as the object of desire, pushed around by everyone in her past and present. The film's hybridity falls somewhere between *Mildred Pierce* and *Leave Her to Heaven*. In a manner similar to the former, but unlike the latter, the melodramatic registers in *A Woman's Face* – a combination of romantic and family melodrama – subvert film noir; however, Joan Crawford loses her subjective position significantly earlier and more completely in this narrative than she does in *Mildred Pierce*.

My first chapter analysed the woman-centred narrative of *Leave Her to Heaven* as a hybrid that paints Technicolor melodrama over a femme fatale's dark gestures and murderous acts. In spite of the male-centred, legal discourse that frames the flashback plot, the viewer experiences the narrative through the perspective of the woman who kills

in the name of forbidden love. Ellen's position dominates all others and subverts the law's authority. When Ellen kills herself, the most severe causes of disequilibrium die with her. However, the illicit nature of her desire and the fatal power of her will dominate the flashback so strongly that she posthumously undermines the restoration of equilibrium contained in the union of the fitting romantic couple. The law discourse fails to condemn Ellen's transgressions because the film fails to articulate directly the incestuous nature of her sexual desire; the narrative can only ask the viewer to 'leave her to Heaven.'

My second chapter began with a reference to Tom Gunning's book-length study of Fritz Lang. In his chapter on *The Big Heat*, the author writes about the barren space of the house in the moving-out scene as a signifier of the emptiness that underlies the tranquility of home scenes in the first act: "Lang uncovers the hollow core of the dream of the suburban home, the centre of 50s ideology."[111] Additionally, Gunning's analysis of the Langian narrative stresses its lack of excess, its economy.[112] Conversely, I suggest domestic serenity is not a dream that Bannion abandons; it is an undying desire that drives the widower to the depths of the noiresque underworld looking for vengeance and the chance to rebuild his home. Although the film's ending closes the noiresque plot-line, the narrative's melodramatic registers generate excess in the process of desire that underlies the entire film and leaves it without a strong sense of closure. In his discussion of fifties melodrama, Elsaesser observes the following point:

> In the films of Sirk, an uncompromising fundamentally innocent energy is turned away from simple, direct fulfillment by the emergence of a conscience, a sense of

111 Gunning, 422.
112 Gunning, 409.

> guilt and responsibility, or the awareness of moral complexity... a theme which in Sirk is always interpreted in terms of cultural decadence.[113]

Although film noir can often be analysed as a deviation from classical Hollywood norms, the noir conventions in *The Big Heat* intensify family melodrama. Noir gives the melodrama a different tone than the Sirkian aesthetic; nonetheless, the narrative is comparable to conventional family melodrama in terms of its emotional irresolution and moral ambiguity.[114]

One can interpret the melodrama in Lang's film with the kind of ironic meaning that Gunning emphasizes and that is also typical of Sirkian criticism. However, as Williams insists in "Melodrama Revised," criticism of melodrama should emphasize emotional subjectivity.[115] In the section of his book, *Genre*, dealing with conventional modes of narrative address, Neale develops his argument about the prominence of desire in the melodramatic mode:

> The particularity of the address of melodrama derives from an articulation of the mechanisms of suspense basic to any narrative across a representation of the vicissitudes of (hetero)sexual desire as they, in turn, articulate with a series of discourses about class, sexuality, property and the family. The representation of desire itself engages 'directly', so to speak, the twin pleasures of narrative by giving them representation in terms of (a specific version) of desire itself. The tension between them is thereby heightened, since the wish for the narrative to continue is structured as directly in conflict with a wish for the representation of fulfillment of desire, while the wish for the narrative to end is organised in direct conflict with a pleasure in the process of desire itself. [116]

Although the opening scene of *The Big Heat* depicts the corruption of the socio-political order, the viewer's pleasure in witnessing Bannion's lonely crusade to the depths of the

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113 Elsaesser, 81.

114 With the film's degree of closure, Bannion is closer to Ethan Edwards's disposition at the end of *The Searchers* than the archetypal action hero of the fifties.

115 Williams, 42-51.

116 Neale (1980), 29-30.

underworld is created by the disruption of the family setting that makes his journey a deeply personal struggle. When Bannion finally invades the home of his criminal adversary towards the film's end, the pleasurable suspense of the process reaches a peak just before Bannion delivers his monologue about his dead wife. At this point, the tension between desire and fulfillment shifts from suspense toward the satisfaction of witnessing the start of the widower's healing process and his return to domestic serenity. However, as the family man returns to his crime-fighting position, the narrative's total restoration of equilibrium is compromised by the grave degree of Bannion's loss, the severe depths of the city's corruption, and the morally complex dynamic between the two factors.

The focus of my third textual analysis, *The Night of the Hunter*, contains a more complex narrative subjectivity than the female-dominated and male-centred forms of my first two transgeneric examples. Paul Hammond's essay, published in a 1979 issue of *Sight and Sound*, taps into the film theory of the time to offer multiple methods of interpreting the film. The author couches psychoanalytic, ideological, and textual analyses in an obliquely auteurist approach.[117] Hammond's treatment covers *empathy vs. distanciation*, the *Griffithian* influence, *excess* ("visual hyperbole,"[118] for example) and the film's multiple layers of *irony*. It seems to this reader that the key term for which Hammond searches but never pins down is *melodrama*. Writing in the late seventies

117 As Hammond moves from a narrative to a stylistic analysis, he considers the roles of Laughton and Cortez, looking at personal histories (such as the director's working relationship with Brecht), socio-political context and ideology. He writes: "Antithesis, then, is at the very heart of this tale in which good battles evil, light overcomes dark, child takes on adult. Empathy stands opposed to distanciation; 'Griffithian Pastoral' to 'German Expressionism'; elegy to irony. Or rather, the two strains overlap in a rather complex way" (108).

118 Paul Hammond, "Melmoth in Norman Rockwell Land... on *The Night of the Hunter,*" *Sight and Sound* 48, 2 (Spring, 1979): 109.

about a family-themed, though not woman-centred, narrative, Hammond's piece is a symptom of his era's perspective on melodrama's place in film criticism. More significantly, the article is a testament to the layered richness of the film, its timeless capacity to garner praise while inspiring wonder, even doubt, about its workings. Developing his argument, Hammond explains the following:

> If *Hunter* relies on empathy, it also relies on distanciation. We are struck by contrasting aesthetics in use; we aren't sure which basket to put our eggs in. There are basically three aesthetics in use: 'Griffithian Pastoral' and 'German Expressionism', supplemented by contemporary Hollywood film practice.[119]

Perhaps Hammond has good reason for missing the melodrama at work in the narrative and eschewing notions of genre altogether: the film is beyond the genre theory he had at his disposal, theory that Neale published the year following Hammond's *Sight and Sound* piece. Translating Hammond's astute observations – whether it is "two overlapping strains"[120] or 'three contrasting aesthetics' – into the current vocabulary of genre theory, *The Night of the Hunter* is classical melodrama filtered through the conventions of film noir and family melodrama—the "contemporary Hollywood film practice" to which Hammond refers above.

Silver and Ward conclude their brief note on Laughton's film by labeling it "...a classic example of 'American gothic' filmmaking":

> Some of the ambiance of film noir is present; but the ultimately nightmarish plot demands a sense of salvation because Harry Powell is too concrete a force of evil. Accordingly, Rachel, the old woman who intercedes on behalf of the children, is an archetype of goodness. In this context, even the visual richness of Stanley Cortez's camerawork, ranging from expressionistic lighting and stark imagery, draws *Night of the Hunter* away from the noir world. Violent, grotesque, nightmarish, decadent, and yet *not hopeless*, *The Night of the Hunter* employs the

119 Hammond, 108.
120 Hammond, 108.

> elements of noir film-making without exploring the existential core of the cycle.[121]

Associating post-war realism with noir is an unnecessarily myopic version of what constitutes the mid-century Hollywood genre. Paul Schrader, among others, cites the realist period of film noir (1945-'49) as one third of the most generally accepted noir corpus (1941-'58).[122] Additionally, it is weak to argue that a happy ending precludes categorization in the noir genre. If narrative closure that inverts the hopeless or cynical tone of film noir removes a film from the genre, it is interesting to question how a feature like *Key Largo* finds an entry in Silver and Ward's *Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* while *The Night of the Hunter* does not.

The Night of the Hunter falls outside the tried and tested systems of Hollywood film critics and historians. Critics such as Silver and Ward, Hammond, and David Thomson have registered a range of theories to discuss the film, including star persona, literature/film adaptation, auteurism, and queer theory. It strikes me as odd that a film with such a rich diversity of conventional aesthetics has been neglected by genre critics. Some of these writers, especially the reviewers at the time of the film's release, likely did not have film noir in their vocabulary, let alone their critical toolbox, and certainly would not have been inclined to compare the black-and-white film to the lurid Technicolor melodrama of the fifties. As the film can be considered a Hollywood classic, it would be negligent to ignore its strongly noiresque elements and melodramatic impulses. In recent years, especially since the film's 1999 re-release on DVD, there has been an effort by

121 Silver & Ward, 330; emphasis added.
122 Paul Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," in Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds. *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996): 53-64.

several critics and academics, such as Callow and Jones, to redeem the film after its initial box-office failure, luke-warm critical reception, and years of cult status at retrospective festivals around the world. This work has been strong, but little has been done in the way of discussing the film as something other than the arty creation of an eccentric actor turned one-time director. I have argued that the film's appeal lies in its transgeneric conventions as much as in its heavy stylization and connection to Laughton and Mitchum. Rather than defying convention, the film combines conventional aesthetics to create a transgeneric work that recalls both the classical melodrama of Griffith's era and resonates with film noir/family melodrama hybrids of Hollywood in the forties and fifties.

Perhaps the most interesting question one can ask about a film like *The Night of the Hunter* is the following: how does the crossing of discursive registers in the film's constellation change the theoretical conventions of each genre in the hybrid? As a mix of film noir and family melodrama, *The Night of the Hunter* is a unique product of the melodramatic dialectic. The narrative is a synthesis of, on the one hand, the virtuous actions of the morally pure and young at heart that is compromised, on the other hand, by the hopelessness cast over the narrative by pathos for the film's weak adult characters. The pleasure of the noiresque process of desire darkly intensifies and complicates the pleasure of fulfillment and possibility of closure within the melodrama mode.

My final example of noir/melodrama hybridity, *Cape Fear* (J. Lee Thompson, 1962), was produced a few years after the decade of cinema from the mid-forties to the mid-fifties represented by my three central cases. The film is evidence of the noiresque

shadows that languished in mainstream cinema after the end of film noir proper. Gregory Peck plays a small town trial lawyer with a loving wife, a teenage daughter, and a nice home in the suburbs. A full-length analysis would question the discursive relationship between law, paternal love and the threat embodied by Robert Mitchum's dark character. Which discourses represent the disruption and refiguration of equilibrium in the narrative? In his comparison of the original *Cape Fear* and the Scorsese remake, Marc Raymond dismisses the earlier film as "simply the story of a psychotic terrorizing an innocent family."[123] He later elaborates by explaining, "Scorsese has crossed the tensions and anxieties of the family melodrama (marital tension, parent-child discord, sexual repression) with the thematics of the horror film, with its multi-layered repressions such as female sexuality, the proletariat, and children."[124] I suggest that the original *Cape Fear* is not only a sophisticated hybrid of the noir thriller and family melodrama, but that its transgeneric subtlety makes it more effective than Scorsese's nineties remake in which sex and violence operate more on the level of spectacle for its own sake. Like *Leave Her to Heaven*, the original *Cape Fear* employs noiresque aesthetics to bring to the surface unspeakable tensions within the seemingly idyllic interior of domestic melodrama. The most transgressive of such tensions is the sexual frustration the father feels in the presence of his growing, teenage daughter—perversions of sexual desire projected onto Robert Mitchum's psychotic character who, unlike in *The Night of the Hunter*, harbours sexually illicit intentions toward the innocence of youth. Interpreted as a noir/melodrama hybrid, *Cape Fear* is commonplace evidence of my argument that the majority of film

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123 Marc Raymond, *Martin Scorsese and American Film Genre* (M.A. Thesis, Ottawa: Carleton Univeristy, 2000): 84.
124 Raymond, 85.

noir in the late-studio era cannot exist without the melodramatic mode. The noir narrative is often characterized by how it directly articulates the kinds of dark discourses languishing in the full-colour mise-en-scene of more conventional melodrama. That is to say that noir would be an utterly amorphous genre without melodrama's dialectic of pathos and action and its thematic play of good and evil.

Underlying the central assumptions of my arguments and analysis have been several related kinds of questions. First, if classical Hollywood cinema can be conceptualised as transgeneric, what is the relationship between popularly designated 'male' and 'female' genres? Further, what is the dominant tone of discourses around the family in the cinema of the late Hollywood studio-era? If melodrama in all its various forms is a fundamental mode of Hollywood cinema, is there a specific genre of passion-centred melodrama that appeals to a masculine sensibility, such as war films or gangster films? How do film noir's conventions relate to family, romantic, and psychological registers within the melodramatic mode? Finally, does film noir's diversity of forms contain what one could discuss as 'masculine melodrama'?

This last possibility is precisely what Frank Krutnik proposes, almost as an after-thought, to begin the conclusion of his book-length study of film noir, genre, and masculinity titled *In a Lonely Street*:

> Just as the dramatic representation of the realm of women – issues of family, home, romance, motherhood, female identity and desire – has been approached (by the film industry and by film critics) in terms of the generic category of the 'women's picture' melodrama, one could consider the 'tough' thriller as representing a form of 'masculine melodrama.' By setting in play scenarios of male alienation, victimisation, fatalistic despair and romantic obsession etc., the

> 'tough' thriller offered an engagement with, and, albeit, in a disguised manner, an acknowledgment of, a contemporary destabilisation of masculinity in both its psychic and cultural spheres of determination. These films trace the disjunctions within and between masculine identity and social authority, often uniting the two in the form of sexual transgression.[125]

Many noir narratives centre on a male protagonist's violent actions and cathartic outbursts, whether anti-social or virtuous; this type of noir can be compared to pathos-centred melodramas due to the sympathy elicited by the moral compromise of the anti-hero's masculinity. Nonetheless, though I appreciate the intention of Krutnik's observations, the idea of categorizing noir films as 'male-weepies' runs counter to my contention that noir lacks any singularly defining features, especially in light of my analysis of *Leave Her to Heaven*, a decidedly noiresque film with no pretense of male subjectivity. The feminist discourse that defined the woman's film in film studies since the mid-seventies has at once demonstrated the demeaning connotations of the category and its importance as a historical representation of changes in female viewer's socio-political status. The question to leave open beyond the limits of this study asks what function is served by the dialectic of pathos and action in film noir's male-centred crisis and victimization. On the topic of the popular distinctions between woman's films and male genres, Neale makes the following observation:

> While it is true that the cinematic institution has itself tended to categorise certain of its genres in this way, and while it has often evaluated the market for its product in such terms, it is nevertheless the case that it has always, also, sought to cater for *both* sexes, whatever the intended audience might be.[126]

Finally, I would simply like to raise the likelihood that many male viewers identify with the melodramatic subjectivity of women-centred films just as female viewers may shift

125 Krutnik, 164.
126 Neale (1980), 56.

among a range of viewing positions in film noir.

My position in this thesis recognizes the necessity of mutually exclusive categories and generic conventions for the production, distribution, reception, and study of Hollywood cinema. The overarching question, however, is simply stated: why do we categorize Hollywood films the way we do? What is the value of our convenient place-holders, our critical boundaries, and how do they limit the creation, interpretation and analysis of mainstream films and mass culture? What is the ideal balance between definitive borders and interdisciplinary principles? As these related kinds of questions summarized here resonate throughout this study, nowhere have I proposed a new generic category to label the noir/melodrama hybrid; neither have I detailed any kind of hierarchical system for my assumption that melodrama lies at the root of Hollywood cinema's non-comic genres. By focusing on the film noir/family melodrama hybrid at the end of Hollywood's studio-era and the beginning of post-classicism, I have supported a perspective on mainstream narrative that avoids gender-casting generic films. Hollywood films should be free from the unnecessary adherence to traditional generic boundaries if we are to move toward a fuller understanding of Hollywood as an institution of global society and melodrama as a modern or postmodern mode of mass culture.

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