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The Evolution of the Femme Fatale

The Femme Fatale. The femme fatale has been a quintessential character in film noir, captivating audiences with her seductive allure and cunning intelligence. The femme fatale presents a unique challenge to male protagonists and is often the catalyst for their downfall. Over the years, the femme fatale has evolved, undergoing many changes, reflecting the cultural shifts and societal norms of each given era.

For starters, we're going to begin with defining film noirs. Film noir stems from French origins, meaning "black film," and depicts dark, bleak, cynical worldviews often painting a gloomy pessimistic environment. Film noirs traditionally feature a leading male protagonist, usually a hard-boiled detective type, based in a labyrinthian urban landscape who finds themselves caught up in a complex plot surrounding crime, deception, and betrayal. In addition, the femme fatale was an integral part of this world, this dangerous and alluring woman who uses her sexuality to manipulate and control men.

One of the earliest examples of the femme fatale can be seen in the film *Double Indemnity*. Phyllis is introduced to the audience as a bored and unhappy wife who approaches insurance salesman Walter with a proposition to help her murder her husband and collect on his life insurance policy. From the moment she appears on screen, Phyllis exudes a sense of seductive danger. She is alluring and mysterious, with a sultry voice and a smoldering gaze that

immediately captures Walter's attention. I mean, her first appearance is her just out of the shower, this setup itself is screaming for something to happen between the two characters.

One of the key characteristics of Phyllis as a femme fatale is her manipulation of Walter. She uses her sexuality and charm to lure him into her scheme, playing on his desire for adventure and excitement. Despite her apparent vulnerability and neediness, Phyllis is clearly in control of the situation, using Walter's attraction to her to get what she wants. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that she is not simply just a heartless seductress. She is a woman who has been trapped in an unhappy marriage and is looking for a way out. This adds a layer of complexity to her character. Another key aspect of Phyllis as a femme fatale is her intelligence. She is a master of deception, manipulating not just Walter, but also other characters in the film, including her own step-daughter. She's a woman who knows what she wants and is willing to go to great lengths to obtain it. Phyllis Dietrichson is a classic example of a typical femme fatale archetype, representing the danger and allure that often accompanies female sexuality in film noir. We can use Phyllis as an example going forward when looking at further examples of femme fatales in film noirs.

For our next example of the femme fatale, we're going to look at *The Maltese Falcon*. The character of Brigid O'Shaughnessy from *The Maltese Falcon* is a classic example of the femme fatale archetype. Brigid is introduced as a mysterious and alluring woman who hires private detective Sam Spade to help her recover a valuable statue known as the Maltese Falcon. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Brigid is not what she seems, and her true motivations are revealed to be much more complex. One of the defining traits of Brigid's character as a femme fatale is her ability to manipulate the men around her. She uses her sexuality and charm to get what she wants, but at the same time, she is careful not to reveal too much about herself or

her true intentions. This creates a sense of intrigue and mystery around her character, making her a compelling figure for both the other characters in the film and the audience; this is the typical idea when most think of the femme fatale, but one aspect that sets her apart is her vulnerability. Despite her apparent confidence and self-assurance, it becomes clear as the film progresses that she is deeply troubled and haunted by her past. This adds a layer of depth to her character and makes her more sympathetic, even as she continues to manipulate those around her. At the same time, however, Brigid remains a dangerous and unpredictable figure. She is willing to do whatever it takes to get what she wants, including murder and betrayal. Brigid O'Shaughnessy is a complex and multifaceted character who embodies many of the key traits of the femme fatale archetype. She is both alluring and dangerous, vulnerable and manipulative, making her a fascinating femme fatale that essentially starts the gradual change towards more complexities seen within this archetype.

Phyllis Dietrichson and Brigid O'Shaughnessy are both perfect examples of the femme fatale, but what's different and similar between the two? For starters, Phyllis leans way more into the cold-heartedness trait compared to Brigid. Phyllis is aware of the power she holds over Walter and proceeds to manipulate him into doing things for her; she's willing to do whatever it takes. Brigid, on the other hand, kinda falls more under the category of circumstance, however, she still does lie and manipulates to get what she ultimately wants. Both of these femme fatales utilize their allure to achieve what they ultimately want at the end of the day; Phyllis being insurance money, while Brigid wants to not split the money and not go to jail. What's interesting to note is the consequences and fates of both these characters. Phyllis is caught and brought to justice while Brigid is kinda just left to walk away with what she's done, leaving a more ambiguous ending. Something important to note is how as the times progress, so do the

qualifications of the femme fatale itself. At first, you'd traditionally categorize the femme fatale as a cold-hearted woman who will do whatever it takes to achieve her goals, to a more defined character with deeper complexities. As the years progressed forward, film noir progressed forward, and so did the femme fatale.

The femme fatale began to take on a more dangerous and unpredictable edge. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, the femme fatale, Lily Carver was portrayed as a cold-blooded killer, capable of extreme violence and brutality. Lily Carver is introduced as a hitchhiker who crosses paths with the film's protagonist, Mike Hammer. From their first encounter, it is clear that Lily is not to be trusted. She is evasive about her past and her intentions, and she seems to have a hidden agenda. However, Hammer is drawn to her beauty and her flirtatious demeanor, and he becomes obsessed with uncovering her secrets. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Lily is involved in a dangerous conspiracy involving stolen nuclear material. Lily uses her sexuality to control Hammer and other male characters, however, Lily is not simply a victim of circumstance. She is a willing participant in the criminal activities that surround her, and she is not above using violence and intimidation to get what she wants. In conclusion, Lily Carver represents the archetypal femme fatale of film noir. Her beauty and charm are used to manipulate the men around her, leading them to make dangerous decisions and putting their lives in peril.

In comparison to the previous two femme fatales we've looked at so far, Phyllis and Brigid, we yet again have another remarkable femme fatale that challenges what we previously considered the norm for this archetype. For starters, compared to the other two, Lily isn't a "victim" of circumstance, however, she's actively aware of her situation and was an active participant of the crime surrounding her. Lily is a femme fatale that doesn't thirst for greed like the other two, however, she thirsts for power. This is a femme fatale who is actively a part of the

crime that surrounds the plot and actively wants to continue being involved in it, setting her apart from the other two. Lily isn't a victim of circumstance seeking a means out, she wants to stay exactly where she's at using her sexuality and allure to manipulate men. If you think about it, Lily is essentially a victim of the patriarchy, having to use her sexuality as a means of survival in a world dominated by men. On the other hand, she is a powerful and dangerous figure, capable of manipulating and destroying those around her. I think this makes her very interesting and sets her apart from the other two femme fatales.

One final note I'd like to mention about these three examples of femme fatales is the idea that as time progressed, all three of these women have nuance to their character, their story isn't just black and white, but, it's gray. You could argue that Phyllis in a twisted way is justified for wanting her husband dead; she's a victim of these societal pressures and expectations of having to be reliant on a man for financial stability and security. You could say that Brigid is justified in her deception; she's a victim of societal pressures and expectations of needing to be reliant on a man for her safety and security overall. You could argue that Lily was justified in her hunger for power as traditionally men are in control everywhere around her. You see what I'm getting at? The femme fatale is a trait that explores an underlying issue with women's rights and how through different means, these women are cunning enough to take their own lives into their own hands creating what we know as the traditionally known femme fatale.

Given that we've now broken down the femme fatales of three noir films, something to note is that the femme fatale is an archetype that is rooted to the culture and era in which the film originates from. By the 1960s, the femme fatale had slowly begun to become less prominent. The cultural shifts of the time, including the rise of feminism made it difficult to continue portraying the typical portrayal of women as dangerous and manipulative figures as this proved problematic

and would contradict or challenge feminism at the time. However, the femme fatale and its underlying messaging proved itself as a lasting impact on pop culture, inspiring countless imitators and in a way, influencing the portrayal of female characters in film and television for years to come.

Today, I personally don't hear much of the femme fatale in my discussions regarding film or other means of media, however, it's still a notable archetype in pop culture, despite undergoing changes to reflect modern societal norms. In recent years, the femme fatale has become a more complex and nuanced character, with motivations that go beyond her sexuality. For example, one show I can think about within recent times is Marvel's *Jessica Jones*, where we see a hybrid of the typical hard-boiled detective archetype and femme fatale archetype hybrid with our protagonist. We see a female protagonist who contains many of the characteristics of the femme fatale, including intelligence, seductiveness, and willingness to use violence. However, they are considered more than these traditionally defined traits, also being portrayed as flawed, three-dimensional characters, with their own desires and motivations that go beyond their relationship with male characters. I feel this distinction is important to note as what we might've considered as the femme fatale has now evolved past these originally defined traits.

In conclusion, the evolution of the femme fatale in noir films reflects the changing attitudes and cultural shifts of the time. From her origins as a dangerous and seductive figure in the 1940s and 1950s, to leaning towards a more sympathetic portrayal in the 1960s, and her modern-day evolution as a complex and nuanced character who can lead their own film. The femme fatale has remained an enduring archetype in film noirs and pop culture as a whole. While her influence may have declined in recent years, her impact on the portrayal of female characters in film and television remains significant, and her legacy continues to be felt today.

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