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„A Comparison between the Representation of the Femme Fatale in Film Noir of the 1940s and Neo-Noir Hollywood of the 2010s"

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Yuliia Tverdun

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Introduction

In the past few years, social media have served as the primary platform for showcasing societal interests and concerns by using songs, films, and poetry to depict a specific concept, comment on a particular problem, or create a new trend. David Fincher's 2010 film *Gone Girl* was recently used extensively on the social media platform TikTok. As represented by Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, TikTok sounds incorporating lines from the film combined with music became a means to depict a montage of the movie scenes or represent creators pertaining to the film's themes.

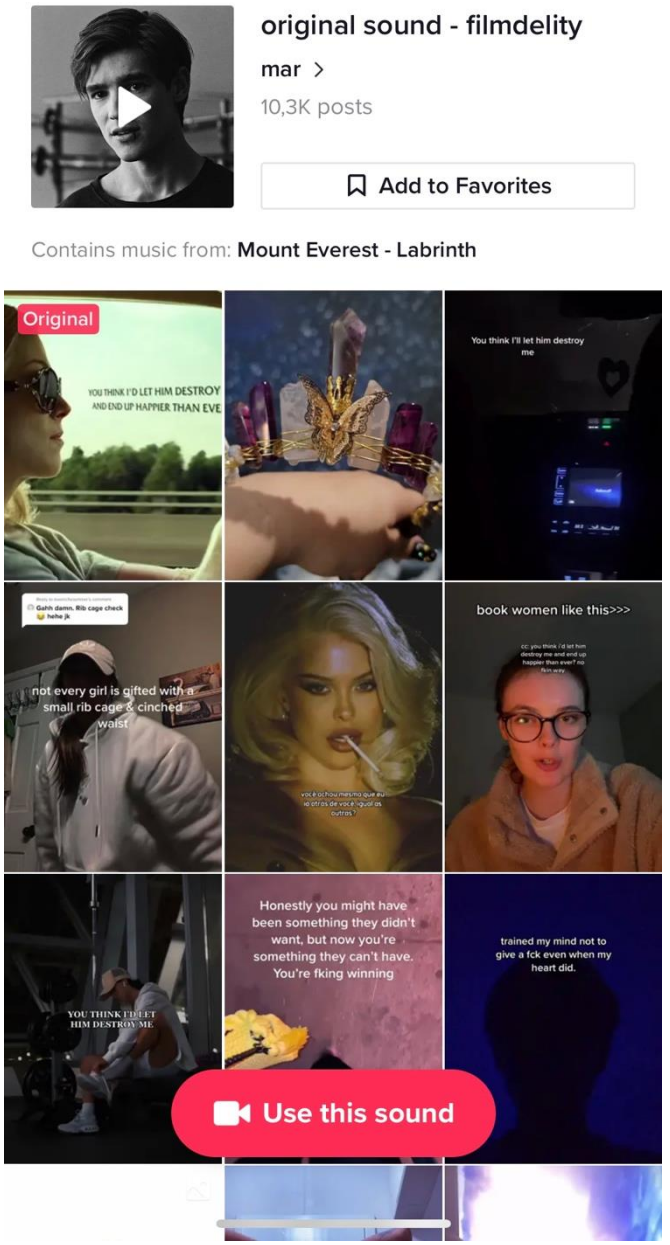

Fig. 1. TikTok videos inspired by *Gone Girl* 1

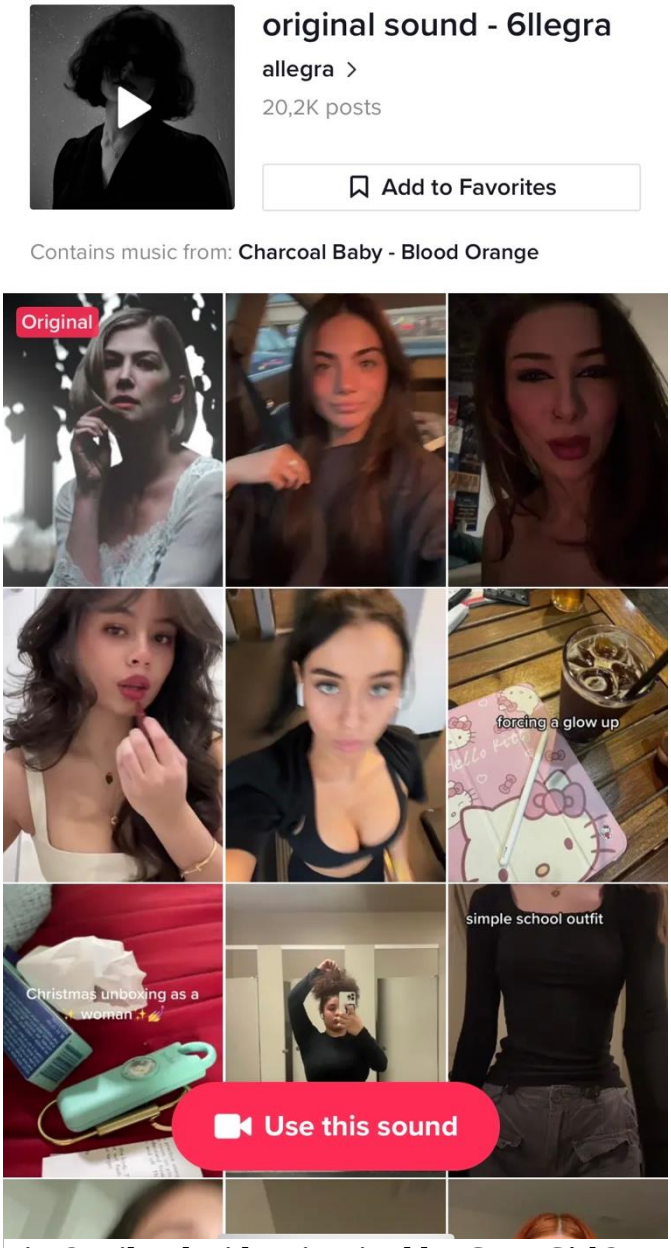

Fig. 2. TikTok videos inspired by *Gone Girl* 2

In the examples shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, the songs are combined with the phrase, “You think I’d let him destroy me and end up happier than ever? No fucking way. He doesn’t get to win!” used in *Gone Girl* during Amy’s infamous monologue. Thousands of videos have been created using the sounds, with some of them receiving more than two hundred thousand likes. The question of what led to the resurgence of *Gone Girl* almost ten years after its debut is what led me to this project. The videos replicate the line spoken by Amy in the scene demonstrating her hatred towards her husband as she embarks on her revenge; therefore, I believe that it is the figure of the neo-noir femme fatale that has attracted the attention of social media.

During the film noir period, the femme fatale was a prominent figure, subsequently transforming into the neo-noir femme fatale, which continues to exist in contemporary films. Typically, a film noir contains an intricate murder, a mystery to solve, a convoluted series of events, and an alluring femme fatale whose arrival on screen prompts the beginning of the events. Film noir and neo-noir contain a number of different themes, the majority of which reflect the world of betrayal, unfairness, and ill intentions. However, an eminent space is typically reserved for the femme fatale, whose attractiveness, intelligence, and cunningness are revealed throughout the films. The purpose of this research is to compare the portrayal of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale, separated by fifty years. Two 1940s noir films, *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity*, as well as two 2010s films, *Gone Girl* and *Promising Young Woman*, are analyzed. Even though *Promising Young Woman* was released at the beginning of 2020, its production and filming occurred in the preceding decade, therefore I consider it a 2010s film. The movies chosen for the analysis of 1940s noir are some of the most recognizable examples of the genre since “*The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Laura* were all box-office successes from major studios, nominated for Academy Awards and well regarded by critics” (Scheibel 317). They were selected for the analysis for being the most illustrative examples of the noir aesthetic. *Gone Girl* was also picked due to its popularity, as both the novel and the film based on it, were immensely renowned at the time of their release. *Promising Young Woman* is the least well-known film on the list; since it was produced a few years ago, it was chosen as a representation of the most recent developments in the femme fatale portrayal. Additionally, it contains similar themes to *Gone Girl*, such as betrayal, rape, and retribution.

Before conducting an analysis, it is necessary to define the film's plot in order to highlight the most significant events. In *The Maltese Falcon*, private investigators Sam Spade and Miles Archer welcome young and lovely Ruth Wonderly into their office. She requires their

assistance in finding her sister, who, she claims, was seduced by an unreliable man named Floyd Thursby. Archer offers to aid in the search for her sister. However, later that evening, the police notify Spade that Archer and Thursby have been shot. Sam begins to unravel the complex chain of events that led to his colleague's death. He meets his client again, and she discloses that she lied and that her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy. She also reveals that Thursby was her lover; he betrayed her and probably murdered Archer. Spade encounters Joel Cairo in his office, who promises him $5,000 to find a statue of a bird. O'Shaughnessy's unease when Spade recounts the events to her shows that she knows Cairo. During a meeting organized by Sam, Cairo becomes irritated when O'Shaughnessy declares that the "Fat Man" is in San Francisco. Later Spade is introduced to the "Fat Man", who explains the history of a precious statue of the Maltese Falcon. After some investigation, Sam discovers the statue. When he returns to his office, O'Shaughnessy, Cairo, and others are there waiting. Upon examining the statue, they determine that it is a forgery. After they leave, Spade calls the police to report their crimes. Then Spade immediately confronts O'Shaughnessy, informing her that he is aware she murdered Archer in order to implicate Thursby. She acknowledges her guilt but begs Spade not to tell the police. Spade declines, despite his affection for O'Shaughnessy.

In *Double Indemnity*, an insurance salesman named Walter Neff sits in his office with a wound. He dictates a confession to his colleague and close friend, Barton Keyes. He reveals how he meets beautiful Phyllis Dietrichson when visiting her husband to renew insurance policy. They flirt, and Phyllis hints at purchasing accident insurance without her husband's knowledge. Walter understands that Phyllis is planning a murder and immediately leaves. Phyllis later visits Walter to discuss her scheme again. Dietrichson is duped into signing what he believes to be a renewal. The policy features a double indemnity clause that pays double in the event of a rare accidental death. When Mr. Dietrichson goes to a college reunion, Walter conceals himself in the car, murders him, and then goes into a train pretending to be Mr. Dietrichson. He exits the train at a predetermined location in order to meet Phyllis and drag Mr. Dietrichson's body onto the rails. The company's president feels that the death was a suicide, but Keyes rejects this suggestion. Keyes explains to Walter his belief that Phyllis had an accomplice who murdered Mr. Dietrichson for the insurance money. However, he lacks evidence. Lola, the victim's daughter, informs Walter that she believes her stepmother Phyllis is responsible for her father's death. Phyllis was the nurse of Lola's mother, who also died under dubious circumstances. Walter begins spending time with Lola, initially to prevent her from reporting her concerns to the police, and then out of guilt and sympathy. Keyes discovers a

witness who claims the train passenger was younger than the deceased man. Lola informs Walter that her boyfriend, Nino Zachette, has been secretly seeing Phyllis. Walter confronts Phyllis and informs her that he is aware of her relationship with Zachette. Phyllis shoots Walter once but is unable to shoot again, understanding that she cares about someone other than herself. Walter disregards Phyllis's revelation and shoots her. He drives to the office and starts his confession. Keyes unexpectedly enters the office, then Walter collapses in Keys's arms as they wait for the police.

In *Gone Girl*, Amy Elliot Dunne is reported missing on her fifth wedding anniversary. Amy was the inspiration for her parents' popular children's book, *Amazing Amy*; therefore, her disappearance garners media attention. The detectives find a cleaned bloodstain in the kitchen, which indicates murder. Nick is suspected of the murder due to his lack of concern about his wife's disappearance. Over the course of the movie, detectives find more evidence of Nick's guilt, such as financial problems, faithlessness, pregnancy, as well as Amy's diary, which details the marriage's disintegration and her growing fear of Nick's temper. Even though Nick denies those details, almost everyone around him, including his twin sister Margo, is convinced of his guilt. In the middle of the movie, it is revealed that Amy is alive since, after discovering Nick's infidelity, she orchestrated her disappearance to frame her husband. She distorted her relationship with Nick in her diary, befriended her neighbor in order to tell her stories about Nick's furious nature and stole the urine to the alter pregnancy results. She also splashed and cleaned her own blood in the kitchen. Her end goal is to see Nick executed for her murder, and then she intends to commit suicide. Nick comes to realize Amy's scheme and convinces Margo of his innocence. He hires Tanner Bolt, a lawyer who defends men accused of murdering their wives, and together they work on a strategy to reveal the truth about Amy's disappearance. Amy asks her ex-boyfriend Desi for help after her neighbors in the motel rob her. Nick comes on a talk show defending his innocence and apologizing for his inadequacies, in order to urge Amy to come home. After watching it, Amy forgives Nick, slices Desi's neck, and returns home covered in blood, which clears Nick's charges and portrays Desi as a psychopath. Nick intends to leave Amy, but Amy announces she is pregnant. Even though Nick abhors his marriage, he agrees to become a faithful and doting partner for his child's future. The couple then announces their impending parenthood on television.

In *Promising Young Woman*, Cassandra "Cassie" Thomas, formerly a prospective medical student, now works in a small coffee shop and lives with her parents, having no apparent ambitions or hobbies. The only thing she devotes her time to is going to bars and clubs to imitate

intoxication and confront men who want to take advantage of her state. This is caused by the tragedy in Cassie's life since her friend Nina was raped by their classmate Alexander "Al" Monroe years ago. Al faced no repercussions for his actions, but Nina was devastated and dropped out of medical school. One day Cassie encounters her former classmate Ryan in a coffee shop, who informs her about Al's success and impending marriage. Enraged by this information, Cassie plans to punish Al and other people involved in the incident. She visits her former friend Madison, who claimed that the rape was Nina's fault; Dean Walker, who dismissed Nina's accusations; Jordan Green, a lawyer who coerced Nina into dropping charges. Cassie prepares individualized punishments for each of them because, except for Jordan, none of them feels remorseful for their actions. After talking to Nina's mom, Cassie chooses to forgo her revenge plan and begins a relationship with Ryan, with whom she has developed a close friendship. However, one day, distressed Madison brings a recording of Nina's rape, where Cassie recognizes Ryan as a bystander. She resumes her revenge and demands the location of Al Monroe's bachelor party from him, threatening to send the video to his patients. Cassie arrives at the bachelor party dressed as a striptease dancer and drugs Al's friends. When she and Al are upstairs, she handcuffs him to the bed, revealing her identity. As she takes a scalpel to curve "Nina" on his chest, Al manages to free one hand and overpowers Cassie, suffocating her with a pillow. In the morning, he and his friend burn Cassie's body. A few days later, at Al's wedding, the police arrive to arrest him and his friend for murder. As it turns out, Cassie provided Jordan Green with instructions in the event of her disappearance. In the last scene of the movie, Ryan witnesses police arresting his friends as Cassie's scheduled messages arrive, signed with her and Nina's names.

Film noir has been extensively researched, similarly film neo-noir has gained considerable research attention in recent years. However, to date, scant attention has been paid to a comparison of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale, constituting a research gap. The thesis poses the question of how the elements of the femme fatale's plot position and agency were portrayed in 1940s film noir and 2010s film noir and how those changes fit the societal constraints of the selected time periods. I have chosen these components as the focus of my thesis because they have a significant impact on how the characters are portrayed on screen and how the audience perceives them. Moreover, they are the ones where the change in characters' portrayal is the most drastic. The comparative approached is used to effectively illustrate the major points that underwent changes. The research consists of three chapters. The first chapter serves to establish theoretical understanding of film noir and neo-noir as well as the character

of the femme fatale and neo-noir femme fatale. Moreover, it explains how the films analyzed fit into that category, highlighting the elements of *Gone Girl* and *Promising Young Woman* that characterize them as neo-noirs. The chapter presents the key elements of film noir as well as the influences contributing to its appearance. Then, the femme fatale's distinguishing features are described. Film neo-noir is explained in terms of its longevity and self-awareness of the topic it relies on. Similarly, the neo-noir femme fatale is presented in her connection to various transgressive female figures.

The second chapter represents the notion of flat and round characters established by Forster. The femme fatale and the male protagonist are discussed in that context. Several criteria of the flat and round characters are established, which are the narrative elements that contribute to favoring one character's point of view as well as the background information about the characters. After that, the chapter presents the concept of feminism and how it influenced the representation of the female characters, in particular the neo-noir femme fatale. The neo-noir femme fatale's place in the plot is analyzed through the same framework as the femme fatale's; however, some new concepts are introduced, namely the concept of anti-herione and how it is reflected in the neo-noir femme fatale's depiction and eventual fate. The representation of the neo-noir femme fatale in the 2010s is repeatedly contrasted with her predecessor's place in the plot.

In chapter three, the femme fatale is analyzed in terms of her agency in film noir and neo-noir and how it is represented through her action or inaction in the plot. It is revealed how the concepts of knowledgeability, desire, and fate contribute to the representation of agency and how they are transformed to reflect the neo-noir femme fatale's agency. This chapter also analyzes the dichotomy of a "good" and a "bad" woman represented in film noir and challenged in film neo-noir.

1. Theorizing Noir and the Femme Fatale

To present a comprehensive analysis of the chosen points, it is first necessary to define some theoretical concepts. This chapter showcases the features constituting film noir and neo-noir as well as presenting the figure of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale.

1.1 Film Noir's Origins and Features

Film noir is now generally accepted as one of the most significant movie genres and is regarded as "an object of beauty" in American cinematography (Vernet 1). While being a quintessential part of film history right now, at its start it "was [practically] unknown in the US during the 1940s and 1950s" (Tyrer 103). Surprisingly, despite the fact that film noir has been a staple of American cinema, French scholars were the first to define it (hence the French name). One of the first works on film noir, *Panorama du film noir américain* by Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, was published in 1955 and is now considered a baseline for all other studies of noir (Naremore 19). As Marc Vernet rightfully remarks, "[T]he Americans made it, and then the French invented it" (1). This is merely the first instance of film noir being a mixture of both foreign and domestic influences. As scholars explain it, film noir is "a synthesis of hard-boiled fiction and German expressionism" (Naremore 9), as well as a set of "certain visual and narrative traits, including low-key photography, images of wet city streets, pop-Freudian characterizations, and romantic fascination with femmes fatales" (Naremore 9). Film noir has been extensively shaped by the mood of the time, which was affected by the crumbling economy as well as the repercussions of World War II since "the feelings of loss and alienation expressed by the characters in film noir can be seen as the product both of postwar depression and of the reorganisation of the American economy" (Harvey 39). Additionally, film noir also arose in the time of popularization of Freud psychoanalysis that allowed it to reflect on hidden fears or desires (Dickos 8). In other words, film noir originated as a combination of a mood prevalent in American society during the late 1930s and 1940s, some artistic elements of European filmmaking, and features of American literature and photography to "wipe off the shiny veneer of truth and sanity in American cinema and culture" (Turner 34).

Much has been said and written about film noir. Over the last couple of decades, film noir has been intensively researched in an effort to shed light onto its various facets, such as its socio-economic implications (see Broe 2009), its reception (see Papadopoulos 2022), its soundtrack (see Wager 2017), as well as the representation of the American dream portrayed there (see Carson 2019). Even with significant scholarly interest in film noir, the crucial question regarding its classification remains unanswered. Despite numerous attempts, no agreement over the precise definition of film noir has been reached; some scholars claim it to be a genre (Dickos 4), a movement (Schrader 271), a motif and tone (Durgnat 253), etc. With the various viewpoints challenging each other's existence, some scholars openly acknowledge their lack of consensus, stating that "[s]ince there are so many definitions of the stylistics and thematics of these

low-budget, dark, seedy, postwar crime films, many of which take place at night, most people perhaps just throw up their hands and, like Justice Stewart's definition of pornography, 'know it when they see it' " (Broe xvi). Some scholars consider the overall debate rather "tiresome" (Naremore 276) and prefer to focus on the elements constituting film noir or the characters inhabiting its world, arguing that "[t]here is, in fact, no transcendent reason why we should have a noir category at all" (Naremore 276). In my classification of film noir, I agree with the view presented by Jamaluddin Aziz in his book *Transgressing Women: Space and the Body in Contemporary Noir*. He considers "classical noir a genre; this means neo-noir and future noir are its natural extensions or sub-genres, that is, a creative variation and subversion of the classical noir period" (3).

Regardless of how film noir is classified, it is evident that it comprises a pool of films that share certain cinematic and narrative characteristics. Conard describes the cinematic and thematic features that create film noir:

> You know a classic noir film when you see it, with its unusual lighting (the constant opposition of light and shadow), its tilted camera angles, and its off-center scene compositions. But, besides these technical cinematic features, there are a number of themes that characterize film noir, such as the inversion of traditional values (bad guys as heroes, traditional good guys like cops doing bad things) and a kind of moral ambivalence (it's hard to tell right from wrong any more); there's also the feeling of alienation, paranoia, and pessimism; themes of crime and violence abound; and the movies attempt to disorient the spectator, mostly through the filming techniques mentioned above. (1)

In the introduction to *Street with No Name,* Dickos defines a similar set of characteristics. He claims that the main factor that distinguishes film noir from other genres is its visual style:

> [L]ow-key lighting, with the effective contrast of chiaroscuro to delineate the shadows of people, buildings, and cityscapes, predominates [...] Venetian blind slats, hallway and other room lights left on in the dark, and shafts of light shooting inside windows from blinking or partially broken neon signs form a looming and palpable geometric design of psychic imprisonment and terror (5).

However, he also adds some additional components, like the location of the films, which constitute "a modern, twentieth-century setting, from the Great Depression on" (6), "[a]partments or bungalows as the dwellings of most characters" (8). Some characteristics presented by Dickenson are more character-specific, like the presence of "[t]he active/sexual and passive/nonsexual characters" (7) and "[t]he femme fatale or her counterpart, the homme fatal" (7) Some characteristics highlight character's transgressions, like "[a]n assertion of individuality as defined by the killing [although not necessarily murder] of someone [including oneself] in defiance of modern social mores and the law" (7) or "[a] denial by its main characters of conventional

social and domestic happiness through unattainability or refusal" (7). Some characteristics define the narrative devices in the movies, such as "[t]he voice-over narration and the flashback. Both are usually from the male protagonist's point of view" (7). Dickos also highlights the repetition of certain objects in film noir, like "[t]elephones—ringing, answered, or dialed—that portend bad and often incriminating news" (7), "[c]ars as indispensable devices of escape, from crime or a criminal past, one's pursuers, the law, or marital and domestic unpleasantness" (7) or "[a]rt and its collection—paintings, antiques, rare acquisitions, objects d'art—suggesting corruption, effeteness, and a European sensibility held in general contempt by the common American" (8).

The elements established by Dickos reflect general loss and alienation of the character in the corrupt world, highlighting the uncertainty about the future and the present, as "its very existence [is] an enigmatic odyssey into the bleakness of the American soul" (Turner 33). One of the contributing factors was wartime and its aftermath, which influenced cultural norms and expectations. Shaken by the war period, the economy could not sustain the same level of luxury as before: "The encounter with a depressed peacetime economy, with its threat of high prices and rising unemployment, began a process of general disillusionment for many of those returning home after the war, in search of values which they had fought to defend" (Harvey 39). Additionally, the following years of film noir's success were linked to dealing with the repercussions of the war, as well as a possible threat of nuclear annihilation. As Scheibel explains, "[F]ilm noir was a genre that responded to post-World War II American culture" (313), and moreover, it was a reaction to the unstable social order with "a series of metaphors for a decade of anxiety, a contemporary apocalypse bounded on the one hand by Nazi brutality and on the other by the awful knowledge of nuclear power" (Hirsch 21). The feeling of unease is also reflected in the noir's representation of the city, which becomes a jungle for a film noir hero to survive. As scholars explain, "In film noir, the proletarian and sub-proletarian areas of American cities are represented as a kind of space where character is tested, a space of intellectual machismo, functioning for the left much as the African jungle functioned for the right as the habitat for a white hero of a certain type" (Diawara 279).

However, with the world of noir toughening and presenting more uncertainty and unease, the protagonist of film noir has also gone through a transformation. The world of film noir was heavily influenced by hard-boiled fiction, where noir borrows its sinister stories (Turner 34). A typical hard-boiled character of the 1940s is usually a smart, brave man with a stark but bitter character. Originating from detective stories the hard-boiled hero is "a tough

and laconic protagonist, often but not always a detective, making his way in an indifferent world that he navigates by establishing a code of behavior that substitutes for the corrupted morals of the society he occupies" (Cassuto 4). The traits of a hard-boiled hero include cynicism, a strong sense of self-will, and a strong character that forces him to stick to his morals. For instance, the protagonist of *The Maltese Falcon,* Sam Spade, is rarely emotional, rather down-to-earth and behaves in a fourthright manner. He embodies the typical example of a male hero populating the cinema screen in the 1940s. This type of hero is in stark contrast to the traditional Hollywood's soft-boiled hero of the earlier decades. Phillipa Gates provides a cogent explanation of that shift by analyzing the character of Sam Spade in three different adaptations of the novel *The Maltese Falcon*. The analysis leads to the conclusion that with each new adaptation, the portrayal of Sam Spade changed as his qualities became more brutal with the 1941 adaptation presenting the most cynical version of the character. She attributes the new kind of hero arising to the USA's engagement in World War II. Gates states:

> The rise of film noir, however, also coincided with a new need to Americanize the onscreen hero in response to the changing international climate with America's entry in World War II. The traits associated with the soft-boiled hero - eloquence, elegance, egotism, and wealth - became firmly realigned with the villain as the war redefined the threat to American society as 'other' and specifically European. (16)

The hard-boiled hero, who contrasted dramatically with the ostentatious, upper-class hero of the prior decades, evolved in an effort to distinguish American identity from that of European during the shaken war period. The new type of hero was the one with a stout heart, steady nerves, and a witty mind, features typically associated with manliness. This new image was essential for the male audience at the onset of the war. As women began to replace men in the workforce and the number of men dying in war rose, the role of a man as the head of the household was challenged. The character's emasculation in the cinema gave the audience much-needed reassurance of the preservation of masculine superiority in society. Film noir satisfied the need for a hard-boiled hero to uphold the idea of male authority in both *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity*, as well as mirrored the paralyzing fear of seeing the traditional societal system standards altered or replaced. This fear became embodied in the character of the femme fatale.

The 1940s was one of the most fruitful decades for film noir; however, after that the peak of its popularity was gone, and as early as the 1950s "it appeared that noir was dying" (Naremore 2).1It is true that film noir was a prominent cinematic genre in the 1950s, but the 1960s and 1970s saw a significant decline in its prevalence:

> Borde and Chaumeton attribute this "decadence" to the exhaustion of a formula and to the rise of neorealist social-problem pictures. To these factors, we might add several economic and political determinants: in response to television and the growing leisure industry, Hollywood was turning to Cinemascope, color, and biblical epics; at the same time, many of the key writers and directors of the previous decade had been blacklisted by the major studios. (Naremore 21)

With the societal norms shifting and the progress inevitably pushing the darkness out of the screen, film noir had to evolve into something new to reflect the changes. With that the 1980s were coined as the beginning of a neo-noir.

1.2 The Femme Fatale in Classical Film Noir

A quite noticeable aspect of film noir that arises from Dickos' traits of film noir is the figure of the femme fatale. She is so essential to film noir that it is sometimes believed difficult to conceptualize film noir without mentioning the fatal woman, as Hanson and O'Rawe suggests "the link between the femme and noir can be read in many ways as a tautological one: if a film as a femme fatale, it is a film noir, and in order to qualify as a noir, the femme is indispensable" (4). The femme fatale acquired many names throughout her history, the most notable of which are the vamp, the siren, the seductress, the vixen, all underlining her wicked nature and danger. The longevity of the femme fatale can be attributed to her versatility and the fear of powerful women throughout the centuries. The portrayal of the femme fatale goes as far back as the early myths and stories, dating back to Biblical times. As Mainon and Ursini explain, "[S]ome of her earliest appearances can be found as far back as the Judeo-Christian Bible. The very first woman, Eve, is a femme fatale herself as she entices Adam to sin, and Adam becomes the first man to begin making excuses to God that SHE made him do it" (2; emphasis in the original). Throughout the years, the figure of the femme fatale has been present in various important literary and cinematic periods, as "she is a familiar archetype in Western culture, from early modern tragedy, via British Romantic poetry and Gothic fiction, popular art in fin de siècle France, and noir cinema of the 1940s–50s, to the cycle of movies featuring psychotic females of the 1980s–90s" (Simkin 5). There have been many representations of the femme fatale throughout not only the film or literature but also in the history and popular culture, as Mainon and Ursini claim in their analysis of the various encapsulation of the femme fatale:

> The femme fatale has many changing forms. She is the Egyptian Sphinx, half-human, half-animal. She is the Bible's teenage seductress Salome. She is the devious World War I spy Mata Hari. […] She is the Egyptian queen Cleopa, the Roman empress Messalina, the Byzantine ruler Theodora, the controversial apostle of Jesus - Mary

> Magdalene, the much – imagined Renaissance princess Lucrezia Borgia, and the misunderstood second wife of English King VIII - Anne Boleyn. (4)

One of the most notable depictions of the femme fatale dates back to the late 19th century, as some scholars indicate that "it is in the nineteenth century that the femme fatale emerges as a powerfully resonant figure that infuses the culture of the period" (Simkin 30). The late Victorian era bloomed with the presentation of the femme fatale, as Rebecca Scott illustrates in her book, "[S]he is one of many features which are specific to this period [1880-1900] and which form a network of correspondences" (1). She links it to the changes in society, stating that the figure of the femme fatale can be seen as "a component of a changing consciousness", linking her to the arising notion of feminism in the late nineteenth century and the "degeneration anxieties, the rise of invasion scares, anxieties about 'sexuality' and 'race', and concerns about cultural 'virility' and fitness" (22) perpetrating in the society of that time. Even though the tradition of the femme fatale character is not a new one in the cinema, as scholars point out, "at the beginning of cinema history, the femme fatale came to life in silent films that took a new dimension when haunted by Theda Bara's dark kohl-lined eyes and pale skin" (Mainon, and Ursini 4), it is primarily in the genre of film noir that the character reached its pinnacle.

Over the year the femme fatale received a number of portrayals throughout the literature and cinema, thus, to define her becomes a complicated task, as Farrimond notes, "The femme fatale resists clear definition. The term is connected with sexuality, femininity, danger, violence and deceit, but these connections are slippery, as many of those characters popularly associated with the term do not fit a coherent pattern" (2). However, some scholars tried to define the femme fatale's trope, presenting a set of defining characteristics, distinctive to the character:

> Just as it is possible to list the key conventions of film noir while agreeing that not all films falling under the definition will necessarily include every one of them, likewise it is possible to distil some kind of consensus about the femme fatale; this from Yvonne Tasker: First, her seductive sexuality. Second, the power and strength (over men) that this sexuality generates for the femme fatale. Third, the deceptions, disguises and confusion that surrounds her, producing her as an ambiguous figure for both the audience and the hero. Fourth, as a consequence the sense of woman as 'enigma', typically located within an investigative narrative structure which seeks to find 'truth' amidst the deception. (Simkin 6)

This classification highlights the lethal sexuality and destructiveness of the femme fatale. This is one of the defining features of the femme fatale, due to which she is able to deploy dubious means to drive men to destruction, or, in other words, she "lures the male hero into dangerous situations by overpowering his will with her irresistible sexuality" (Simkin 8). The notion of femme fatale's sexuality is inextricably linked to the notion of beauty that is assumed to be duplicitous, leading men to their destruction. Those characteristics lead to the conclusion

that “the femme fatale is broadly understood through a combination of manipulative sexual allure and danger” (Farrimond 1). The femme fatale is always inevitably linked to the fears of female lethal sexuality, dubious nature, and menacing agency deployed to drain “her victims of their morals, values, their friends, and often their money” (Mainon, and Ursini 2) and by that assault the patriarchal standards. The mood of threat and evil of the femme fatale was primarily based on fears of women’s rights gained from entering the workforce during the World War II.

The figure of the femme fatale was of great importance in the 1940s, as she allowed for a wider range of representation for the female characters, straying from the accepted standard for women's representation.

1.3 A Complex Phenomenon of the Neo-Noir Film Genre

While it is hard to formulate an exact and clear-cut definition of film noir since “[i]t has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term” (Naremore 9), it is even more difficult to provide a comprehensive definition of film neo-noir. Film neo-noir is a broad term that is associated with a variety of films stretching over an extended period of time. Some critics state that film neo-noir immediately followed the film noir period, locating its emergence in the 1960s and 1970s connecting it to a financial crisis in Hollywood and the period when film noir started “gaining attention in popular and academic critical writing” (Bould et al. 4). Some critics define the pinnacle of film neo-noir as the 1970s and point out that the following decades of neo-noir production were “a rather empty, politically conservative cycle of nostalgic noir-tinged works” (Willis 36). Others praise David Lynch as one of the most prolific neo-noir directors (Sheibel 322). Regardless of the time period in which film neo-noir is analyzed, it becomes abundantly clear that the late 1950s and early 1960s became widely regarded as the end of film noir’s popularity. Scheibel explains that change:

> In order to compete with television, Hollywood made technological appeals to the senses by increasing its color and widescreen output through genres of spectacle, such as musicals and historical epics (not to mention family melodramas, which inherited the Freudian themes and moody characters of noir but rendered them in a lurid palette of visual excess). (319)

The genre of film noir lost its relevance and importance in the cinema. However, soon after the new development of the noir genre, neo-noir, started becoming more noticeable. Before developing its distinctive themes and features, film neo-noir primarily produced the remakes or paid homages to the well-known noir movies (Sheibel 321). Film neo-noir still encapsulates the typical for film noir “themes (sex, crime, corruption, murder, betrayal), characters (the gumshoe,

the femme fatale, the criminal, the fall-guy) and locations (the city, night time)" (Bould et al. 3). For example, in *Gone Girl*, the figure of the detective, who is determined to serve justice, persists. She is passionately navigating the convoluted narrative of the crime. However, she is not the focus of the story, being relegated to the role of a supporting character. In addition, she is unsuccessful in her pursuit of justice because Amy manipulates the police into believing her story, treating Rhonda Boney as the indirect cause of her purported suffering. In *Promising Young Woman*, the pervasive film noir themes of treachery and crime drive the story as Cassie prowls through nightclubs and bars to expose male predatory behavior.

The consensus seems to be in the fact that both film noir and neo-noir originate from "a moment of social anxiety" (Willis 32) and "reflects a wider loss of faith in those charged with organizing and running society for the benefit of its members" (Willis 32). Film noir and neo-noir emerge in times of social unrest and upheaval. A sense of isolation, despair, and hopelessness become the distinguishing characteristics of film noir and, subsequently, neo-noir. Neo-noir does not shy away from the despair of cinema noir, but rather applies it in a contemporary setting, or, as Turner describes, "Neo-noir literally means *new blackness*, the kind of darkness audiences cannot help but explore" (35; emphasis in the original).

Neo-noir is still present on screen, with numerous directors turning to this sub-genre. Lota points out the longevity of neo-noir calling it "a surprisingly long-lived phenomenon" (154). He observes that film neo-noir, being extremely fruitful, is an important part of the contemporary cinema:

> [D]ating back at least as far as Robert Altman's subversive 1973 version of The Tong Goodbye and continuing right through popular contemporary texts such as the Sin City films, Drive (2011), and True Detective (2014 -), as well as David Fincher's 2014 film adaptation of Gone Girl. By now, neo-noir has officially lasted more than twice as long as the original run of film noir, and it shows no signs of exhausting itself anytime soon. (154)

Some scholars note that the longevity of film neo-noir is surprising since "[w]ith sugar sweet being more addictive and profitable, one could argue it's surprising that any bitter noir film were made at all" (Hodges ix). Hower the existence of film noir through various decades can be explained by its self-awareness and its versatility. Scheibel discusses mutability of film neo-noir, and its common use by the filmmaker. Since the this subgenre encapsulates so many various influences and possibilities of use, the frame for defining a movie as a film neo-noir is rather blurry. He explains:

> Noir today is more of an adjective than a noun, applicable to almost any crime- based narrative with a distinctive visual style that has a precedent in earlier films reclaimed by

> the ever- ubiquitous term. If The Killing [AMC, 2011– 13; Netflix, 2014], True Detective [HBO, 2014–], and Fargo [FX, 2015–] all look different and yet all might be considered noir, it is due to evocations of classic films about murdered women, anti-heroic detectives, and suspicious couples and crooked insurance salesmen. (321-322)

Due to their malleability, neo-noir films continue to endure the passage of time and the evolution of societal mores, as they may be molded in any way the directors consider appropriate. With the world changing, that allows neo-noir to reflect on "contemporary culture filled with materialism, consumerism, technology" (Turner 35), and feature a plethora of topics, being a venue for the representation of race (see De Kock 2016), questioning the issues of personal identity (see Smith 2009), discovering the influence of the capitalism on the individual (see Schuler and Murray 2009), and so on.

Even when neo-noir draws on cinema noir and echoes its core themes and style, it is much more than film noir; it is a step forward, a development of a genre. To start, it is much more self-aware of its nature:

> Neo-noir, unlike so many of its protagonists, is hardly lacking in self-knowledge, […] it reworks, works up, works over, works with and works against classical noir. It knows how to be noir. It knows that people are rarely as good as, and often far worse than, we might wish. It knows that even the simplest plans go wrong. It knows that trust is in short supply and that our desires far exceed our talents. And it knows that it knows these things. (Bould et al. 8)

It also shows its self-awareness by encapsulating "boundary crossing by employing parody and pastiche, and postmodern narrative structure" (Aziz 147). Bould et al. reflect on that feature of neo-noir, highlighting it as one of the fundamental distinctions between film noir and neo-noir. They state that although many of the filmmakers who contributed to the film noir genre were likely aware of the work of their predecessors, none of them intentionally set out to create anything that would later be known as "film noir" (5). In a similar vein, members of the audience might have been familiar with a variety of crime dramas and melodramas similar to the one they were watching, but none in the audience was aware that they were watching a film noir per se since "[t]he concept and the category simply did not exist for them" (Bould, et al. 5). However, neo-noir, relying heavily on its predecessor film noir in categorization and key elements, is "made and watched by people familiar with the concept of film noir" (Bould, et al. 5). This constructs another level of awareness of film neo-noir, as it uses its self-awareness to deconstruct particular issues film neo-noir previously unexplored in film noir.

The visual aesthetic also differentiates neo-noir from film noir. Glitre lists a number of distinctive characteristics of neo-noir films, including the use of color, "Neo-noir predominantly relies on co-ordinated use of neutral colours […] off-set by areas of saturated primary colours, which become more prevalent during scenes of dramatic conflict […] Specifically, neo-noir favours the primaries of light: red, green, blue" (17). Fig. 3 illustrates the use of lighting in film neo-noir as the blue ambient color presents Cassie as she is about to find her next victim.

Fig. 3. Color blue dominates the shot

Another aspect of the neo-noir visual style is "the combination of colour with lighting. Neon signs, brake lights, shaded lamps all help colour neo-noir environment", as illustrated in Gone Girl when Amy witnesses her husband cheating the sign "The Bar" casting light on the couple (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Sign "The Bar"

1.4. The Neo-Noir Femme Fatale

While being a development of the noir genre, one of the strongest links between film noir and neo-noir is the preservation of the figure of the femme fatale (Aziz 62). The neo-noir femme fatale, just like her predecessor, is firmly connected to the fears about female subjectivity and destructiveness in the changing society. As De Kock explains, "The femme fatale of classic noir film and fiction, and her neo-noir successor, are overdetermined generic tropes that nevertheless serve as useful encodings of sociopolitical anxieties under modernity (noir) and late modernity (neo-noir), including neoliberal, global capitalism (global noir)" (98). The neo-noir femme fatale came to define a new set of fears arising that are firmly connected to gender and its representation, as Lota explains, "Along with the new version of noir we thus get a new version of the femme fatale, one who reflects new gender anxieties much as the original femmes fatales reflected specifically postwar problems" (154). The femme neo-noir is still primarily defined by her opposition to the male protagonist, being a danger to his manhood. Aziz states, "What unifies noir and neo-noir women is that they signify the destabilisation of gender roles and identity, and they often function as a threat to the male protagonists' virility" (144-145).

However, another set of characteristics went through a change with the representation of the neo-noir femme fatale. While the femme fatale was traditionally regarded as a villainous figure, the neo-noir femme fatale escapes such a simplistic interpretation and becomes a more complicated character, "Traditionally in noir texts, the female characters are stereotypically divided into a good woman and a femme fatale–a representation that panders to male fantasy. A neo-noir woman, however, can be a hybrid figure of both categories of women" (Aziz 144). She also acquires some new names, being closely connected to a figure of a nasty woman, transgressing woman, a wronged woman, and an avenging woman. The distinction between those becomes sometimes blurry, with the absence of the clean boundaries some researchers highlight the link between the terms, "I define the 'nasty woman' in this book as a partial descendant of the well-known figure of the femme fatale in film noir" (Piotrowska 15) and "The female revenge thread […] runs through a number of neo-noir formations" (Williams 169).

2. From a One-Dimensional Villain to an Anti-heroine

Characters' position in the plot is an important factor contributing to its perception by the audience, due to that, it is important to define the femme fatale's place in the story. The chapter's focus lies in underscoring the femme fatale's transformation from a villainous figure to an anti-heroine.

2.1 The Flatness of the 1940s Femme Fatale

Characters are at the center of most stories. The audience follows the adventure or the transformation of the depicted characters over the course of the plot arc. Some stories rely so heavily on the characters portrayed that the characters become more well-known than the story itself, resulting in the emergence of numerous fandoms. This emphasizes the significance of the character in any book, film, or television program, especially one that is compelling. A compelling character is essential in terms of how the audience perceives them, evaluates their actions, and defines and positions other characters in relation to them. Character creation is a difficult process that occupies the minds of many authors and directors. Numerous scholars have also focused their research on various aspects of character representation, such as point of view and its effect on the reader (see W. van Peer and H. Pander Maat 1996), defining the meaning of the character (see Chatman 1972), etc.

Forster introduced one of the earliest classifications of characters in his book *Aspects of the Novel*. There he distinguishes between two kinds of characters: flat characters and round characters. They differ drastically in the way they are constructed. A flat character is "constructed round a single idea or quality" (Forster 47) and lacks any sort of development or growth; as a result, a character is less appealing and holds less interest for the audience, who are "so bored by his consistency that we do not care if he succeeds … or fails" (Forster 50). The other kind of character described by Forster, a round one, is more complex, with various character traits revealing themselves gradually throughout the story. Forster acknowledges that flat characters have the advantage of being easily recognized and memorable. However, he states that round characters are not "in themselves as big achievements as round ones, and also that they are the best when they are comic. A serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore" (Forster 50). Following this idea, the presence of a round character creates interest in the characters and the story portrayed, while a flat character does not attract the same amount of attention and can be distinguishably boring to observe. Subsequently the presence of a round character piques the interest in character development and the story presented, while a flat character does not draw the same level of attention and might be noticeably dull to observe. Using Forster's classification, I wish to explore the flatness or roundness of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale in relation to film noir and neo-noir characters The concepts explored in this chapter were developed from a range of theoretical frameworks, including those for novels, films, and screenplays. Even though each genre brings its own unique obstacles and complica-

tions in character development, I believe that the fundamental principles of character development are consistent throughout all genres. Most of the concepts for the analysis were derived from the book *Creating Unforgettable Characters* by Linda Seger, in which the author discusses the approaches and tactics for building a compelling character. She highlights various aspects of character construction, drawing special attention to the reasoning behind a specific character construction tool. Numerous additional sources are utilized to bolster a certain point or supply a more convincing explanation of an approach. My interest in this chapter lies in the concepts associated with determining which qualities of characters make them captivating and round, as opposed to one-dimensional and flat ones. In addition, it is important to determine how these strategies maintain a specific discourse as the dominant one. By applying these findings to the characters of film noir and neo-noir, I hope to demonstrate the evolution of the femme fatale's portrayal in film noir and neo-noir.

The protagonist occupies the central position in the plot since "one character's point of view will dominate, and we call this character the protagonist. We see through their eyes, get to know their speech, attitude, physique; in other words, it is their rhythm which claims our attention the most" (Mills 114). In the 1940s film noir, the femme fatale is granted a prominent position in the story; however, the role of the protagonist is always reserved for a male character. In both *Double Indemnity* and *The Maltese Falcon*, the androcentricity is clear right from the opening scene. In *Double Indemnity*, Walt confesses his sins immediately at the beginning of the film. The duration of the entire sequence is approximately 8 minutes, and the camera follows his every move. The shot opens with a dark road, illuminated only by the sparks from the welding with a Los Angeles Railway sign in the foreground. The car erratically driven through the almost empty street approaches a stop sign but makes no attempt to stop. It almost crashes into a newspaper truck that stops with the loud squeak of the full-pressed brakes, causing the newspapers to topple. The car continues to move until it stops in front of the tall office building. The gloomy figure of a man emerges from a car and enters the building. He slowly moves through the hall to the elevator, and barely responding to a watchmen's question arrives on the twelfth floor. He enters a dark room and for a few seconds the screen is almost fully black, until the man turns on a small table lamp. He takes off his coat and sits at the table, revealing a heavy pitch of dark blood on his jacket. The man struggles for a few seconds to light his cigarette, heavy sweat dripping off his face. Finally, after taking a long drag, he moves towards the Dictaphone and turns it on. Walter Neff is ready to tell his story (Fig. 5). He sits in a chair and narrates the story detailing his motivation and eventual downfall, declaring, "I killed

him for money and a woman, and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman" (00:06:41-00:06:51). This sequence is a perfect example of the plot positions the characters typically occupy in film noir of the 1940s. Walt is central to the story, controlling the narrative revealing his side of the story. Phyllis Dietrichson, the femme fatale, is mentioned as a cause of his actions and thus blamed for male transgressions. She is not given a voice of her own to tell her story, nor is her past or internal motivation made clear. She is portrayed solely via Neff's opinion of her, their relationship, and her significance in his life. As a result, the femme fatale appears as a one-dimensional seductress, falling into the category of a flat character.

Fig. 5 Waler Neff details his crime

The androcentricity becomes even more evident as the story progresses with various techniques working in his favor. They enhance his representation as a round character, hence generating audience's interest in him. Among the most prominent strategies that contribute to privileging masculine perspective is the use of flashback with voice-over. Flashback is a powerful technique used quite often in film noir. It presents a particular fractured reality from the perspective of a single character, hence generating an unavoidably biased account of events. As Turner explains, "Narration is the driving force of both films, shaping the audience's perception

so that each film is understood as entirely subjective from the protagonist's point of view, thus shaping the audience's perception of reality" (39). Turner applies this line of reasoning to the analysis of two neo-noir movies and explores how the viewer's perception of reality in them is filtered through the protagonist's narration. Even though *Double Indemnity* is not that convoluted in terms of narrative, flashbacks compared to the films analyzed by Turner (one of the movies analyzed even presents the events in a non-linear fashion), the voice-over narration combined with a flashback sequence is central to *Double Indemnity*. This technique shapes the story, and, in that way, it presents "a drastic effect on this understanding of truth, altering sequences and twisting the audience's perception of the story to an extent where all is manipulated. It is narration that drives these stories and thus affects the audience's perception of truth and reality" (Turner 33). It is also noteworthy that the narration is organized in the form of a confession since it also enhances credibility: "[it] creates an illusion of reality, it commands the willing suspension of the reader's disbelief, by modeling itself on the discourses of personal witness: the confession, the diary, autobiography, the memoir, the deposition" (Lodge 87–8). Walter is responsible for painting the particular image of Phyllis, and the events of the crime. What follows is the recollection of events that allows for the femme fatale to be villainized and the male character to be redeemed.

In addition to flashback, the voice-over is also an important element of storytelling in the movie since "narrated monologue has a strong effect on readers' responses to characters" (Keen 219). The story is told from the male character's perspective, allowing him to tell his truth directly to the audience, albeit through a surrogate. In the case of *Double Indemnity*, Walter addresses his confession to his boss Barton Keyes, who is an important figure in his life. The bond between them is clear from the first phrases spoken by Walt, as he is honest and direct with his mentor, stating that "I just want to set you right about one thing you couldn't see" (00:05:25), and "You think you're such a hot potato as a claims manager, such a wolf on phony claims. Maybe you are" (00:05:30-00:05:35). Their friendship shapes the audience's perception of the protagonist and builds an immediate link of trust. Additionally, the confession "'doubles' the intensity of the male discourse by directing the narrative, passing to another male" (Gallagher 238). This again centers male experience and the excludes the femme fatale's narrative.

Voice-over also contributes significantly to establishing the male perspective, subsequently being a highly important tool in terms of character redemption for the audience. Gallagher highlights this stating, "The film insinuates the fatality of the Walter-Phyllis relationship by carefully restricting the narrative point-of-view: namely, we see Phyllis entirely from the

psychological viewpoint of the beguiled and doomed Walter. Much of his voice-over commentary implies that he was impelled by a physical desire for Phyllis which he could not control" (240). Novelist and literary theorist David Lodge claims that historical and philosophical contexts may explain the preference for first person or figural third person narrative voice, "In a world where nothing is certain, in which transcendental belief has been undermined by scientific materialism, and even the objectivity of science is qualified by relativity and uncertainty, the single human voice, telling its own story, can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness" (Lodge 87). It is apparent that the first-person narrative allows the reader to identify with the character and hence to believe the offered information. By explicating his thoughts and emotions and revealing his motive, Walter is perceived as a sympathetic figure and receives some sympathy. This opportunity is denied to the femme fatale, who is narratively prevented from revealing her inner motivations for her deeds. Even more striking is the fact that while the femme fatale rarely has the opportunity to explain her inner motivations, it is typically the masculine character that does so for her. Her role is reduced to agreeing or disagreeing with the male rendering of the event and to respond to the information provided. In *The Maltese Falcon*, when Sam accuses Bridget of killing Miles and planning to do the same to him in the future, he is the one presenting her motivation and revealing the course of the events, which is purely his own interpretation of the situation. While being confronted by Sam, Bridget only manages to nod her head, shortly agree, or weep phrases like, "Don't say that, don't say that!" (01:33:34), "Why do you accuse me?" (01:33:37) Having no control over the narrative or no way to reveal her true intentions, the femme fatale is denied the narrative place in the story and her perception is totally controlled by the male view.

A third aspect of the character that contributes to their roundness is their backstory. A backstory is a fundamental part of any character arc since it "helps us understand why characters behave as they do" (Seger 81). The backstory also acts as a method for the audience to connect with characters, empathize with them, and comprehend their behaviors, even the immoral ones. In addition, the backstory can influence the interpretation of the film's primary plot by providing context for the current events:

> Every novel and screenplay focuses on a specific story, one we might call the front story. That's the real story the writer wants to tell. But the characters in the front story do what they do and are what they are because of their past. This past might include traumas and crises, important people who came into their lives, the negative and positive feedback they've received, childhood dreams and goals, and of course influences from society and culture. The backstory provides two different types of information. One is the past events and influences that directly affect the construction of the story. (Seger 75)

Any background information provides a way to collect more insight about the hero and enhances the multidimensionality of the character; in other words, it "can illuminate situations, sentiments, fears and goals. […] Background can account for present choices, or shifts in a person's existential, socio-cultural and spatio-temporal status" (Varotsi 26). Even though the movies are not very explicit about the upbringing of the male characters or their past in general, they still provide some key characteristics about their life and past. Both characters are regularly depicted at their employment, engaging with members of their social circles, which reveals their personality qualities and aspirations in life. This allows the audience to have a deeper insight into their personality features and ambitions.

Regarding the femme fatales in the 1940s, most of the audience's knowledge of their pasts is either false or incredibly limited. Phyllis's past is a very elusive thing. She is initially introduced as Mr. Dietrichson's wife. However, it is eventually revealed that she was his first wife's nurse prior to their marriage. Phyllis's backstory is drastically condensed in the film adaptation compared to the original novel. This prevents any possibility of sympathy for the femme fatale figure of the 1940s by denying her a crucial part of character development - background information. Aziz also observes that Phyliss is more sympathetic in the novel than in the film adaptation (25). Bridgit's past is made much more obscure by the fact that she introduces herself using a false identity. Her name is not mentioned until 17 minutes into the film, nor is any other truthful information about her life provided. It is stunning since a character's name is of utmost importance in forming their perception. As Varotsi notes, a character's proper name is crucial for "the recognition of [the] distinct existence" (16). Seger also emphasizes the significance of naming a character by sharing an example of how changing a character's name helps a writer develop a plot (244). In addition, it is unclear whether Bridgit is her actual name, preventing the femme fatale from identifying herself. Bridget loses her individuality when she is denied her name, which undermines her representation as a round character.

Numerous parts of a character's background are vitally important to the character's perception, one of which is the character's occupation since a "profession can describe [the] multifariously: it may reflect a process of self-creation or a sacrifice that led her away from it. […] In many cultures, education and work constitute significant parameters of identity." (Varotsi 30). Both Phyllis and Bridget are unemployed, and neither Phyllis nor Bridget appear to have any exceptional skills in any area or career that would make them sympathetic, such as a dedication to a particular vocation or an underlying passion for a given field. Later in *Double In-*

demnity, it is revealed that Phyllis was a nurse; nevertheless, Lola has reservations about Phyllis's competence in this field, suggesting that Phyllis may have endangered her patient's health on purpose. Therefore, even when the employment sector is revealed, the femme fatale continues to be chased by the malevolent implications of this industry. The lack of female characters in the workplace or their departure of it in order to establish a family can be explained by the pressing desire to return women to the domestic sphere. According to Leibman, "Although 80 percent of working women wanted to maintain their jobs even with the return of the soldiers, the popular and political consensus necessitated that women return to a life of home making and child-rearing" (182). This is perfectly illustrated in the character of Phyllis Dietrichson, who abandons her job once she gets married.

The male character's occupation reveals radically different circumstances. Sam and Walter both attained a high level of success in their respective fields, and not only were they highly regarded by their peers, but their self-esteem also depended on their achievements. In *Double Indemnity* Keyes repeatedly states how good of an employee Walter is: "You are too good to be a salesman" (00:43:24), Keys proclaims praising Walter's work ethic. Walter also acknowledges that he excels in his career. Being confident and self-assured, he believes he can convince everyone to work with him. "They are all tough at first " (00:19:45), he states while talking to Phyllis about her husband. The protagonist of *The Maltese Falcon,* Sam Spade, exemplifies this to an even greater degree. He repeatedly undermines the police work, establishing himself more knowledgeable in various instances. ("Haven't you anything better to do than popping in here early every morning with a lot of fool questions?" [00:37:44-00:37:48], "Don't be a sap, Dundy. The gun was part of the plant. It's one of mine. Too bad it's only a 32 or maybe you could find it was the one Thursby and Miles were shot with." [00:40:45-00:40:52]). This portrays both characters as dependable and trustworthy individuals, adding another level to their depth.

Undoubtedly the most salient part of the character's backstory is their relationships with other characters and their connections to others. As Sager notes, "Characters rarely exist alone—they exist in relationships. Aside from an occasional one-character story […], most stories are about the interaction between people" (141). Following that thought, the interaction between the characters and the relationships of the main characters plays a pivotal role in the story construction. Unsurprisingly, the female characters do not have access to this component of the masculine narrative either. The underlying theme of both films is the brotherhood of men, i.e., the concept of a male rapport that a woman cannot undermine or even comprehend. In *The*

Maltese Falcon, despite his attraction to Bridget, Sam chooses to send her to prison. He states that by doing this he will not only revenge his colleague, but all the other poor men that Bridget may have deceived:

> SAM.,I don't care who loves who! I won't play the sap! I won't walk in Thursby's, and I don't know how many others' footsteps! You killed Miles and you're going over for it.
> BRIDGET. How can you do this to me, Sam? Surely, Mr. Archer wasn't as much to you as…
> SAM. Listen. This won't do any good. You'll never understand me, but I'll try once and then give it up. When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something. It makes no difference what you thought of him. (01:35:34-01:36:30)

This dialog towards the end of the movie clearly presents a strong disregard of female feelings and emotions. Sam states that Bridgit could never understand his position, implying that she lacks the capacity to comprehend the male connection with one another, the code that binds them. This exchange also provides an interesting perspective on what is important in Sam's life. Even though he is in love with Bridgit, as he reluctantly admits, "I'll have some rotten nights after I've sent you over, but that'll pass" (01:37:25-01:37:31), he still chooses vengeance for his colleague over love, even though the relationship between Sam and Archer was far from friendly. From their encounters and the dynamic of the detective business, it is evident that they harbored resentment for one another. Moreover, Sam was involved with Archer´s wife, a fact that was known by pretty much everyone in the office, probably also by Archer himself. However, even when considering the hostile relationship between the two, there is still an invisible connection linking the men. According to Sam, women can't break that bond nor comprehend its significance. The importance of a male rapport was essential in preserving the patriarchal ideas and foregrounding male experience. As Gates explains,

> [Sam] chooses to stand by his partner in death - even if he did not in life - and sacrifice his personal happiness to see justice served. That a man's loyalty lies with his fellow man and not his lover became a dominant message through Hollywood's wartime offerings and far from the glamorization of "every man for himself" that underpinned many depression-era films. (15)

A similar scenario can be seen in *Double Indemnity* when Walter discovers that Phyllis intends to murder Lola and blame Zachette (Lola's boyfriend) for the crime. When Walter sees Zachette approaching the house, he warns him not to enter, protecting the young guy from the murderous slope that Phyllis had prepared for him. He also mentions that more men might fall under her spell in the future, once again highlighting the importance of male bonding and femme fatale destructiveness: "You've got me to take care of your husband, and then you got Zachette to take care of Lola, and maybe take care of me too, and then someone else would have come

along to take care of Zachette for you. That's the way you operate, isn't it, baby" (01:38:35-01:38:45).

The femme fatale is excluded from any connection of that sort. She seems to exist on her own without any close emotional relationships with other characters. Mrs. Dietrichson for example is first portrayed in her family home, surrounded by the trappings of her husband's wealth and pictures of the family. However, the picture only includes her husband and step-daughter showcasing her detachment from the family and the emotional distance between her and the rest of the family. Some scholars point out the environment of the house, explaining that it does not seem inclusive of the female characters since the furniture and the decoration in the house "might well emphasize the brutish Mr. Dietrichson as a vulgar exemplar of modern patriarchal domination within the domestic space" (Grossman 51). Additionally, no information is provided on any sort of friendship she may have with some other characters. When Bridgit is first introduced in *The Maltese Falcon*, she expresses compassion for her sister's suffering and profound sentiments for her plight. This is portrayed as her reason for visiting the detectives. However, it is eventually revealed that Bridgit's past was entirely fictitious, as was her emotional attachment to her sister. It is also stated that the femme fatale is deprived of the opportunity of having an emotional connection even towards the protagonist. She is deemed as fully unable of love or affection. In both *Double Indemnity* and *The Maltese Falcon,* the end of the movie presents the heart-to-heart conversation between the male protagonist and the femme fatale. Over the course of it the femme fatale reveals her tender feelings towards the hero. However, her revelation of feelings is met with much animosity and skepticism. The presence of any feelings in the femme fatales is totally ignored and her moment of weakness is used by Walt to overpower her. At the same time the male characters are defined by their connections to others, so much so that it has an influence on the story's development. Taking Keys and Walter's relationships and an example, the plot line that gained a more prominent role in the film adaptation (Gallagher 242), became the basis for the confession and the desire to set the things straight for Keys. They are colleagues and close friends, and unsurprisingly it is Keys to whom Walters's confession is directed. In that way, Walter chooses the male connection over the female allure by revealing the truth. Some critics go as far as to suggest the homoerotic reading of their relationships pointing to the use of "I love you" between the characters and the special connection the characters share (Gallagher 244). Their connection and caring for one another serve as the foundation for recognizing Walter as a multifaceted individual with shortcomings, strengths, and limitations. The emotional connection presented in the movie gives

Walter the possibility of redemption, both physically (Walt records the message for Keys), and emotionally (Walter is able to reveal his truth to a trusted person) and the possibility for the audience to sympathize with him. The similar thing can be observed in *The Maltese Falcon*, where the primary argument Sam gives for his willingness to send Bridget away is that his tie to his deceased business partner is stronger than his bond to Bridget. His connection to Miles, even though quite complicated and borderline hateful, is the reason for committing morally right things. The femme fatale is denied of that connection and deprived from the possibility to do what is right. All the aforementioned factors contribute to a particular portrayal of the femme fatale. This denial of emotional attachment or the background information for the femme fatale character simplifies her perception by the audience and denies the complexity that can come with the various emotional connections, highlighting the flatness of the character. The femme fatale of the 1940s deprived of the connection to preclude any redemption arc or humanization, thereby presenting her as a one-dimensional villain who should be destroyed or punished. The flatness of the femme fatale in the 1940s reduces her possibility of being perceived with any degree of likability.

All the elements mentioned above serve as a means for the femme fatale to be villainized, reduced only to her malice. In both *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity*, the femme fatale's love declaration is dismissed as untruthful by the male characters. The femme fatales in those movies are aware of their portrayal and they even comment on their nature, as Phyllis exclaims that she is "rotten to the heart" (01:40:02). This emphasis on the femme fatale's wrongdoings and lack of sympathy for her is explained by the fact that female character representation in the 1940s had to adhere to a specific set of portrayals in order to ensure the female position in society. Women were expected to settle down and have children, which was especially highlighted during the war and post-war times since "[s]tories of ordinary families that featured working-class characters were especially appealing during the war years. They provided relief from war's anxiety and fear; they also created a template for working out the terms of an expanded postwar citizenship and realigned heterosexual partnerships" (Smith 3). Because the femme fatale contradicted that portrayal, no striving to have a marital life or experiencing the motherhood, or in other words, " [T]he American dream of home, family, and 'security' is precisely the feminine fulfilment which the femme fatale intended to elude" (Straayer 153). Because of the femme fatale's unwillingness to stick to the conventional norms for female characters she had to be presented as a villain since "film noir demonstrated the ruination that awaited those who strayed from this path" (Leibman 182).

2.2 The Neo-Noir Femme Fatale in her Anti-Heroic Portrayal

In retrospect, the lack of female characters and the one-dimensionality of the femme fatale are clearly explicable by the prevalent concepts and norms of female portrayal at the time. The portrayal of the female character was relatively limited, and her ending in the films followed similar patterns. As explained by Jeanine Basinger in her book *A Woman's View How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960*:

> Most of the writing and thinking done on the subject of the image of women in movies has logically concerned itself with the considerable stereotyping of the woman's role that the screen has presented or with the unacceptable victimizing of women that occurs with such appalling regularity. Indeed, because women from the thirties through the fifties were being asked to conform to an accepted pattern of social and moral behavior in real life, it was inevitable that films would reflect those patterns (36).

The shift in the depiction and treatment of female characters was made possible since feminism's growing impact and its acceptance in academic and popular culture. Feminism as a movement arose in the early 20th century dealing with issues of civic equality for women (Whelehan 3). Soon, feminism moved beyond the social to other domains of representation, providing various feminist critiques of the signs of representation. In early 1970s feminist film theory emerged, with the year 1972 being called "the watershed year for feminist film theory" (Kuhn 72) because of the growing number of publications of female scholars and women's film festivals. The movement came with the aim to redefine the male-centered worldview and subsequently sparked a set of discourses on how female characters have been defined and perceived in various aspects of their lives. Kuhn establishes feminism as "a way of seeing the world, a frame or reference or a standpoint from which to examine whether it is one wishes to examine" (Kuhn 67-68). Feminist ideology eventually interacted with literature and film to challenge the norms of female representation there. Feminist text analysis established that "in dominant cinema the voice of woman, the women's discourse, is systematically absent or repressed, and that the controlling discourse is almost invariably male" (Kuhn 85-86). As Kuhn explains, feminist film theory began to redefine the set of behaviors and representations of female characters in films and to criticize the dominant patriarchal ideology. Feminist film theory applies a different set of tools to cast light on the specific representation, borrowing the concepts from psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, semiotics, etc. and applying "a set of conceptual tools, a method or a series of methods, even an analytical model, by means of which to examine its object" (Kuhn 68). In particular, feminist film theory draws attention to Hollywood films to account for "not only […] presences - the explicit ways in which women are represented, the kinds of images,

roles constructed by films - but also […] absences - the ways in which women do not appear at all or are in certain ways not represented in films" (Kuhn 72).

With feminist influences permeating various areas of cinematic representation, the noir also went through a transition of portraying female characters. With changing societal norms, the neo-noir was able to dedicate more time to its female characters, transforming the femme fatale and providing a different representation. Those changes also resulted in a new sub-genre called the domestic noir, a term coined by Julia Crouch. It is "defined by its focus on the female experience and their relationships with others, is primarily set in the home or workplace, and takes a broad feminist stance that domestic spaces can often be just as perilous for women as those outside" (Christensen 87). It builds on 19th century women's literature, but quintessentially it is a new development in the noir genre. Using modern feminist and post-feminist lenses, the domestic noir explores problems of gender, class, race, and sexual identity to show "questions of feminine agency, narrative power and subjectivity, as well as the consequences of when women finally snap" (Christensen 88). Christensen suggests that the female character inhabiting the domestic noir's world has several prominent characteristics that define the experience, such as urban setting, intelligence, talent, but despite that being "mistreated in their relationships, romantic and platonic alike, and have a growing sense of dissatisfaction with their obsessively gendered existence" (Christensen 91). Even though the domestic noir has been characterized by Christensen as a literary subgenre, I suggest that the traits of domestic noir are also present in neo-noir. Let's have a look at the world of *Gone Girl* and *Promising Young Woman* and analyze how both female protagonists fit into the designated traits of the domestic noir. Amy Dunne has a picture-perfect life - a handsome husband, small family nest and an adorable cat. She is well-educated, having attended Harvard and pursued a journalistic career in New York before relocating to her husband's hometown. Throughout the course of the film, the immaculate facade progressively crumbles, first through diary entries and then through Nick and Amy's confessions of how atrocious their relationship was. The culminating point of the movie comes with a shocking revelation: Amy Dunne is alive. After carefully planning and then meticulously executing her plan of revenge on a cheating husband, she presents her motivation by not just revealing the steps of the plan, but also by sharing the emotional burden she experiences. She starts her monologue with the phrase "I am so much happier now that I am dead" (01:06:05). She continues with the description of the emotional abuse she endured in the relationships, stating "Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity and my hope and my money. He took and took from me until I no longer existed. That's murder" (01:06:24 -01:06:27).

Cassandra in *Promising Young Woman* deals with the consequences of maltreatment and abuse her friend was subjected to, being deeply affected by the anguish her friend endured and the indifference of others. Cassie is intelligent (she can devise elaborate plans to punish the people who wronged her friend), educated (her classmate recalls her being the best student in the class, "You were so good, though. You knew everything. [00:26:56]), and she was on her way to become a well-established professional in the medical field ("You were way ahead of everybody. You would have been a great doctor" (00:27:14). She is the encapsulation of a promising young woman. However, shocked by her friend's tragedy, she abandons her education and commits herself to uncovering men who engage in predatory behavior toward women. Later in the film, one of the pivotal moments comes with Cassie learning the truth about her purportedly ideal partner. Ryan appears to be a typical nice guy who would never harm anyone[1]. Cassie abandons her pursuit of vengeance for a lost friend after forming a strong emotional connection with Ryan, and it seems that she has achieved her happy ending. Christensen explains, however, that domestic noir typically explores "the brutal reality after a so-called happy ending" (92). Cassandra discovers her boyfriend's complicity in the rape and sets out to bring her friend's rapists to punishment. Amy and Cassie are both intelligent, academically gifted women who have been mistreated by males and have resolved to exact retribution by punishing those responsible. Thus, domestic noir keeps the figure of the femme fatale, but she has undergone a transformation that "is embodied most fully in its transgressive use and reclamation of the figure of the femme fatale" (Christensen 93) Later Christensen uses the term "femmes anti-heroines" as a synonym for "modern femme fatale" (93), which highlights that femme fatale in domestic noir is portrayed as an anti-heroine rather than the story's antagonist. is particularly noteworthy since it redeems the term femme fatale, which was demonized in many conventional noir films

The classification of characters as anti-heroes or anti-heroines is not a new concept, but it has reached its zenith with the proliferation of television programs and streaming services. The anti-heroine is "a deeply flawed, yet at the same time, sympathetic character" (Tally 8). She sacrifices her conscience to achieve the desired goal or escape a perilous circumstance in her life, demonstrating that she possesses the qualities "that mark her as being capable of doing

[1]Interestingly, the casting of male characters was aimed at making the actors appear personable and reliable, as Conan O'Brien explains in an interview with one of the actors, "What happens is you get so many very funny, likable guys that we already know and like and think are funny and then they are put in this context that almost takes advantage of the fact that we already know and like you" (00:02:10-00:02:22).

bad things for good reasons" (Tally 8). She is not inherently evil, but she certainly does not fit the criteria of a hero. The anti-heroine possesses a certain degree of likeability and because of that, "[m]oment by moment, the reader may find herself immersed in the anti-hero's personal journey" (Varotsi 131). The anti-heroine is compelling to follow because of her multidimensionality and complexity since "the deeper into the narration we move, the more complex and appealing she appears to be, representing the perplexity of the eternal existential self" (Varotsi 131).

The neo-noir femme fatale falls into the category of the anti-heroine and goes from being valorized and presented as a flat character to being defined as the anti-heroine with an added layer of complexity and moral ambiguity. It is reflected in numerous instances in the movies *Gone Girl* and *Promising Young Woman*. There are different strategies employed in both movies that serve for centering the neo-noir femme fatale as the protagonist and uphold the female perspective in the story. Most of those techniques had been used to secure the male hero's portrayal as a round character, however in the 2010s neo-noir the female characters get access to that representation as well.

2.3 The Roundness of the Neo-Noir Femme Fatale

The opening and last scenes of *Gone Girl* are mirror images of one another, tying the plot together and giving the story a circular structure. The shots have the same composition. Amy is laying on Nick's chest while he strokes her hair tenderly. The camera focuses on Amy's head, blonde lustrous hair, long neck. The voice-over of her spouse unexpectedly disrupts the beautiful image by posing questions about their marriage, "What are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other?" (00:00:44-00:00:47). Amy raises her head and makes brief eye contact with Nick before the screen goes black. However, the crucial distinctions between the two scenarios illustrate Amy's metamorphosis. As a reflection of the opening scene, the last scene conveys a measure of familiarity while simultaneously introducing a few crucial changes to the familiar surroundings. First of all, Amy's hair is shorter and straight in the last scene. The changes in her appearance remind of her story arc in the movie since the haircut was one of the major points of her disguise. The second difference, and probably the most striking one, is the way in which Amy looks at her husband. In the first scene, Amy is timid, almost frightened; she looks at Nick in a gentle way, seemingly seeking his approval (Fig. 6). The final scene is considerably more intense. Amy looks at Nick with a confident gaze and a smirk on her lips, as if to confirm that she has defeated him (Fig. 7). As Piotrowska

Fig. 6. Amy in the opening scene of the movie

explains, "[T]he expression of the Amy's character's face is very different: the innocence is gone and instead a slightly sad, knowing look features. The illusion of any kind of harmony is gone: this battle for supremacy in the marriage has been fought – and won: by the woman" (51). The scenes present the transformation of her image, from an angelic, passive suburban wife to a self-assured head of the household. The close-up of Amy's face looking at her husband, and then looking at the viewer opens and closes the movie, putting the focus on her transformation. This highlights Amy's journey and indicates her as a round character. However, a set of additional elements can be established that underpin the femme female's roundness. While the 1940s femme fatale is deprived of any sort of background, the 2010s femme fatale is granted more insights into her reasoning behind certain actions due to narrative devices in the movies.

Fig. 7. Amy in the final scene of the movie

Both *Promising Young Woman* and *Gone Girl* feature female monologues as the turning point of the movies. In *Gone Girl*, Amy's monologue starts right when Nick realizes his wife's plan. The screen goes black for a few seconds, with Amy's voice revealing her presence, "I am so much happier now that I'm dead" (01:06:10). The next few minutes represent Amy revealing her perspective on their marriage as well as detailing her plan. The audience does not see Amy saying the monologue; only the voice-over is present, depicting first hours of her disappearance. Since neither the physical activity of speaking nor the recipient of Amy's monologue are visible to the audience, it can be concluded that it is Amy's inner monologue that the audience gets access to. This is the only time in the film where the audience is privy to the thoughts and unfiltered opinions of a character, as the true objectives of the other characters remain obscure. She is brutally honest in her monologue, revealing her true thoughts and using harsh language like, "a local idiot", "her humdrum life", "pregnant idiot", "fucking game", "no fucking way". Amy's monologue can be compared to Walter Neff's confession because their structures are remarkably similar. The confession of Walter is also a monologue delivered over a series of events, told with access to Walter's inner thoughts and beliefs. While in *Double Indemnity* the plan is revealed by the male protagonist without the femme fatale being able to present her motivation, in *Gone Girl* the turning point of the movie is marked by the neo-noir femme fatale detailing her steps in framing her husband, while also presenting her motivation. Amy details how wronged she felt by her husband, "We were the happiest people we knew. And what's the point of being together if you're not the happiest. But Nick got lazy. He became someone I did not agree to marry. He actually expected me to love him unconditionally then he dragged me, penniless, to the navel of this great country and found himself a newer, younger, bouncier Cool Girl" (1:17:02-01:16:45). In *Promising Young Woman*, the voice-over narration is absent; however, quite similarly to *The Maltese Falcon*, Cassandra details her true intentions to the unwitting character at the end of the movie. Sam reveals his intention to Bridget, Cassie to Al Monroe. Both revelations come as the character is about to execute their real plan. Cassie's monologue reveals her intention to harm Al, and it details her motivation as revenge for her friend's rape.

Another device that contributes to the neo-noir femme fatale presenting her narrative in *Gone Girl* is the diary. Diary entries are presented as flashbacks right from the start of the movie. Diary reveals Amy's relationships with Nick, beginning with their first meeting. It heavily influences the audience's perception of the characters since the entries are the only way to see the relationship between Amy and Nick and to form an opinion about each of them. In that way Amy, feels like the protagonist of the story, narrating her past with Nick and, as revealed

later, modifying it to paint a particular picture of him for the police. Amy manipulates not only the police, but also the audience, presenting the events in a way that benefits her. It is significant that the film never fully contradicts Amy´s description of the events. Nick disagrees with some information in the diary while being interrogated by the police, however, the truth is never explicitly shown, hence, never actually revealed. The audience's access to Amy's diary entries is crucial since it subconsciously develops a connection with a character. Even if the information is revealed to be untrustworthy, the perception of the characters has already been formed. Furthermore, visually, the trust is highlighted even more since "[f]or each diary scene, there is a moment in which we watch the diary being written. Fincher uses classic point-of-view shots here to position us within Amy's body, so that we actually observe the pen moving across the page as though through her eyes" (Penoyer-Kulin 54). In that way, the diary becomes an important part of Amy's portrayal.

While the diary establishes trust for the femme fatale character, it is not the only device used to shape her perception. The soundtrack contributes greatly to establishing Amy as the protagonist of the story. Even though, as Penoyer-Kulin claims, the question of the music in *Gone Girl* was largely overlooked by the critics, it is an important tool for understanding the characters since "the soundtrack does play a role in shaping how we perceive the narrative positions of the protagonists" (45), and it also "does help to nuance our understanding of [the characters] and, furthermore, provides insight into how a film score can work to embody character subjectivity and narration " (45). Penoyer-Kulin claims that Amy's narrative is constructed sonically because she is "a kind of musical narrator, so that at times it seems like the listener is not only entering into her thoughts but that she herself is directing what those thoughts are communicating" (45). He illustrates it through various examples in the movie of how the soundtrack underlines Amy's position in the plot, especially when it is combined with the diary entries. He explains that the diary flashbacks with the use of the binary of consonance - dissonance "[evoke] the emotional mood of whatever section of the narrative Amy is trying to feed us" (53).

Besides these narrative elements, the background, and relationships with other characters of the neo-noir femme fatale are also expanded compared to her predecessor. Amy's childhood is adapted in the series of books produced by her parents, called *Amazing Amy*. From the book's plotlines, the audience gains access to Amy's childhood since, as Amy admits, her parents used an improved version of it to sell the books. She is constantly haunted by Amazing Amy's success, "When I was 10 I quit cello. In the next book, Amazing Amy became a

prodigy" (00:12:10-00:12:13). In the short sequence, more examples of Amy's failures becoming an inspiration for Amazing Amy's success are presented. As Amy denotes, "Amazing Amy has always been one step ahead of me" (00:13:36). In Amy's diary the competition that Amy felt with her improved version comes to the fore when Amazing Amy is getting married, "Amazing Fucking Amy is getting fucking married! That's how the night started.With me—regular, flawed, Real Amy—jealous, as always, of the golden child. Perfect, brilliant Amazing Amy. Who is getting fucking married" (00:12:03-00:12:09). Finding out key details of Amy's childhood gives a sense of familiarity to the audience and creates an attachment to the character. However, what is even more prominent is that a series of entries created by Amy reveal her relationships with her parents and the rivalry between her real self and her improved book version. It is clear that Amy feels inferior to the perfect version created by her parents. Even though Amy has good relationships with her parents, the idea of them using Amy a source material for the book and thus generating money of her existence is heavily implied in the movie. As Nick and Amy acknowledge in their conversation:

> NICK. Your parents literally plagiarized your childhood
> AMY. No, they improved upon it and then peddled it to the masses. (13:02-13:06)

This emotionality and vulnerability presented by that plotline gives a viewer a chance to understand Amy as a character, to find out more about her personal traumas connected with the fact that her parents "plagiarize and revise their own daughter's childhood for their Amazing Amy series. Amy's mistakes and choices as a child are often paraded for her parents' general reading public" (Marso 862). It is crucial that Amy's childhood and her negative attitude towards Amazing Amy are revealed, since as Seger explains, talking about the importance of presenting a character's past, "This past might include traumas and crises, important people who came into their lives, the negative and positive feedback they've received, childhood dreams and goals, and of course influences from society and culture" (75).

In *Promising Young Woman*, the background of the main character is revealed in bits and pieces, mainly through the other character's words. Over the course of the movie, the audience slowly unravels the puzzle of Cassie's past and her friend's tragedy. Even though it is not explicitly mentioned, by judging from the absence of the friend in the movie and the general theme of revenge and mourning, it becomes somewhat clear that her friend committed suicide after being sexually assaulted. This event is a premise for the whole movie and generally for Cassie's life taking a turn. The audience can clearly see the implications of her friend's tragedy for Cassie. She quits medical school, discontinues any sort of social life, and starts her quest to

punish men who are about to commit sexual assault. The change in lifestyle is understandable to the audience, with the movie repeatedly emphasizing the emotional connection between Cassie and her friend. One of those instances is Cassie meeting Nina's mom. They have a difficult conversation about moving forward and forgiveness. However, they are also reminiscent of the old times, talking about Nina's fierce personality and Cassie's guilt over what happened. Even though Nina's mom assures Cassie that she has to let it go, Cassie states, "I just want to fix it" (01:01:17). In the movie, Cassie repeatedly expresses her admiration of Nina, saying, "I was just in awe of her. I couldn't believe she wanted to be my friend! She didn't give a fuck what anyone else thought, except for me. Because she was just...Nina" (01:32:07-01:32:19). Thus, the motivation behind Cassie's actions, even when they are illegal or morally wrong, provides a possibility for understanding and relating to the character.

A third aspect of the character's background is their connection to other characters. In *Promising Young Woman*, one of the main plotlines of the movie is Cassie and Ryan's budding romance and eventual relationship. The audience observes their dates and how important Ryan becomes to Cassie. There are several moments in the movies when Cassandra is shown contemplating the development of their relationships. She seems genuinely happy and in love, leaving behind her desire for revenge. Mainly because of Ryan's importance to Cassie, which is illustrated on screen, his betrayal becomes even more hurtful. However, at the same time, it provides an excuse for Cassie to resume her revenge on Al Monroe. In *Gone Girl*, it may seem like Amy's relationship with Nick was planned and rather superficial, with Amy admitting, "Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be" (01:10:24-01:10:26), "When I met Nick Dunne, I knew he wanted a cool girl" (01:11:02-01:11:05). However, Amy's diary and her own words indicate a true romantic attachment she felt, "We were the happiest people we knew" (01:11:50). The annual tradition to organize a treasure hunt also reveals Amy's attachment to her husband and her attention to details in their marriage. She carefully constructs the clues to reflect the important events in their marriage. Nick, however, becomes more and more detached from family life. He grows resentful of the tradition, outwardly stating to his sister when she mentions the annual hunt, "You mean the forced march designed to point out what an uncaring, oblivious asshole I am." (00:07:03-00:07:06) The love Amy felt for Nick highlights her choices as it becomes clear that her revenge comes not from her malicious nature but from her feeling betrayed.

All the aspects analyzed accentuate the development or change of the neo-noir femme fatale experiences over the course of the movie. The character is also granted more emotional

depth with her background highlighting the key elements of the neo-noir femme fatale. In this way, she becomes a more sympathetic figure, which leads to her anti-heroic portrayal rather than her representation as a villain.

3. From a Powerless Figure to an Agent of Action

This chapter investigates the agency of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale in the chosen movies. The femme fatale's actions, final demise, and violence are analyzed in relation to her agency.

3.1 The 1940s Femme Fatale is Denied her Agency

The female agency has always been a source of significant concern in patriarchal society. Being a female has primarily been described as being submissive and agentless, following orders and norms rather than establishing her own. In the book *How Hollywood Spoke to Women*, the author defines a set of rules a female character had to follow to avoid male scorn in 1940s Hollywood movies. Most of the rules highlight female subordination:

> 1. A woman must be a good sport. (Sacrifice is everything.) [...]
> 3. A woman must not be evil. (Being evil for women means becoming powerful in some way.)
> 4. A woman must be initiated into what it means to be a woman. (She has to give up any power she was born with or assumed, become a good sport, lie as needed, and live by the rules of behavior). (Basinger 55)

These rules demonstrate the appropriate norms of behavior for the female character in order to emphasize her obedience and passivity. The disregard for those rules by the female character results in her punishment in the movie. As Basinger explains, "the central strong figure of the woman's film, is expected to sacrifice her own desires to those of a man or of society. This is part of the rules of behavior that women have to learn in order to survive, or at least to get along in the world. Those who do not become good sports but who fight circumstances […]will suffer the consequences" (57).

On-screen and in reality, sacrifice and devotion to the male figure were expected. Therefore, the character of the femme fatale in the 1940s possessed undeniable significance for female portrayal. Mysterious, alluring, and dangerous, she contrasted sharply with a simple homegirl, more suitable for marriage and family life. The femme fatale challenged the notion of feminine subservience and starkly opposed a typical representation of female characters. The representation of the character's agency is also a crucial part of the story's construction, as Varotsi notes, "The conditional sets of personhood manifest in action triggered by the

character's actions and reactions in external stimuli, that is, narrative elements. A character that appears to float through, rather than stir, the story's events is lifeless" (11-12). The actions or inactions of the character are an important part of the perception of the character and the story's progression. This chapter follows with an explanation of how the agency of the male protagonist and the femme fatale is presented and how it is transformed in the 2010s film neo-noir.

The femme fatale manages to exert her own will and agency in several instances in the movies. In *The Maltese Falcon*, for instance, Bridgit successfully deceives and kills Archer. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis is able to persuade Walter to be her accomplice, and it is later suggested that Phyllis is also responsible for the death of Lola's mother, as Lola recounts in her conversation with Walter:

> LOLA. It was winter and very cold, and my mother was very sick with pneumonia. She had a nurse with her. There were just the three of us in the cabin. One night I got up and went into my mother's room. She was delirious with fever. All the bed covers were on the floor and the windows were wide open. The nurse wasn't in the room. I ran and covered my mother up as quickly as I could. Just then I heard a door open behind me. The nurse stood there. She didn't say a word, but it was a look at her eyes I'll never forget. Two days later my mother was dead. Do you know who that nurse was?
> WALTER. No. Who?
> LOLA. Phyllis (01:15:01-01:15:45)

Looking at the femme fatale character from this perspective can create a view of the female prevailing agency in the movies, indicating her transgressions as a mechanism of her liberation, as Aziz notes, "Phyllis, like Neff, is a transgressor, a mirror of the morally collapsed society. For that reason also, Phyllis's character can be seen as having the ability to fashion the narrative, finding a liberatory voice" (149). The femme fatale is partially successful at this, but her autonomy is quickly eroded as the male character outsmarts or dominates her. Some scholars analyzing the agency of the femme fatale, identify her "more apparent subjectivity" (Aziz 25). However, in that regard, I agree with Julie Grossman, who, analyzing Bronfen's perception of Phyllis Dietrichson's agency, states that even if female subjectivity can be seen in *Double Indemnity*, it is important to "see such agency as a direct result of charismatic female performance" (54). Following the story a bit longer, it becomes evident that even though the femme fatale is allowed to exert her agency to some extent, her possibility of being an active subject is limited. William D. Jeffrey even questioned the general notion of the femme fatale's influence on the male character, explaining that "Neff subjects Phyllis to his forbidden desires" (702), which makes Phyllis a victim. The question of whether the femme fatale is inherently evil can be asked in numerous instances in film noir. For example, in *Double Indemnity*, the declaration of love from Phyllis comes as a surprise both for the audience, and for Walter. Her

inability to kill Walter is an indicator that she may not be as corrupted as Walter's description of her seems to be. However, her image being filtered through Walter's perception, paints her as a formidable force of evil that needs to be destroyed since she is "rotten to the heart" (Double Indemnity 01:40:03).

In *The Maltese Falcon*, the power balance between the femme fatale and the male character is clearly striking. The film begins with Bridget's destructive power being revealed which leads to the death of one of the detectives. However, the power dynamic shifts after Archer's demise, as Sam discovers the underlying motives of her appearance. From this moment on, Bridget becomes an impotent figure since her fate is entirely dependent on Sam's decisions. Phyllis Dietrichson encounters a similar fate at the end of *Double Indemnity*. When Walter arrives at her house, with a menacing look, he openly declares his intention, stating, "Sometimes people are where they can't talk. Under six feet of dirt, for instance " (01:37:34-01:37:36). Phyllis attempts to establish her superiority over Walter, but ultimately loses control over him and then her life. As seen in *Double Indemnity*, the femme fatale is capable of independent action, as Phyllis is the one who devises a plan to murder her husband and purposely attracts Walter's attention to execute her plan. However, the agency she exerts stops there. Piotrowska suggests that moments of female dominance in film noir of the 1940s serve only to reveal their brevity and rather entertaining value, "In the heyday of femme fatales in the 1940s (in films such as, for example, *Double Indemnity* [1944] or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946]), she [the femme fatale] might have been the sole figure fracturing male dominance in Hollywood narratives – but she was allowed to do so ONLY very briefly – for the spectator's fun, before being disempowered" (16; emphasis in the original). A psychoanalytical reading of the femme fatale character affirms the idea of the femme fatale's ambivalent power. As Doane explains in the introduction to *Femmes Fatales*, the femme fatale "is not the subject of power but its carrier [the connotations of disease are appropriate here]. Indeed, if the femme fatale over represents the body it is because she is attributed with a body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness. In a sense, she has power despite herself" (10). Therefore, possessing a conventionally attractive body gives Bridget and Phyllis the power to briefly exceed agency over the men around them, however, she is (following Doane's metaphor) merely the carrier of that power, the one who is permitted to embody the fearsome combination of beauty and sexuality while being powerless over her own future and ultimate fate.

Another aspect that reveals the femme fatale's inferior position towards the protagonist is the aspect of knowledgeability. Even though she is cunning and deceitful, the intentions of

the femme fatale are almost always clear to the protagonist. He has no problem identifying her lies and deciphering her intentions. In his discussion of private and public spaces in film noir, Joan Copjec illustrates the transparency of the femme fatale's mind to the protagonist. She analyzes Neff's second visit to Dietrichson's home, highlighting how Phyllis's plans are not a mystery to him:

> Consider the scene of Neff's second visit to the Dietrichson home [...]. Her husband is not in, of course, nor is the maid, though Phyllis plays it - unconvincingly - as if she had forgotten that it is Nettie's day off. She has not forgotten at all; her deceit is transparent to us and to Neff. If the femme fatale is the embodiment of deceit, it is always a deceit of this order: transparent, painted on; a deceit that does not disguise itself. [...] The femme fatale remains a two dimensional figure with no hidden sides; the deception is only up-front. In other words, although she, too, seems to function, for the hero this time, as a sort of pro illusionistic element in film noir's non illusionist field, she usually fails to become a proper barrier, to protect him in the way real illusion does. Rather than screening jouissance, she hoards it. (193)

This scene represents how well the male character perceives the femme fatale's intentions and is able to deduce her plan right from its conception. In the same scene, when Phyllis asks Walter if he understands her line of reasoning, he states, "Sure, I've got good eyesight. You mean you want him to have a policy without him knowing it. This means without the insurance company knowing that he doesn't know it. That's the setup, isn't it?" (20:54-21:04). Right from the start, Walter knows Phyllis's intentions even without her voicing them. Additionally, a particularly noteworthy moment is also the ending of the movie, when Walter openly reveals to Phyllis that he is aware of her nature, saying, "That's the way you operate, isn't it, baby?" (01:38:45). This illustrates that even when the femme fatale exerts agency and implements her plan of deceit, the male character is still able to successfully read her intentions, preventing her from succeeding. In this regard, he is a superior figure, as he understands the femme fatale's fundamental motivations and is able to manipulate and fool her instead of falling into her trap. This contributes to the male superiority in the story, highlighting his agency and control over the situation. The same situation as in *Double Indemnity* can be seen in *The Maltese Falcon*. As stated in the preceding chapter, Sam reveals Bridget's motivations toward the conclusion of the movie. He is unaffected by her weeping and vows of love because he is certain in his assertions regarding Archer's death. Given that, Sam is not surprised by Bridgit's admission of guilt and that he has known Archer for a substantial amount of time, it is plausible to conclude that he knew how the events had unfolded long before confronting Bridgit, as he outrightly confesses, "Miles hadn't many brain but he had too many years experience as a detective to be caught like that by a man he was shadowing" (01:33:10-01:33:15) and, "But he would have

gone up there with you, Angel. He was just dumb enough for that. He'd have looked you up and down and licked his lips and gone grinning from ear to ear" (1:33:18 -1:33:27). These phrases are not an epiphany that Sam attains after receiving some new information, therefore, it can be indicated that Sam knew the truth about Archer's death from the beginning, but has chosen to exploit it to control the situation. Another instance of Sam's knowledge about the femme fatale's intention comes at the very beginning of the movie. Sam visits Bridget in her apartment immediately after Archer's death to learn more about her case. Here, he discloses, "We didn't exactly believe your story, Miss O'Shaughnessy." (00:17:35) explaining to her that her pretense was clear since "I mean that you paid us more than if you had been telling us the truth and enough more to make it alright." (00:17:47-00:17:50). This annihilates the agency that the femme fatale possesses since her actions and plans are transparent to the male character.

The femme fatale's eventual destruction at the hands of the male protagonist is a third factor that undermines her agency. Bronfen explains, "[T]he hero can not stay with the femme fatale, or even more importanly he has to destroy her" (107). The destruction of the femme fatale is inevitable in film noir of the 1940s, but the act itself comes as a surprise to the femme fatale and usually as a concluding point of the movie. Sam does not reveal his intention to surrender Bridgit to the authorities until the closing scene of *The Maltese Falcon*, right when the treasure is proven to be a forgery and McGaffin's quest continues. When he admits his honest intention towards Bridgit's fate, it is met with her utter disbelief, and at first she is convinced he is joking with her. Sam promises Bridgit to wait for her,"If you are a good girl, you will be out in 20 years. I'll be waiting for you" (01:34:41-01:34:44). I suggest that the use of the phrase "good girl" is not accidental in this context, this is Sam's way of saying that Bridgit can only achieve redemption if she undergoes a transformation into a good, decent woman while she is incarcerated. Only her change can guarantee a happy ending, however remote it may be. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis Dietrichson is not offered the possibility of a redemption arc. The final encounter between Phyllis and Walter is tense as both prepare for the approaching events. She is killed by her lover, Walter Neff, after shooting at him. The last meeting between Phyllis and Walter is filled with tension as both prepare for the events unfolding. At the beginning of the scene, it is clear that Walter has already reached a decision about the fate of his lover, as can be seen by the phrases he says, like, "I'm all through thinking, baby. I just came to say goodbye" (01:35:58-01:36:00), and "You are the one that's going, not me" (01:36:05).

The femme fatale is inextricably related to the concept of desire. In the 1940s cinema, the femme fatale was one of the very few representations of female desire, as "it is the leading female's commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be (sexual, capitalist, maternal), at any cost, that makes her the cynosure" (Grossman 3). In both *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity*, the motivation of the femme fatales is revealed throughout the movie. Bridget is determined to find the statue of the falcon to receive money and status; Phyllis is after a similar goal, hoping for insurance money to provide her with a prosperous life. While the femme fatale is determined to achieve her desires, this is usually the reason for her downfall and destruction. The femme fatale is blamed for her willingness to improve her position, as Grossman notes, "[F]emale characters branded as femmes fatales perform roles in order to survive, to seduce, or to manipulate others in order to get what they want, yet any "pretense" to better their position is received as immoral and invites male scorn" (6). The female fatale's desire and transgressions become the leading cause of her destruction. Some scholars argue that the destruction of the femme fatale is an inevitable event in film noir since "[t]he femme fatale must inevitably die—or, at the very least, be mortally injured or be arrested for her crimes. The implication in her arrest is a moral one as much as a legal one: she has committed a crime against the healthy image of society's female, and she must be punished for it" (Dickos 163). The destruction of the femme fatale usually comes in the form of taking her power away, leaving her powerless and subordinate to a man. This leads to the femme fatale being either slain, or sentenced, so in one way or another, her power of action is destroyed, not only on a metaphorical level, but also quite literally on a physical one. There is also another way to overcome the femme fatale, which is through her domestication and change into a suitable woman of the 1940s. Since the movies examined in the thesis do not offer the femme fatale an opportunity for atonement but rather use the movie's ending to imply her malice, this example is not considered in this thesis.

The act of destruction of the femme fatale acquires a symbolic meaning for the noir character since, by destroying her "he hopes to purify himself of the desire she inspired and the guilt this entailed" (Bronfen 107). The femme fatale also functioned as an encapsulation of male sexual fantasies as well as of power and wealth. Slavoj Zizek calls her "a symptom of the noir hero's fatal enjoyment" (156). It is evident in *Double Indemnity* when Phyllis is fetishized, with her anklet mesmerizing Walter, as he himself repeatedly states, "I kept thinking about Phyllis Dietrichson and the way that anklet of hers cut into her leg" (00:16:52-00:16:56). The character of the femme fatale serves as a catalyst for many of his reckless actions and desires.

The annihilation of the femme fatale is presented as a price for the male character's redemption. This is another reason for the femme fatale's destruction since it becomes a possibility for the male character to redeem himself of any transgressions from his side, to purify himself through her destruction. As Bronfen notes, "The femme fatale is sacrificed. Sacrificing his partner in crime allows him to abdicate both his sense of guilt as well as his responsibility for their mutual transgression" (112). Thus, the femme fatale is the mere challenge in the hero's life that he has to overcome to conquer his own desires. Due to that the destruction of the femme fatale becomes almost an inevitable trope in the 1940s since "[f]requently the death of the transgressive woman is seen as a necessary act of purgation" (Simkin 89).

The femme fatale also posed a challenge to the traditional family structure, which necessitated her destruction. The embodiment of the fatal woman contains a threat to the usual world order in terms of her displacement in the family system and her disregard of the general patriarchal societal structures. Her ambition to overcome and dominate a man, her absence, or even her animosity towards motherhood seemed to exemplify the dreadful trait of family disintegration (a familiar and central aspect of society) and thus the transition into the unknown. Kaplan points out that "[s]ince the placement of women in this way is so necessary to patriarchy as we know it, it follows that the displacement of women would disturb the patriarchal system, and provide a challenge to that world view" (16). Notably, in *Double Indemnity*, the threat to a family structure is present not only symbolically but also on a plot level. Phyllis's desire to dispose of her husband, and her alluded role in his late wife's death represent her disregard of the importance of the family. Sylvia Harvey discusses the disturbance of the familiar family system in film noir, claiming that in *Double Indemnity* "the act of killing the husband serves as the supreme act of violence against family life" (42). She elaborates that since the two lovers were a threat to a family system, they had to be punished and destroyed. She concludes, "It is perhaps most clear in this movie that the expression of sexuality and the institution of marriage are at odds with one another, and that both pleasure and death lie outside the safe circle of family relations" (Harvey 42). Her urge for independence projected onto a man betrays a primal function of a woman in a family system as a nurturer. As a result, the annihilation of the fatal woman serves to uphold traditional family values and encourages reliance on decent, submissive women to raise a family and uphold the cultural boundaries imposed.

To emphasize the femme fatale's destructiveness to the family system, she is typically contrasted with a so-called "decent" woman who embodies the prevailing values and ideals of

the time. As Place points out in *Women in Film Noir,* the distinction between the femme fatale and the other female characters is quite visible:

> The opposite female archetype is also found in film noir: woman as redeemer. She offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities. She gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he come back to her) and is generally visually passive and static" (60).

In contrast, the femme fatale brings destruction and danger into a man's life, a role that was previously reserved for male antagonists, and thereby challenged the notion of female subjugation. The characters Phyllis and Lola, a stepmother and stepdaughter, symbolize the dichotomy between a "domesticated" woman and a "vamp" woman in *Double Indemnity*. Walter views Lola as both a nurturer and a damsel in distress. Her calming presence provides him with the comfort and understanding he lacks with Phyllis, as he admits, "It was only with [Lola] that I could relax and let go a little" (01:26:33-01:26:40). This line begins a scene in which Lola and Walter meet, almost romantically, on the Hollywood hill, with Lola complaining about her unfortunate situation. This scene contrasts starkly with Walter's changing attitude towards Phyllis, as in the scene immediately preceding it, he describes how the thought of killing Phyllis first occurred to him, "I guess that was the first time I've ever thought about Phyllis that way, dead, I mean. How it'd be if she were dead" (01:27:07-01:27:16). It is not entirely clear what the nature of Walter and Lola's relationships was, as their encounter does not involve any sexual or romantic gestures. However, with their place of meeting up (a secluded part of the Hollywood hill without any other people present) and the frequency of their meetings ("I saw Lola three or four times that week" [01:27:17-01:27:19]) it can be speculated that their relationship could have evolved into something more than a platonic friendship. Lola Dietrichson is never presented in a sexualized way, quite to the contrary, she is timid, obedient, and fully relies on the main character for support and guidance. For Walter, Lola is not a threat, not an obstacle to overcome, not a force to overpower. As Anne Kaplan states in her introduction to *Women in Film Noir,* "Since the femme fatale was often evil and deliberately used her sexuality to draw the hero into the enemy's hands, the films were in one sense a message to men to stay away from these sexy women-to settle for the homegirl" (10).

In *The Maltese Falcon,* this opposition between a "good" and a "bad" woman is not foregrounded and does not represent the direct clash of the two characters, their fight is rather symbolic, for the heart of Sam Spade. Iva Archer is Miles Archer's wife, who has extramarital relationships with his business partner, Sam. Her infidelity, however, is not presented as

threatening to the audience. She is portrayed as an obedient and completely powerless figure who follows Sam's orders and never objects to his opinion. Moreover, when Sam is suspected of murdering her husband, with his romance with Iva being a highly probable reason for that, she still trusts Spade fully. Iva is not presented in an alluring way, and her sexuality, even though it is stated that she engages in sexual activity with Sam, is not highlighted. The comparison of Bridgit and Iva proves them to be somewhat similar in their actions, both deceive somebody (Bridgit - the detectives; Iva - her husband), both have a relationship with a man outside of the family system, however, only Bridgit receives her punishment. The absence of overt sexuality and general passivity of the character portray Iva as a safe option for a male character to pursue, and since the viewer is not shown otherwise, it can be suggested that Sam and Iva become a couple at the end of the movie.

Since the femme fatale serves as a representation of female and male transgressive desires as well as a threat to the societal structure, her annihilation is inevitable, "it is far too dangerous to let a character who manipulates men live her independent life – and so she is usually killed off" (Piotrowska 16). Her destruction is the last part that underscores taking her agency away and making her a powerless figure.

3.2 The Representation of the Neo-Noir Femme Fatale's Agency

In 1940s noir, the femme fatale was granted agency, only to have it unmercifully revoked, leaving her unable to decide her fate or influence the unfolding of events. In this aspect, the neo-noir femme fatale is clearly different, as she obtains access to the expression of her agency and control. The femme fatale's agency is evident throughout the film, as more and more information demonstrate her cleverness, and the film's conclusion does not undermine the neo-noir femme fatale's position.

Fig. 8. Cassie pretends to be intoxicated

The agency of the neo-noir femme fatale in a neo-noir film is not immediately apparent. At first glance, she may resemble her predecessor, the femme fatale, and appear defined by the men in her life. Cassie is depicted in a vulnerable situation at the start of *Promising Young Woman*. She is visibly inebriated as she reclines on a large sofa in the nearly empty club (Fig. 8).

Fig. 9. Cassie reveals her sobriety

She has difficulty sitting up straight and cannot stand up. The audience becomes a witness to a discussion between three men regarding Cassie. They first reprimand her for staying alone in such a hostile area. When Cassie's skirt slides up, displaying her underwear, the males shift to openly expressing sexual interest in her. They also make sexist comments about her, “I mean that is just asking for it” (00:02:27), “You know, like, you’d think they’d

learn by that age, right?" (00:02:31-00:02:33). One of them approaches Cassie, offering to help her get home. However, he eventually gives his own address to the taxi driver, and they drive to his apartment. In the flat the man soon begins kissing her while removing the clothing, even though the kiss is completely unilateral, and Cassie is almost unconscious. Throughout the scene the viewer is convinced of Cassie's subordinate position, having no control over her body or mind. However, unexpectedly, Cassie's gaze changes from a woozy, unfocused one to a determined and fully sober one (Fig. 9) as she asks the man what he is doing. The transition from an agentless to a fully aware of her agency is one of the key characteristics of the neo-noir femme fatale. Similar to Cassandra, Amy Dunne's subjectivity is not immediately apparent. Almost halfway through the film, her dubious scheme is revealed. Initially, every evidence pointed to Nick's guilt, and only when Nick solves his wife's riddles does the screen go black and Amy's voice confirms Nick's innocence by saying, "I am so much happier now that I am dead. Technically missing, soon to be presumed dead. Gone" (01:06:09-01:06:20). The next few minutes of the film serve as an explanation of her plans and how she was able to accomplish them. The previously established facts crumble as Amy's agency is revealed.

The 1940s femme fatale is incapable of concealing her intentions from the male protagonist, whereas the neo-noir femme fatale is able to create intricate methods to deceive the naive protagonists. In 1940s film noir, the male protagonist seems to be provided access to the femme fatale's inner drive and logic, while in the 2010s the contrary is depicted. Amy Dunne effectively predicts her husband's actions many times in *Gone Girl* which aids her in carrying out her plan. Nick describes Amy's meticulous planning to his sister in a conversation about the morning of Amy's disappearance:

> NICK. The morning of our anniversary I was gonna ask her for a divorce. I just couldn't do it. I couldn't fake it for another year, another day.
> MARGO. Then what happened?
> NICK. Before I could say anything, she said, "I need you to go somewhere and really think about our marriage." She knew I would go to Sawyer Beach.
> MARGO. So, you had no alibi.
> NICK. She stage-managed me. She knew exactly what I would do. And I fucking did it. I went to the beach, I thought about our marriage. I came back and decided I wanted a divorce.
> MARGO. And by the time you got home…
> NICK. She was gone. Oh, you fuck.
> MARGO. She is good. (01: 14:15-01:14:40)

This dialogue alone demonstrates the neo-noir femme fatale's ability to develop a complicated story based on an accurate prediction of her husband's conduct. Margo's awestruck

appreciation at the end of the passage underlines the neo-noir femme fatale's superior position in terms of knowledgeability and her ability to utilize it to exert her agency.

Amy Dunne creates an image of a monstrous crime, being able to deceive not only her husband but also her parents, neighbors, the detectives, and even the audience. For the first half of the movie, the plot presents a typical murder story. The evidence points to the husband's guilt, and even his twin sister Margo doubts her brother's words. This is one of the most intense points of the movie since, after being interrogated by the detectives and accused of Amy's murder, Nick discusses the accusation with his sister. While divulging the things he dislikes about his wife, concealed in a tiny box in his wardrobe, the discussion escalates. Margo starts questioning Nick about his resentment towards Amy until Nick screams out, "Are you asking me if I killed my wife, Go?" (01:02:41). Margo leaves the house, visibly questioning her brother's innocence. Nick, blamed by everyone around, sits down to solve the mystery clues his wife left for him. Soon after Nick discovers the anniversary present - Punch and Judy puppets, which as Margo assumes symbolize Nick's future, "Remember, [Punch] beats Judy to death and kills that baby" (01:15:02). This is a straightforward message from Amy about her plan. By giving Nick a glimpse into her mind, Amy highlights her superiority over Nick. However, what gives her an even greater advantage over her husband is the text of the clues she leaves behind for him to gradually gain some insight into her plan. She constructs the traditional treasure hunt around the places of Nick's infidelity, cleverly pointing out why she punishes her husband. The clues that Amy leaves for Nick are quite ambiguous, and even though they seem sweet at first, with Amy using the words like "dear husband", "my favorite writer"; they do not serve as a love declaration nor an effort for a reconciliation, but rather as a device establishing the neo-noir femme fatale's seeming omniscience, "I know where you've been, and I know where you're going" (01:13:42), "So, open the door, and look alive" (00:31:46). The clues are not only a part of a physical treasure hunt but also an example of the femme fatale's superior power position in the movie.

In *Promising Young Woman*, a similar situation is presented at the end of the movie. Cassie discovers the recording of her friend's rape and, with even more vigor starts to plan an intricate plan of revenge. She arrives at Al Monroe's bachelor party and, posing as a striptease dancer, handcuffs him to the bed. Al is confused and uneasy when Cassies tells him her name is Nina Fisher. He grows agitated and begins to suspect that something is amiss, asking, "Did one of the guys put you up to this?" (01:26:11). With each new piece of information revealed by Cassie, Al realizes that she is out for revenge. Cassie initially flirts with her former classmate

in a playful manner, then, she methodically establishes her authority over him, prompting him to wonder,"Why would I give you a dead girl's name?" (01: 28:40). She slowly guides him through several aspects of Nina's story for the next couple of minutes before disclosing her plan, "[W]hen I heard your name again, your filthy fucking name, I wondered, when was the last time anyone had said hers? Or thought it, even? Apart from me. And it made me so sad because, Al, you should be the one with her name all over you" (01:33:00-01: 33:18). Cassie's words are presented together with Al's face expressions, as the grimace of terror appears on his face with her taking a scalpel out of the bag. This further demonstrates that the male protagonist of the 2010s is oblivious to the neo-noir femme fatale's intent, while she, like the male protagonist of the 1940s, is able to successfully concoct her plot, outsmart other characters, and forecast their reactions in order to control them. These examples demonstrate the neo-noir femme fatale's superior status and consequently greater agency in the 2010s compared to the male protagonist. She is the one making decisions, devising convoluted plans, while the male character is supplied with only pieces of information that the neo-noir femme fatale allows him to have until the final reveal.

Possessing more knowledgeability than other characters, the neo-noir femme fatale imparts lessons to them. By the end of the movie, it is not she who is transformed, but rather the other characters on whom she exerted her agency. In *Promising Young Woman* Cassie exacts her vengeance on various individuals, however, one of the most notable examples is her reunion with an old university acquaintance. Madison disregarded Nina's plea for help and, instead of helping, mocked her behind her back. Cassie invites Madison to an exclusive restaurant for a friendly talk. Nevertheless, after consuming some champagne, Cassie reveals her genuine goal. She invited her former classmate to discuss Nina and Madison's rejection of Nina's rape claims. After hearing Madison's prevailing disregard of the situation, "Don't get blackout drunk all the time and then expect people to be on your side when you have sex with someone you don't want to" (00:39:20), Cassie leaves her visibly drunk in the restaurant. Then, Cassie employs a man to bring Madison to a hotel room and create the appearance of a sexual act between the two. Madison feels guilty after that night and repeatedly calls Cassie to discover what transpired that evening. Madison becomes concerned and agitated upon realizing she might have experienced a situation similar to that of her former acquaintance Nina. The next time we see her on screen, she is plainly frustrated, trembling nervously, and gazing around anxiously. That situation changes Madison's opinion about the incident at their university, "After we had lunch and I got so drunk and woke up in a hotel room with that guy, um, I thought about it. About

what you said about Nina. And how we all just acted like. And I remembered something [...] There was a tape" (01:14:45-01:15:19). As a result of Cassie's intervention, Madison develops sympathy for Nina and discloses a crucial piece of information that shows Nina's suffering and prompts Cassie to further her revenge plan. Cassie's action changed her former friend, showing the neo-noir femme fatale's overwhelming influence on other characters.

The whole plot of *Gone Girl* centers around Amy teaching her husband a lesson, as she herself admits, "My cute, charming, salt-of-the-earth Missouri guy. He needed to learn. Grown-ups work for things. Grown-ups pay. Grown-ups suffer consequences" (01:12:37-01:12:55). Nick is not the only man in Amy's life whose life she has changed dramatically. She falsely accused her ex-boyfriend Tony of rape and made his life miserable. In response to Nick's inquiry, Tony recounts their love story, revealing that once he lost interest in Amy and decided to take a break from their relationship, Amy resolved to exact revenge. She orchestrated an act of physical intimacy, and later claimed to the police that it was not consensual. The main point of the story was the fact that Amy used the ties she gifted her ex-boyfriend to make it appear as though she was bound by creating ligature marks. Their significance is apparent since those ties were a reason for many disagreements between Amy and her ex-boyfriend. Tony admits that after that his life became terrible, "I have been unemployed for the last eight years, because I have to write 'sexual offender' on every job application. I am on a neighborhood watch list because I have to register as a predator" (01:22:33-01:22:42). Thus, the agency of the neo-noir femme fatale is evident not only in her determining her own fate, but also in altering the lives of others.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the soundtrack contributes to centering Amy as the protagonist of *Gone Girl*, reinforcing her narrative. However, it also contributes to highlighting her agency and Nick's passivity. When Penoyer-Kulin analyzed the soundtracks of major moments in the movies he established a noteworthy observation of Amy's audio supremacy over Nick when they are together. As he notes, "Indeed, Nick seems almost to barely exist at all when detached from Amy, at least where the soundtrack is concerned" (57). This massage is reinforced by a couple of examples:

> [T]he reappearance of 'Sugar Storm' and 'Appearances', both also played over scenes in which Amy successfully administers her rigid plan for marital life. Nick's final surrender to Amy then comes in the last track of the movie, 'What Will We Do?' It is not a diary track, but it follows the familiar diary music format of degeneration into technological dissonance. (57)

On the soundtrack level, Nick is repeatedly presented as a more passive figure, especially in the second part of the movie. A prominent example of that, as Penoyer-Kulin demonstrates, is the soundtrack "Just Like Home" that appears during the diary Amy's recollection of Nick's assault. In this case, it shows Amy as a vulnerable figure, being wronged by her husband. However, later in the movie, the soundtrack repeats in a few more instances when Amy is fully in control of the situation. Firstly, when she returns home. Secondly, over the shot of Nick unsettlingly sitting in the living room with a family cat after Amy's return. The repetition of the soundtrack in those crucial moments demonstrates, "that the power dynamic of Nick and Amy's marriage has shifted. Whereas Amy was once required to cater to Nick, in this new configuration he defers to her" (57). I suggest that even the initial use of the soundtrack highlights Amy's agency and control over her husband since the diary entries are only somewhat reflective of Amy and Nick's marriage, and as Amy herself admits, "[Y]ou invent. The spending. The abuse. The fear. The threat of violence" (01:09:25-01:09:27). Since the entries of abuse and violence are just figments of Amy's imagination, the entry of the fight between Nick and Amy is just an example of the neo-noir femme fatale creating her own narrative, and exerting agency over her and her husband's fate. As Christens comments, "The diary also represents the first step Amy takes in reclaiming and asserting her authorial agency against those who have threatened her subjectivity" (100). In *Promising Young Woman,* there are no distinctive soundtracks that repeat throughout the story since most of the songs are either covers or original tracks of various genres. Most of the songs are produced by female artists, especially when it comes to the covers. The covers of the well-known songs appear in several instances in the movie, however, one noteworthy example is the title sequence song "It's Raining Man", performed by DeathbyRomy. The words of the famous song are changed to highlight the contemporary female protagonist of the movie, for example, "Get ready all you lonely girls", "God bless Mother Nature / She's a single woman too". That highlights the importance of the female story in the movie.

One of the most striking differences in terms of agency between the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale is the ending of the movie. As Williams explains:

> [N]oir femme fatales presented positive images only so long as they remained alive (paying the price for their oversexed greed in the final reel), their neo-noir counterparts have spectacularly evaded patriarchal/moral retribution, escaping, sexually satisfied, with their ill-gotten gains. The neo-femme fatale is not (often) punished for her crime. This 'happy ending' underpins why she has become such a celebrated figure amongst viewers and critics. (170)

Whilst in film noir the femme fatale had to be punished or destroyed for her menace and allure, the neo-noir femme fatale, to a certain extent is able to decide her own fate, and the fate of others around her. As Piotrowska notes, "the narratives of these contemporary films and the neo femme fatales created by female writers and directors is that they do not perish. A sacrifice is often called for and delivered – but not the final one" (16). In both films, it is apparent that the neo-noir femme fatale had to make a sacrifice in order to attain her ultimate goal. Amy in *Gone Girl* reaches her lowest point when her motel neighbors ruthlessly take her money, and she is forced to turn to her ex-boyfriend Desi for help. Desi endeavors to return Amy to the version of herself that he remembers from high school, stating, "The sooner you look like yourself, the sooner you'll feel like yourself" (01:50:01). He supervises her movements and food intake and threatens to abandon her if she does not comply, by saying, "Don't trust the instinct that left you beaten and homeless, sleeping in your car, fearing for your life. I'm not gonna force myself on you" (01:55:45-01:55:57). Even though she abandons her original plan to see Nick's execution and then kill herself, she achieves even better outcomes than she anticipated. Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* finishes the movie in a victorious position, not only did she manage to achieve Nick's transformation into a devoted husband and doting father, she also was able to gain prosperity and popularity, as Nick's lawyer assures Nick during their last conversation, "You have a book deal, lifetime movie franchise, The Bar? You are golden. You should thank her" (02:17:02-02:17:09). All attempts by Nick to undermine Amy's story and to reveal the truth are futile since Amy is again able to predict his actions and prevent them. The movie grants Amy a complete fulfillment of her desires, heavily implying that Amy was also able to convince Nick of their compatibility, as his sister Margo notes, "You wanna stay with her" (02:23:03). Despite the horrible actions Amy exerts when fulfilling her plan, she obtains the desired outcome. As Piotrowska explains, "However abhorrent Amy's actions are, however psychopathic her character becomes, she gains and asserts full agency" (48-49).

In *Promising Young Woman*, the neo-noir femme fatale's fate is not very favorable, yet she nonetheless achieves her objective. Al overpowers and suffocates Cassie as she attempts to carve her friend's initials on his chest. In the morning, he and his friend Joe dispose of Cassie's body by burning it, as evidenced by the ash heap and her necklace. The sinking feeling follows the next few minutes of the movie, as the police's investigation of Cassie's disappearance is futile. The body is not found, and Ryan lies to the police about Cassie's mental instability, hinting at a possible suicide. The investigation of Cassie's disappearance contrasts sharply with

the next scene of Al's wedding. It presents the beautiful ceremony, happy guests, and unbothered Al, Ryan and Joe, all of whom contributed to Cassie's death. However, this idyllic atmosphere is interrupted by the approaching sirens as Ryan receives scheduled messages from Cassie. As it turns out, she had a contingency plan in place, and while still alive, she made sure to expose the men for their wrongdoings. Al gets arrested by the police as his friend escapes, and Ryan grimaces in despair as he understands he will also face punishment. Although the neo-noir femme fatale is ultimately destroyed by the male characters, she manages to obtain justice for herself and her friend. After her death, Cassie's presence continues to haunt the characters as she exerts her agency. Even if she perishes, the neo-noir femme fatale triumphs, as Cassie fulfills her most wanted objective of avenging Nina's rape.

Since the destruction of the femme fatale is not a central element of neo-noir, the conflict between a wicked and a decent woman appears to be absent in the films. Even when shown alongside other female characters, the femme fatale of neo-noir is not overtly compared to them. Even more so, the movie does not provide an idolized version of femininity, as in the 1940s. n Gone Girl, Nick initially succeeded in keeping his mistress Andy hidden from the public eye. She is youthful, beautiful, and as Amy describes her, as "a newer, younger, bouncier Cool Girl" (01:12:13). At first the connection can be drawn between Walter Neff's possibly romantic meetings with Lola and Nick's infidelity. They both find comfort with a younger woman, who provides them with a feeling that the femme fatale could not, as Nick says, "You have no idea how shitty it was with Amy, how fucking terrible she made me feel. Flyover Boy. I would get knots in my stomach just coming home, knowing she would be sitting there dissatisfied before I even walked in the fucking door" (00:50:43-00:55:54). However, if Lola is presented in a sympathetic manner, disclosing to Walter her inner concerns and grief over the deaths of her parents, Andy is not portrayed as having similar characteristics. Andy is described negatively by Amy and Margo in the film; she is shown convincing Nick to have sex with her almost immediately after his wife's disappearance, and she is frequently portrayed as stupid (as when Margo angrily tells Nick, "So we're dealing with a 20-year-old who isn't sure where she leaves her undies" (00:51:08-00:51:10). Andy is characterized as an unintelligent yet sexually daring girl, and she is never posed as a potential rival to Amy. There are no female characters in *Promising Young Woman* who vie for one man's attention. The other female character who is given some screen time and a development arc in the movie besides Cassie is her university friend Madison. She fits the typical representation of the female characters, being married with kids. She also ex-

presses her preference towards that life, stating, “I thought I’d be bored out of my skull watching the kids, but it’s been great actually” (00:36:42-00:36:48). However, as a movie progresses, her disregard for the rape is revealed, representing her malicious nature.

In a way, the figure of a good woman is embodied by the neo-noir femme fatale in the movies. Amy’s Dunne monologue about the cool girl trope can be seen as a modern portrayal of the infamous “the Angel in the house”as Amy explains, “She like what he likes. So, evidently, he’s vinyl hipster who loves fetish manga. If he likes girls gone wild, she’s a mall babe who talks football and endures buffalo wings at Hooters” (01:10:48-01:11:01). In the article “‘Catastrophically Romantic’: Radical Inversions of Gilbert and Gubar’s Monstrous Angel in Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl” Christensen analyzes the dichotomy between “the Angel” and the monstrous woman. She explains that those figures reflect on the notion of female femininity and agency. She defines, “the ‘Angel’ in the House [as] an archetypal synthetization of intensively passive feminine traits prioritized by institutionalized patriarchal power structures” (89). In turn, “female bodies, sexuality, and desire are equated with disgust, disease, and immorality, in turn creating the Angel’s dark double – the Monstrous Woman” (Christensen 90). She explains that Amy Dunne tries to encapsulate the image of “the Angel” when she meets Nick. However, growing agitated of Nick’s indifference, she turns into a monstrous figure, which underlines her liberation from the expectation of being a cool girl. Amy’s representation of a good woman is extremely visible in her diary version, as she utilizes the improved version of herself to highlight the use of the Angel narrative:

> The narrative personhood presented in Amy’s diary closely aligns with the common characteristics of the Angel in the House […] Diary Amy epitomizes the self-sacrifice of the Angel – indeed she is always supportive of others even when they deliberately mistreat her, as is the case with Nick and her parents. (Christensen 99).

After Amy’s disappearance, it is her representation as a good, innocent woman that leads to the media’s stark attention to the crime (Christensen 100). However, her disappearance also marks Amy’s acceptance of her monstrous side, as she executes her plan, achieves sexual liberation, and commits murder. Christensen notes, that the change is gradual since at first Amy “struggles to fully divest herself from the mantle of the Cool Girl and still plans to kill herself in a manner that would suggest her body has been dumped by her husband” (102). However, after spending some time on her own she changes her mind, deciding to stay alive. Nick also changes because of his wife’s transformation. Initially reluctant to in, he decided to stay married and have a child together. The dynamic in the family has changed. It is Nick now who caters to Amy needs, gently stroking her hair at the end of the movie. Christensen explains, “Nick is unerringly

changed by witnessing his monstrous wife at work and while he may be shocked by the actions she takes, he has far more respect and consideration for the real monstrous version of Amy than he ever did for performative angelic Amy" (106).

It can be argued that Cassie in *Promising Young Woman* is an encapsulation of a nasty woman since she commits the act of revenge on people who wronged her friend, not caring about the consequences However, Cassie quickly becomes a representation of the Angel while dating Ryan. Their dating period in the movies is presented with uplifting music, and a montage of their best moments together. The scene seems idyllic, with bright colors in the scene highlighting the perfection of the relationship. This period comes as a major setback in Cassie's revenge since she abandons her plan in order to pursue a relationship with Ryan. She plays into a familiar narrative of the heterosexual relationship by intorducing Ryan to her parents and planning their future together, something that she had no interest in before, as she explained to her co-worker:

> Look. You're making the assumption that I want any of it. If I wanted a boyfriend and a yoga class and a house and kids and a job my mom could brag about I'd have done it. You don't think I could walk into any bar in this city wearing an adorable floral dress and get all that for myself? It would take me ten minutes. I don't want it. (00:23:43 – 00:23:53)

When witnessing Ryan's presence on the video, Cassie switches from her angelic version to a monstrous one, threatening him to reveal the video to the public if he does not give her what she wants. This comes as a shock to him, being familiar with Cassie as the Angel, Ryan does not know how to react. He stutters at disbelief at first, then pleads for forgiveness, until screaming at Cassie. After Ryan's betrayal, Cassie returns to her monstrous version with even more vigor, planning to physically harm Al. Her violent revenge plan almost succeeds until Al kills her in a violent struggle. This can be interpreted as her punishment for the transgressions, as Al's sacrificial killing of a monster figure. However, the last scene of the movie proves otherwise, Cassie's death was just a setback in her plan, as her revenge continues from beyond the grave.

All the points demonstrated how neo-noir has influenced and accentuated the femme fatale's agency. When compared to her predecessor, it becomes evident how much agency the contemporary femme fatale wields. The neo-noir femme fatale can be victorious, attaining her objectives, and even if sacrifice is required, it is typically not final since the situation then shifts in her favor. The character can also influence the lives of others by carefully anticipating their behavior and acting accordingly.

3.3 Violence as a Tool of Neo-Noir Femme Fatale's Agency

The use of violence is a common tool for the representation of the neo-noir femme fatale's agency. As Osborne states, the goal of *Gone Girl* is to "provide an outlet for female violence" (4), as Amy "employs violent revenge to regain agency in her marriage" (4). Either implied, as in *Promising Young Woman*, or outwardly presented, as in *Gone Girl*, violence highlights the neo-noir femme fatale's freedom of agency. As mentioned in the previous subchapter, the beginning of *Promising Young Woman* features Cassie revealing that she is not intoxicated as a man wants to take advantage of her almost unconscious body. Right after Cassie reveals her sobriety, the scene finishes in an ambiguous manner, changing to title credits, York analyzes the ambiguity of the scene:

> The extent to which Cassandra acts as a physical aggressor in each of these encounters remains a mystery to the viewer. The tension of the film comes in part from the thrill of expecting the confrontations between Cassandra and her assailants to explode in scenes of graphic, punishing violence, yet Fennell consciously diverts from such depictions at every turn. To illustrate, in a swift cut from the title credits, after the first of these confrontations, Cassandra is shown walking down the street as the camera starts from her bare feet on the sidewalk in an ascending slow tilt to her face. It is the morning, and her legs appear to be speckled with flecks of blood. More blood is seen streaming down her arm, but at this point we realise Cassandra is holding a hot dog drenched in ketchup. This visual gag makes it impossible to know if any physical violence occurred over the course of the night. (3)

The fate of the man is never fully revealed and can only be speculated, however, some moments in the movie suggest Cassie's possible violent actions. For example, her notebook where the rows of tally marks (Fig. 10) and the male names can be seen (Fig. 11), which alludes to many revenge sequences where those are used to keep track of the victims.[2] In *Gone Girl*, Amy's violence is outwardly presented to the audience as she murders her ex-boyfriend Desi Collings. The scene is very graphic and presents not only Amy slicing Desi's neck but also his last breaths as he tries to stop the blood with his hands. A scene starts in an idyllic way with Amy proclaiming to Desi that she is finally ready to engage in an act of physical intimacy. The white dominates the screen at that moment, Amy is wearing white lingerie, Desi is wearing a white shirt, and both the bed linens and the room are of relatively subdued, pastel hues. A few seconds after the beginning of physical contact, Amy grabs a knife and slashes Desi's neck, causing dark-red blood to splatter all over the white room. Amy physically demonstrates her dominance over

[2] For example, in *Kill Bill*, the Bride creates a list of names, naming it Death List Five.

Desi by climbing on top of him while he attempts to cover his neck. Amy becomes completely coated in his blood (Fig. 12), which she subsequently utilizes to her advantage by convincing the police and the public that she is the victim.

Fig. 10. The tally marks in Cassie's notebook

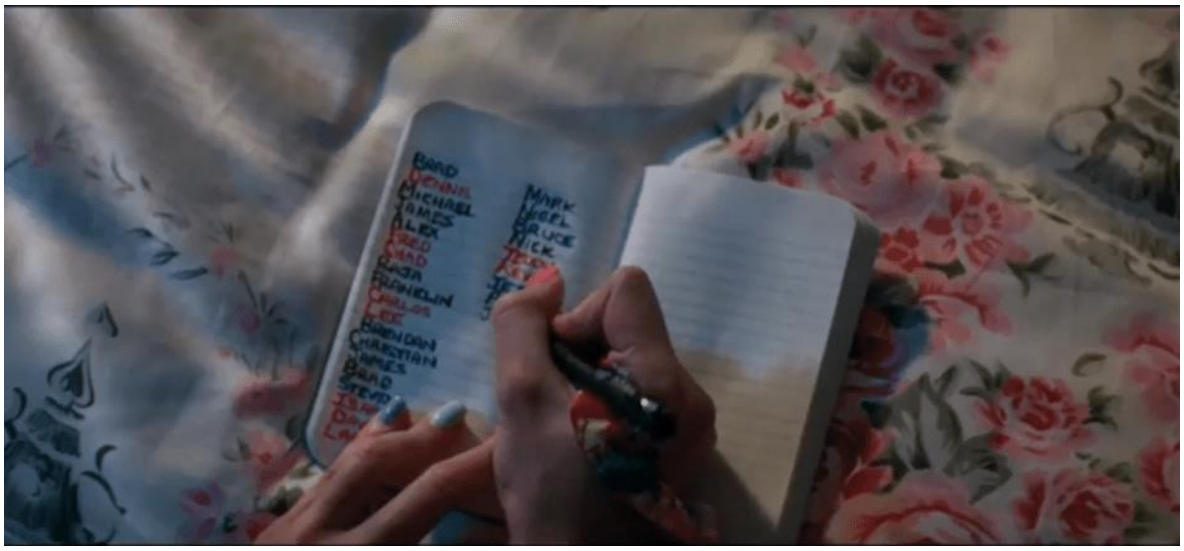

Fig. 11. The male names in Cassie's notebook

Piotrowska explains that violence is an important part of Amy's liberation from Desi's emotionally abusive behavior since "the violence that follows might possibly be the only way forward or out, given the circumstances she put herself in" (52). However, she highlights that while in the novel the murder is represented through Amy's thoughts of it, in the movie "the murder is shockingly violent" (52). This example illustrates the tendency of neo-noir movies to highlight the neo-noir femme fatale's violent agency.

Fig. 12. Amy covered in Desi's blood

This is not to say that the theme of violence is absent in film noir. Violence is sometimes featured or hinted at on screen in the 1940s and the 1950s. However, it is predominantly connected to the male character since "[r]evenge as a motive is not scarce in noir tradition, and it generally informs the location of the male protagonist within the narrative itself" (Aziz 84). Usually, the violence in the movies is directed towards women, and not exerted by them. As Burfoot and Lord explain, "The theme of women and violence is hardly new; however, traditionally it has been restricted to only one-half of the spectacle—women who are killed or who are the victims of violence" (xiii). Women's violence has received a more prominent portrayal on television and in the media in recent years. Most violent actions are undoubtedly a reaction to mistreatment suffered by the female character in her life, usually at the hands of a male character. Burfoot and Lord explain, "[C]inema by women, not surprisingly, imagines its violence as vengeance, as a just-cause response to the exploitation of the body, the burden of sexual difference, and/or psychic violations of everyday life under patriarchy" (177). In this way, the femme fatale is similar to the female avenger figure. Aziz states in his analysis of the modern femme fatale figure that there is a direct link between the femme fatale figure and the female avenger, stressing that, "[T]he most conspicuous link lies in the underlying ideological consciousness that structured these characters–the discursive link between the epistemology, sexuality and violence" (274). Lindop in her analysis of neo-noir also reaches a similar conclusion, stating, "The subject of female vengeance is increasingly central to postmillennial noir,

where the narrative structure is closely aligned to rape-revenge films of the 1960s and 1970s" (17).

In *Promising Young Woman* and *Gone Girl*, violence is a reaction to the mistreatment from the male character or even more generally, the patriarchal system. Cassie's decision to seek revenge for her friend's rape transforms the film into a rape-revenge story. Rape-revenge is a movie in which "a beautiful woman hunts down the men who raped her and kills them one by one, frequently reveling in the pleasure of the man's agony when he realizes who she is and what she is about to do" (Lehman 103). While Cassie is not the victim of rape, she was extremely close with her friend, so she easily identifies those who wronged her friend and receives pleasure from seeing their desperation and distress. Cassie's conversation with the dean of the medical school she previously attended exemplifies this point. Dean Walker rejected Nina's accusations and favored Al's account of the implausibility of the rape allegation due to Nina's alcohol consumption that evening. However, when Cassie reveals that she left Dean Walker's daughter in a room with a group of boys and alcohol, the calm and relaxed demeanor of the dean changes. At first, she just frightenedly tries to dial her daughter's number, then she starts hysterically screaming at Cassie, demanding that she gives her at least some information about her daughter's location, but to no avail. Finally, Dean Walker acknowledges her mistreatment of Nina's situation and begs Cassie to save her daughter. Over this sequence, Cassie sits relaxed in the chair, calmly listening to the dean's plea until she says, "Look how easy it was. I guess you just have to think about it in the right way" (00:48:47-00:48:50). In *Promising Young Woman* Cassie's violence is predominantly psychological since she uses the emotions and attachments of others as her warfare. The theme of revenge only highlights violence in the movie even if it is not explicitly illustrated with physical harm and blood since, as Claire Henry explains in her rendition of Lehman rape-revenge characteristics, rape becomes nearly a narrative basis for the representation of female violence and revenge (15).

In *Gone Girl*, Amy's revenge is motivated by her husband's cheating and his emotional neglect, in other words, "Her violence comes out of her sense of profound betrayal by her husband" (Piotrowska 49). Amy finds out about his mistress and feels betrayed by his actions; however, it is not only the act of cheating that Amy feels bitter about, but also his general lack of sympathy and care about their marriage. As Amy states, "Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity and my hope and my money. He took and took from me until I no longer existed." (01:06:33–01:06:40) and "He actually expected me to love him unconditionally then he dragged me, penniless, to the naval of this great country and found himself a newer, younger, bouncier

Cool Girl" (01:12:08-01:12:16). Some scholars indicate that Amy's revenge plan underpins a more profound problem in society. Piotrowska denotes that Amy's violence comes as a rebellion against "structural patriarchal influences she has to deal with all her life" (12) which can be observed in the trope of cool girl. This is the term coined by Gillian Flynn, which reflects the social boundaries a woman is expected to fit in. Cool girl is mainly characterized by her desire to cater to men's needs, as Amy notes in her monologue:

> Cool girl. Men always use that, don't they? As their defining compliment. She's a Cool girl. Cool girl is hot. Cool girl is game. Cool girl is fun. Cool girl never gets angry at her man. She only smiles in a chagrin loving manner and then presents her mouth for fucking. She likes what he likes. (01:10:27-01:10:01)

Cool girl is a representation of the set of rules a female must adhere to achieve a heterosexual connection and fulfil male expectations of a perfect match. However, Piotrowska also asks a different question of cool girl's representation, "Might this also be the cool girl – the girl who puts up with abuse before finally raising the alarm and speaking up? In some films, she does more than speak – she enacts a metaphorical revenge against patriarchy" (6). This raises the question if the cool girl trope is the representation of female passivity, a trope that urges women to become more convenient to men, even if they have to get rid of their own identity. As Osborne suggests, Amy Dunne provides "a social commentary concerning gender expectations in America […] Amy's deviance is a response to a patriarchal culture that constructs notions of female happiness and self-actualization" (12)

Amy's revenge is also marked by neoliberal and postfeminist influences. As Osborne explains, those discourses present consumerism as a means for individual self-empowerment. However, in reality, "consumer culture creates additional strains for women by presenting female power as an act of conspicuous consumption required for achieving impossible beauty standards necessary for attracting men/husbands" (4). Amy's identity was constructed for her, and because she had no opportunity to genuinely establish who she is, as opposed to what people expect of her, when she loses this idealized vision of herself, she loses herself. Nick gets a new cool girl when he stops perceiving her as the ideal woman, he envisioned her to be. Having different set of expectations to follow to in terms of behavior, Amy "ultimately breaks under the pressure generated by hyperrealities and narcissistic desires of America's consumer culture that ultimately suffocate the traditional bonds of marriage, and her deviance is a reaction to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces such gendered illusions of self-actualization" (Osborne 4).

Even though the 2010s portrayal of female violence and agency provides much more freedom of representation for the female characters, the patriarchal fears about it can still find reflection in the media and culture. The representation of female violence comes with its price since as Stringer notes:

> Vigalantes who target violent men […] disrupt the sexist script of feminine victimhood, articulating instead female agency and the capacity to fight back against male violence. Yet this gender trouble comes at a price: in these characters is also figured a grievous misrepresentation of feminism as somehow finding its rightful conclusion in violent vigilantism. (280)

Some argue that the violence exerted by the femme fatale undermines the feminist representation of the female characters, allowing for speculations over the sanity of the character. The problematic aspect of the neo-noir movies is that the female rage and actions usually go hand in hand with the psychological issues or mental unease. As Piotrowska explains, "The representation of such a fantasy is still only possible through female characters who have deep psychological issues. Amy is an ultra-intelligent but damaged child prodigy turned psychopath" (56). The media's portrayal of a violent woman is also quite often derogatory. Simkins provides as an example the coverage of the murderer Meredith Kercher, highlighting that there are often prejudices formed about female criminals (40) since "[a]gents of female violence are, by contrast, 'doubly deviant, doubly damned' […], having both broken the law and transgressed the 'rules' of what is understood to be acceptable female behaviour" (Simkin 39-40). He emphasizes that men typically avoid such scrutiny, allowing their violent acts to become normalized in the eyes of the public. Some scholars explain that the perception of the female agency portrayed through violence can attract the negative emotions simply because of the patriarchal structures in the society:

> The action heroine and the neo-noir femme fatale ought not to be automatically read symptomatically, therefore, for hidden cultural anxieties and fears; the anxieties these figures address may be more explicit and transparent. In fact, I would argue that the explicit anxieties the neo-noir heroine signals are not those of crises in masculinity or even femininity itself but those of feminism and in particular of the public face, collective action, and political engagement of feminism. (Coulthard 172)

Even though female violence can attract some scorn, the act of female revenge reflects female agency, subsequently it also leads to a different set of portrayals of the female character, something that Aziz calls "rewriting the feminine script" (274). He states,

> [F]emale avengers' revenge was not simply an expression of aggressive agency; it was, in essence, a symbolic act of rewriting the feminine script. By comparing the avenging figures in the sensational, horror and exploitation genres, I argued that the female

> protagonists in noir revenge narratives were given a benighted dignity, which was a defining feature of a noir existential protagonist. (274)

In this manner, the neo-noir femme fatale has a similar portrayal to that of a film noir protagonist, allowing for more compassion for the character and enabling the charter to portray their agency and establish superiority over those who harmed them.

Conclusion

The figure of the femme fatale is an important character in cinematography. The change from the 1940s femme fatale to the 2010s neo-noir femme fatale is marked by several key elements of the character's portrayal. This analysis presented those elements, focusing on the plot position and agency of the character. The research has a number of laminations as it does not discuss the issue of race or social class. In addition, the study does not account for additional alterations in the portrayal of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale, which can be investigated by other researchers. The movies chosen for the analysis are some of the most renounced movies of film noir and neo-noir, such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Gone Girl*, *Promising Young Woman*. The research consists of three chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical explanation of cinema noir and neo-noir, as well as the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale. The chapter examines what characterizes a particular film as a film noir or a neo-noir. The second and third chapters are analytical, comparing the representation of the chosen aspects of the femme fatale character in film noir and neo-noir. The second chapter examines the plot positions of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale in the movies. The third chapter deals with the question of agency, and how it is represented by the characters in the movie.

The thesis underlined two major changes in the portrayal of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale. The first change is the transition of the character from a villain in film noir to an anti-heroine in film neo-noir. In *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity*, the male character is prioritized by the narrative and, highlighting the androcentricity of that time. It is done by applying various narrative techniques, background information and connections to other characters, such as friendship or romantic involvement with someone. This presents the male protagonist as a round character. The femme fatale is portrayed in a different manner. She is limited to a single trait, emphasizing her nefarious nature. For the femme fatale background or he connection to other characters is absent, and thus she is made a flat character. Narratively, she is denied the opportunity to explain her transgressions or to present the events from her

point of view. Her background is often unknown and her emotional ties to other characters are either overlooked or nonexistent. In neo-noir, the opposite is presented; the neo-noir femme fatale is portrayed as an anti-heroine. The voice-over, monologues, flashbacks, and soundtracks offer her account of the events and allow her to speak about a certain issue from her perspective. She is portrayed as an anti-heroine, whose transgressions are presented in a sympathetic manner. The neo-noir is also presented as a more sympathetic character, being granted background and emotional connections to other characters.

The analysis of the femme fatale's agency in chapter three yields a number of intriguing conclusions. In the 1940s, her agency was frequently characterized by her desire to seek a better life for herself, to have defined objectives, and to convey the notion of choice. However, in 1940s noir, the possibility of agency is stripped from the femme fatale, and she is only allowed to explore it for comic effect. Moreover, she is presented as a cautionary tale, thus she has to be destroyed at the end of the movie and usually her fate is ultimately decided by a male character. The punishment of the femme fatale comes because of her transgression in demanding something other than a family, because of that, she is established in comparison to a "good" woman. This comparison highlights the dubious nature of the femme fatale and underlines the necessity of her demise. The neo-noir femme fatale is characterized by her ability to execute her agency She frequently accomplishes intricate plans while the other characters are unaware of her next move. Because of this, she has the ability to determine her own and others' fates. By the end of the movie, the neo-noir femme fatale is usually in a victorious position, having her desires fulfilled. Even when the neo-noir femme fatale does not receive a complete victory (as in *Promising Young Woman*, when Cassie tragically dies) she nonetheless executes her revenge plan. Violence, either expressed or insinuated, is frequently used to illustrate the neo-noir femme fatale's agency. Typically, violence is a reaction to a misogynistic culture, rape, or betrayal. In the neo-noir movie, the overt dichotomy between a "good" and a "bad" woman is absent; nonetheless, the neo-noir femme fatale can sometimes shift from one extreme to the other.

While the femme fatale of 1940s film noir is constrained by societal norms and punished for her transgressions, the neo-noir femme fatale reflects changing attitudes toward femininity, female agency, and its portrayal. She is transformed from a flat antagonist to a round anti-heroine, as well as from a powerless figure to an agent of action. Even though there are still some concerns regarding the depiction of female violence, since some scholars argue that it

reinforces the sexist narrative, the neo-noir femme fatale encapsulates a major shift towards a more profound portrayal of female perspective and agency in the movies.

Word count: 28,008

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Appendix A: Abstract

Cinematography is a technique that reflects the prevalent social norms and ideologies of a particular time period. The femme fatale is one of the most iconic characters in cinematic history. She occupies a highly visible place in both film noir movies and contemporary cinema, mainly due to her formidable combination of beauty and intelligence and the fears of female destructiveness. The portrayal of the femme fatale characters sheds some light on the conventions and limitations of female experiences, as well as the perception of female agency. This research unravels the construction and the perception of the femme fatale in two distinctively different decades, juxtaposing two film noir movies of the 1940s and two neo-noir movies of the 2010s. The comparative approach is used to analyze the crucial elements that underwent changes in the representation of the femme fatale, namely the plot position and the agency of the femme fatale and the neo-noir femme fatale. The thesis discovers the patterns of transgressive female portrayal on screen in the 1940s to indicate how those patterns are transformed to fit the contemporary societal conventions.

Appendix B: Zusammenfassung

Die Kinematographie ist eine Technik, die die vorherrschenden sozialen Normen und Ideologien einer bestimmten Zeit widerspiegelt. Die Femme fatale ist eine der Figuren mit dem höchsten Wiedererkennungswert der Filmgeschichte. Vor allem aufgrund der Kombination aus Schönheit, Intelligenz und der Angst vor der weiblichen Destruktivität, nimmt die Figur der Femme fatale sowohl im Film Noir als auch im zeitgenössischen Kino eine markante Stellung ein. Die Darstellung der Femme fatale wirft ein Licht auf die Konventionen und Grenzen weiblicher Erfahrungen sowie auf die Wahrnehmung weiblicher Handlungsfähigkeit. In dieser Arbeit werden die Konstruktion und Wahrnehmung der Femme fatale Figur aus zwei unterschiedlichen Jahrzehnten beleuchtet, indem zwei Filme des Film Noir aus den 1940er Jahren und zwei Neo-Noir-Filme aus den 2010er Jahren einander gegenübergestellt werden. Der vergleichende Ansatz wird verwendet, um die entscheidenden Elemente zu analysieren, die sich in der Darstellung der Femme fatale über die Zeit verändert haben, im Besonderen die Handlungsposition und das Handeln der Femme fatale und der Neo-Noir Femme fatale. Diese Arbeit untersucht weiters die Muster der transgressiven Frauendarstellung auf der Leinwand in den 1940er Jahren, um aufzuzeigen, wie diese Muster adaptiert werden, um den zeitgenössischen gesellschaftlichen Konventionen zu entsprechen.