# Clash of Desires: Detective vs. Femme Fatale

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article discusses the theme of desire presented in American hard-boiled detective fiction and its subsequent transformation on the screen in form of films noir of the 1940's. The works in focus are novels The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett, Farewell, My Lovely by Raymond Chandler and Build My Gallows High by Daniel Mainwaring and their film noir adaptations – The Maltese Falcon (1941), Murder, My Sweet (1944) and Out of the Past (1947). The proposed paper seeks to offer a contrastive analysis of the novels and the films and situate them in their respective social and cultural contexts. The central conflict of this article is presented by the clash between the femme fatale's and detective's desires.*

*Hard-boiled novels present femme fatale as a dame with a past, a spider woman, and the detective as a hero with no future, caught in her web of intrigues. The only way out for the detective is to suppress the sexual desire for the woman and hold strong to his professional code. The femme fatale's desire for more and for better is deadly and dangerous for those who succumb to her lure, but the detective's desire for truth can be fatal for the dark lady too.*

*This clash presented in the novels is confronted with the 1940's Hollywood production. When the detective frees himself from the sexual lure of the fatal woman he has a chance to live and even bring her to justice, but she can still escape or decide herself what to do with her destiny. Both, the dame and the hero are victims of their desires. The 1940's films noir's femme fatales have to pay for their crimes, no matter how crafty, seductive or manipulative they are.*

*Thus these films present the masculine dominance as strong and undefeated.*

**Keywords:** desire, hard-boiled detective fiction, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Daniel Mainwaring, film noir, femme fatale, detective

Desire is the moving force of the majority of the American hard-boiled detective stories, the clash of female and male desires is the central conflict around which the story develops. The desires of real men and women of the 1940's America are caught on the pages of hard-boiled detective fiction and subsequently adapted into the films noir of the 1940's. This article focuses on novels: *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett, *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler and *Build My Gallows High* by Daniel Mainwaring and their film noir adaptations – *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1947). These film adaptations are works of art that connect hard-boiled detective fiction with the cinema of the 1940's America, but they stand alone as independent autonomous works, thus they will be treated here as subjective acts of interpretation influenced by the social era they were shot in. What I seek to offer here is a contrastive analysis of the novels and the films (while films constitute the main subject of the article), and situate them in their respective social and cultural contexts.

The American hard-boiled detective novels present femme fatale as a dame with a past, a spider woman, and the detective as a tough, solitary hero with no future, caught in her web of intrigues. The only way out for the detective, we are told, is to suppress the sexual desire for the woman and hold strong to his professional and moral code. The femme fatale's desire for a better life and greed for wealth is deadly and dangerous for those who succumb to her lure, but the detective's desire for truth and maintain morals can be fatal for the dark lady, too. When the detective frees himself from the sexual lure of the fatal woman he has a chance to live and even bring her to justice, but she can still escape or decide herself what to do with her destiny. Both the dame and the hero are victims of their desires. However, in the 1940's films noir's femme fatales have to pay for their crimes, no matter how crafty, seductive or manipulative they are. These films, constrained by the Production Code – "stringently enforced censoring mechanism that shaped narratives according to perceived mainstream moral values" (Athanasourelis, 2003), tended to promote the femme fatales in ways that ensured the defeat of this independent woman and thus reassert the male control. The authors of the hard-boiled detective novels, on the other hand, were much freer to reject this stereotyping of gender roles. On the pages the femme fatale is less likely to be repressed, captured, killed or punished in different way for her transgression, strength and desire for independence, either financial or personal.

The main hero of the American hard-boiled detective fiction, and subsequently adapted to film noir, is the detective – a typical American tough, solitary, cynical man who lives in the jungle of venal politics, corrupt police, deception and illegal business. He lives on the borderline between the world of criminals and the world of law, the only thing he abides is his own set of rules, the hard-boiled moral code. This independent man, a lonely knight, is "the rough man of action who would never harm a fly but would stamp out injustice with a vigorous passion" (Durham, 1963), a rescuer of dames in distress and reminder of moral values. His rough appearance and mysteriousness makes him very attractive for women and they are his only curse – his sexual desire can be fatal for him. Moreover, women are "crucial to the hero's struggles and perhaps his central problem, contributing to his sense of an unstable world and the failure of masculine desire" (Horsley, 2001).

The hard-boiled stories, in print and on screen, focus on the detective at his job which usually turns into an obscure game of intrigues, doubles-crossings and traps which the detective falls into. His desire for truth is a challenge to his reason, feelings (ethical code) and body – he takes the beating 'like a man'. He wants to escape and make sense of this nightmarish world, he does not know who is playing him, and he is alone because he does not trust anybody. The person who lures him into this dangerous game is the femme fatale – beautiful, deadly, manipulative woman – who acts as a helpless victim so the detective should save her.

Why the detective always chooses the 'bad girl'? Because she embodies the male sexual desire – she is a fantasy and a real woman is not that alluring. It seems that the more unattainable and lethal she is, the more attractive she appears to the male protagonists. She is an object of sexual desire that causes "the explosion of wild, unbearable desires" (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006) of men, they are not in control of their sexual desires for this woman and therefore they become vulnerable and easy to 'handle'. Men that fall for her are manipulated by their own fantasy, illusion of an independent and very attractive woman. But their fate is in her hands because she knows that she is the object of their desires and thus she is able to exploit them very easily, they become her personal puppets. Thus they will play the role of scapegoats for her while she is on her way to attain her desires. Femme fatale is a fantasy that enters the 'real world' of the detective and other 'fallen' men and tears it apart. She is associated with a danger that seems irresistible to American tough men of the 1940's.

The logical succession of the story brings the detective at the end to the femme fatale whom he has to confront. This conflict between those two is a lethal clash of individual desires which can result only in resignation, escape, pessimism or bloodbath.

Why do these two characters of the hard-boiled detective stories always end up in such conflict/clash? Because none of them wants to forego their desires – the detective does not want to give up his desire for truth, justice and code of honor and femme fatale her desire for independency, better life, money and power, the American Dream. Even if they come out of this conflict alive they are punished for their desires, and for their lust.

These, above described, desires of the hard-boiled detective and the femme fatale are also projected into the films noir of the 1940's America. The triplet of films noir of the 1940's – *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1947) – will be used as a sample for the visual analysis of the characters' desires and compared to the literary sources they are based on.

*The Maltese Falcon* is the third attempt to capture Dashiell Hammett's novel of the same title on the screen. It was shot in less than six weeks and it was a major success. This "version of *The Maltese Falcon* is widely regarded as the most faithful screen adaptation of Hammett, but it is also an innovative film that transforms its source, bestowing upon it an aura of modernist cinema" (Naremore, 1998). Hammett was not the first hard-boiled detective writer, but the quickly became one of the most admired and remains a standard by which the others are assessed.

The film was scripted and directed by John Huston – his debut as a director. The main protagonist is the private detective Sam Spade and I dare to say that the statue of the Maltese falcon as well, since the whole film (and also the novel) develops around the search for this valuable gemmed statue which is an object of desire and subsequent doom for many characters involved – they either wind up behind bars or dead. The statue is the catalyst that causes the femme fatale, Brigit O'Shaughnessy, to contact Spade and invade his world. The Maltese falcon is a projection of Brigit's desire for wealth and thus power and independence. To gain these she approaches the 'Spade and Archer' private detective agency and tries to hire Spade to tail a man - Thursby. He refuses but Miles Archer, obviously enchanted by her attractiveness, agrees to do the job. However, he ends up killed and as we learn at the end of the film (and also novel) she is the one who cold-bloodedly shoots him to frame her lover Thursby for the murder. Archer takes the case because he is attracted to her and therefore he dies, and also Thursby, by her hand. Brigit is a woman who seduces, exploits and then destroys the man under her lure. She is evil and lethal, but also smart, ambitious and courageous and therefore she is a very strong competitor to the male character. However, these men did not overcome their desire for the fatal woman, they were deluded by their sexual desire for her, and as a result they are punished – death.

Spade is also drawn to Brigit, to this desiring object, a black widow. He seems to be attracted to her not just because she is sexually desirable and available to him, as Iva (Archer's wife) is, but also because she embodies danger, the unknown, and she is also witty and manipulative – the same characteristics that Spade possesses. Brigit is a rival to Spade but he cannot help himself, he is a male predator seeking an adventure and the smell of hazard. Their mutual attraction seems aggressive: "Can I buy you with my body? Their faces were few inches apart. Spade took her face between his hands and he kissed her mouth roughly and contemptuously. Then he sat back and said: 'I'll think it over.' His face was hard and furious" (Hammett, 1992) – this is not affection but a pure and possessive lust. His sexuality and desire for women is his greatest weakness. He flirts with his secretary Effie and has an ongoing affair with Archer's wife Iva, who now is available and thus becomes for Spade undesirable and a trouble since she tells the police about their affair and thus implicates Spade into the Archer's murder.

However, as the film ends, Spade sends Brigit off to jail for Archer's murder, even if she tries hard to convince him not to, he rejects a role of a 'sap' for her and says: "I won't walk in Thursby's and I don't know how many other footsteps" (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1941). Brigit's power is neutralized, she is punished for her transgression and thus the order can be reinstalled. In this scene we witness that Spade resists the allure of the dangerous female and refuses his personal desires to overcome his moral code and responsibilities towards the society, thus he is awarded the best price one could wish for – life. Even if Spade at the end of the film stands strong, true and undefeated, the novel shows him in a way battered and damaged. Hammett in the novel does not let him get away with his desire for women that easily. When Spade comes back to the office Effie, his secretary who seems to be in love with her boss, rejects and even despises him. Moreover, Iva is back and wants to see him, he shivers with disgust. Spade is predestined by Hammett to live a lonely life in a world he cannot trust anyone because he succumbed to his passion and desire for women, he created an illusionary woman, and thus "when fantasy disintegrates, you don't get reality, you get some nightmarish real too traumatic to be experienced as ordinary reality. That would be another definition of nightmare. Hell is here" (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006).

*Murder, My Sweet* (1944) is the second attempt to adapt Chandler's novel *Farewell, My Lovely* for the screen. Nonetheless, the film is the first in which Chandler's private detective appears under the name Philip Marlowe and "[t]he film is noteworthy for the fact that Chandler, unusually, was impressed by the way in which Paxton [screenwriter] translated his novel for the screen" (Widdicombe, 2001). Director of the film, Edward Dmytryk, retains the main storyline of the novel, Marlowe's search for Velma/Mrs. Grayle, the femme fatale, and her subsequent deadly response to maintain her newly gained identity.

Raymond Chandler is one of the most influential crime writers in American literature and is known for his distinctive and unmistakable style, the "product of an aestheticized, classically trained sensibility coming into contact with a demotic vocabulary" (Naremore, 1998). His novels are about private eye Philip Marlowe, an idealistic, tough, ironic, witty, self-sacrificing and lonely defender of the 1940's Los Angeles. His foe and an object of desire is the femme fatale, in the novel and also in the film, Velma/Mrs. Grayle. She is wealthy, beautiful, manipulative, deadly and double-dealing wife of an older affluent millionaire. She is trapped in a loveless committed relationship with an old man, but on the other hand she enjoys the material part of the 'deal'. She used to be a dancer in a night club and now she lives a peaceful life and does not have to worry about finances. And whoever wants to spoil her new gained identity will have to pay for it the highest price. The first who wants to look for the 'old' Mrs. Grayle – Velma, is Moose Molloy. He is completely enchanted by this woman and he wants to find her, therefore he hires Marlowe. His search for Velma connects with a search for a valuable jade necklace that Mrs. Grayle wants back. Only at the end of the novel and the film we realize that those two characters, Velma and Mrs. Grayle, are one person.

When Marlowe meets Mrs. Grayle, in the film, he does not hide his appreciation of her beauty which is made spectacular by the camera's focus on her sitting in armchair with exposed abdomen and thigh. Many other shots of Mrs. Grayle picture her alone, e.g. when she comes to Marlowe's apartment, or when she is in the beach house putting an overcoat on she stands on a dais elevating herself over Marlowe. These shots attribute her features of exceptionality but also individuality and power, and they represent her as an object of fascination, sexual desire. Mrs. Grayle is a true femme fatale who tries to manipulate Marlowe by seducing him: "She fell softly across my lap and I bent down over her face and began to browse on it. She worked her eyelashes and made butterfly kisses on my cheeks. When I got to her mouth it was half open and burning and her tongue was a darting snake between her teeth" (Chandler, 2000).

Mrs. Grayle is the archetypal femme fatale of film noir who uses attractiveness and slyness to manipulate men in order to gain power, money and independence. She is in the film presented "evil, all evil" (*Murder, My Sweet*, 1944). In the final scene of Marlowe's flashback, in the beach house where everyone is gathered for the conclusion, Mrs. Grayle is killed by her husband, Mr. Grayle who was completely under her spell and to maintain his masculinity has to punish her. She has to pay for her moral failures with her life. However, he and Moose Molloy, her former lover, have to pay for their desire for her and they kill each other in a gunfight. On the contrary, Chandler in his novel lets Mrs. Grayle escape and then turn a gun on herself when she is cornered in Baltimore by a detective, Chandler does not pigeon-hole her character as a rotten evil woman who will kill everyone just to attain her goals, he leaves it open:

> I'm not saying she was a saint or even a halfway nice girl. Not ever. She wouldn't kill herself until she was cornered. But what she did and the way she did it, kept her from coming back here for trial. Think that over. And who would that trial hurt most? Who would be least able to bear it? And win, lose or draw, who would pay the biggest price for the show? An old man who had loved not wisely, but too well. (Chandler, 2000)

Mrs. Grayle, still loved and desired by Mr. Grayle, in the novel escapes to spare the poor old man the trouble. Thus Chandler avoids an implication that Mrs. Grayle is purely evil, egoistical and blindly following her desire.

The film's conclusion is more melodrama than film noir, when Marlowe and Anne (Mr. Grayle's daughter) leave together and are kissing in the back seat of a cab. Anne has completely forgotten her dead father. The good triumphed over the evil and order has been reinstalled. This film's conclusion seems forced and completely out of context. It also leads us to believe that love will heel and redeem the world and "[l]ove not only conquers all, but erases memory" (Athanasourelis, 2003). Marlowe is 'awarded' a price in form of a good woman that he can marry, for his suppression of desire for the femme fatale and thus live up to the moral code. And the femme fatale is punished for her transgression of the social norms.

Like Hammett, Daniel Mainwaring (aka Geoffrey Homes) built up the character of his detective, Red Bailey/Peter Markham presented in the novel *Build My Gallows High*, on the basis of his experience as a private detective and a news reporter. But unlike Hammett his hard-boiled novel was a departure for him, he used to write straight mystery novels. Mainwaring turned his back on writing novels after adapting *Build My Gallows High* into a frequently praised film noir *Out of the Past* (1944) and begun a successful career as a screenwriter. These facts contributed to the higher status of the film in comparison to the novel.

*Out of the Past* is a "quintessential noir – a tremendously stylish, brilliantly scripted, and wonderfully directed classic noir" (Schwartz, 2001). This film is recognized as one of the greatest film noirs by many theorists and specialists in this field, namely Steve Neale, Elizabeth Cowie, Wes D. Gehring, and many others. The film's plot derived from Mainwaring's novel, as James Naremore points out, is strongly influenced by Dashiell Hammett's novel *The Maltese Falcon*, and dialogs resemble Raymond Chandler's style, especially the use of wisecracks (Schwartz, 2001).

Red (Jeff in the film) Bailey, the private detective from Daniel Mainwaring's novel *Build My Gallows High*, is also a tough man, "too beat up around edges [and] with a black past" (Homes, 2001), a world-weary hero whose speech is ironic, cynical and biting, and has fists made from steel; he is a lonely man with defense reaction even when asleep. On the other hand, unlike Phillip Marlowe, Red breaks the 'detective code': he is not loyal to his client, he does not keep his distance from people, especially women, and therefore he can not retain an objective point of view. All these violations are fatal for

him. However it does not mean that he is not honorable; he fights for justice and he is conscious of his flaw that caused him his own identity.

Bailey, unlike Marlowe, deceives his client, a gambler Whit Sterling, who wants Bailey to find his woman that ran away with his money after she shot him in stomach. Jeff spends some time in Acapulco and finally finds Kathie Moffat (Mumsie in the novel) while drinking beer in café "and then [he] saw her, coming out of the sun, and [he] knew why Whit didn't care about that forty grand" (*Out of the Past*, 1947), he is completely beguiled by her beauty – she becomes an object of a sexual desire for him. Jeff does not care what she has done or whether she stole the money from Whit, he just wants to have her for himself. The best scene that interprets that Jeff is entrapped by Kathie and her lure is when Jeff "stands amid the nets like a netted fish himself […] and the net seems to thicken and close in on him, transformed into a spider's web. She the spider and he the fly" (Christopher, 1997). He is completely blinded by his desire for this woman. Jeff does not inform Whit that he had found Kathie, they have a romance and the film manages to code their sexual interludes by the implied atmosphere in Kathie's bungalow when "Jeff passionately embraces her and tosses the towel across the lamp, which pitches over in a gust of wind from open doorway" (Naremore, 1998). The actual sexual scene happens off-screen what may be attributed to the force of the Production Code and its prohibition of expressing sex explicitly. The director had to code Kathie and Jeff's love affair; the thunder, rain and wind are the allusions of the intense sexual passion between these two characters.

The plot takes a twist when Kathie and Jeff, hiding from Whit in San Francisco, are discovered by Jeff's ex-partner Fisher. Fisher blackmails them – he will not turn them to Whit if they pay him off with the money that Kathie supposedly stole. Jeff and Fisher get into fistfight and Kathie cold-bloodedly shoots Fisher telling Jeff "you wouldn't have killed him. He would have been against us, gone to Whit" (*Out of the Past*, 1947). In this scene the film presents Kathie as a typical femme fatale who kills for her own good – she does not kill Fisher because she was afraid of Whit or save Jeff, but rather because Fisher wanted the money she had stolen. In the novel Fisher is killed accidentally during the fight over the gun with Jeff. However, both film and novel reveal Kathie's true nature when she abandons Jeff who buries Fisher's body and discovers that Kathie really did steal the money. By burying Fisher's body Jeff becomes an accomplice. Kathie poses as good, frightened woman, who tried to escape from violent Whit, at first, but turns to be very bad indeed, a woman that cares only for herself tries to escape from every relationship with a man and is not afraid to murder someone to reach her goal.

Jeff after some time meets Whit and is taken aback by the presence of Kathie; after she murdered Fisher she came back to Whit. In the novel, Kathie's calculation is strengthened even more when she, after the murderous accident, does not come back to Whit but rather manages to manipulate another man, Guy Parker, a former corrupt chief of San Francisco police who now runs a gambling club. Kathie is a true spider-woman "a leaf that the wind blows from one gutter to another" (*Out of the Past*, 1947) – she exploits these powerful men and they are coming back to her for more, she is an ultimate fatal woman whom no man can resist. She collects men using her "sexuality to acquire wealth, power, and control. She has contacts with the dark men of crime; she figures in the equations of gangsters and mobsters" (Christopher, 1997). Kathie as the femme fatale uses her sexuality to manipulate man, but unlike Mrs. Grayle in *Murder, My Sweet* she does not seduce an old wealthy man, she rather operates with men that can protect her from the law because of her past criminal acts.

Jeff senses that he is being framed. After he discovers a dead body he knows that Whit and Kathie, who has signed an affidavit that Jeff has killed Fisher, teamed up against him, and therefore Jeff tries to stay a step ahead of them. This film's sequence is full of twists and double-crosses; finally Jeff manages to take possession of Whit's documents and decides to outwit everyone who tries to destroy him. Despite this tremendous act he fails to acquire the affidavit and is subsequently accused of two murders. Jeff has to disappear, again, but this time he decides to fight against it, for the sake of his

future with another woman – the good, marrying type. However, Kathie will not let Jeff and Whit to hand her over to police; she murders Whit so Jeff cannot bargain with a dead man. Kathie persuades Jeff to leave with her, however he attempts for the last time to bring Kathie to justice. The final scene plays out in the car when Kathie realizes that Jeff deceived her, she sees police barricade and calls him a "dirty double-crossing rat" (*Out of the Past*, 1947). Kathie shoots Jeff (in his groin) and eventually meets her death when killed by the police. In the novel, however, Mumsie (Kathie) is not killed at the end; she is never punished for her misdeeds, protected by Guy Parker who does not want to admit that she is a murderer even when Red (Jeff) tells him that "you'll be happier if you let the cops have her, Guy. An empty bed is better than a coffin" (Homes, 2001). The character of Jeff/Red, in the novel and also in the film, is punished for his obsession and desire for the femme fatale, he is shot dead.

The difference between the femme fatale and the detective is that the detective strives to maintain his code of honor, thus fights off the sexual desire for the woman, and the woman is willing to abandon whatever ethical concerns just to gain what she desires, longs for. She refuses to be captured or converted even if she must kill or die. Why does she choose this evil path to gain independence, wealth and power? Does the femme fatale, a projection of the 1940's American woman striving for self-realization, have a different option? Why the films noir punish her for trying to achieve that?

Žižek in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) asserts that "there is something real in the illusion, more real than in the reality behind it", so there is also reality in the illusion that the films noir of the 1940's present. They provide a picture of the redefinition of American masculinity and femininity. The gender roles and therefore home and domestic relationships were threatened by the mayhem of the Second World War. The accustomed role of women as housewives and mothers was changed with the break of the war, women had to substitute men in the workforce and therefore their role in domestic sphere gained another dimension, they became breadwinners. When men returned from the front they felt unnecessary and betrayed because of the altered social order. Moreover, "these changes set in motion a temporary confusion in regard to traditional conceptions of sexual role and sexual identity, for both men a and women" (Krutnik, 1991). Therefore when films noir portray women as dominant, predatory, explicitly sexual and independent they have to be punished at the end for their digression from the stereotypical organization of male and female relationship so that the 'proper' social order may be reestablished. The 'independent' woman of the 1940's had "only two choices: work (usually as a performer in a night club) or living off a man. Any potentially progressive treatment of women is severely limited by the distasteful alternatives to marriage and motherhood" (Kaplan, 1983). These two options are also presented in the films noirs analyzed in this article. Moreover, these films suggest that when a woman reveals her desire or even tries to follow it, she has to be punished for exposing her fantasy. She should repress her desires and obey the role given to her by the mainstream society of the 1940's America.

The film noir and hard-boiled femme fatale is a victim of her own desires – for independency, power, money, in short being a master of her own fate – but at the same time, however, she is a victim that suffers at the hands of the society's rules and expectations. When she rebels against these, she becomes a threat to patriarchal system, represented by the male protagonists, mainly the detective. The detective is portrayed here as a role model for not succumbing to the schemes of the fatal woman. Thus he is rewarded by regaining his identity and masculinity. These films – *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1947) – present the masculine dominance as strong and undefeated and women's desires as deadly and thus necessary to suppress or even destroy.

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