

Women in Film Noir: A Reflection of Postwar Society's Evolving

Gender Roles

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Introduction

During World War II, American society experienced a momentous shift in gender roles as more than six million women stepped out of the traditional domestic sphere and transitioned into the wartime economy. Following the resolution of the war, the government and sects of society alike pushed for a return to conventional gendered spaces. Within this period of widespread societal contention and postwar disillusionment, the dark and fatalistic genre of film noir grew in popularity. Film noir brought with it a host of archetypal character. Among the most distinguished were those of the enigmatic femme fatale and the domestic femme attrapeé.

Research Question

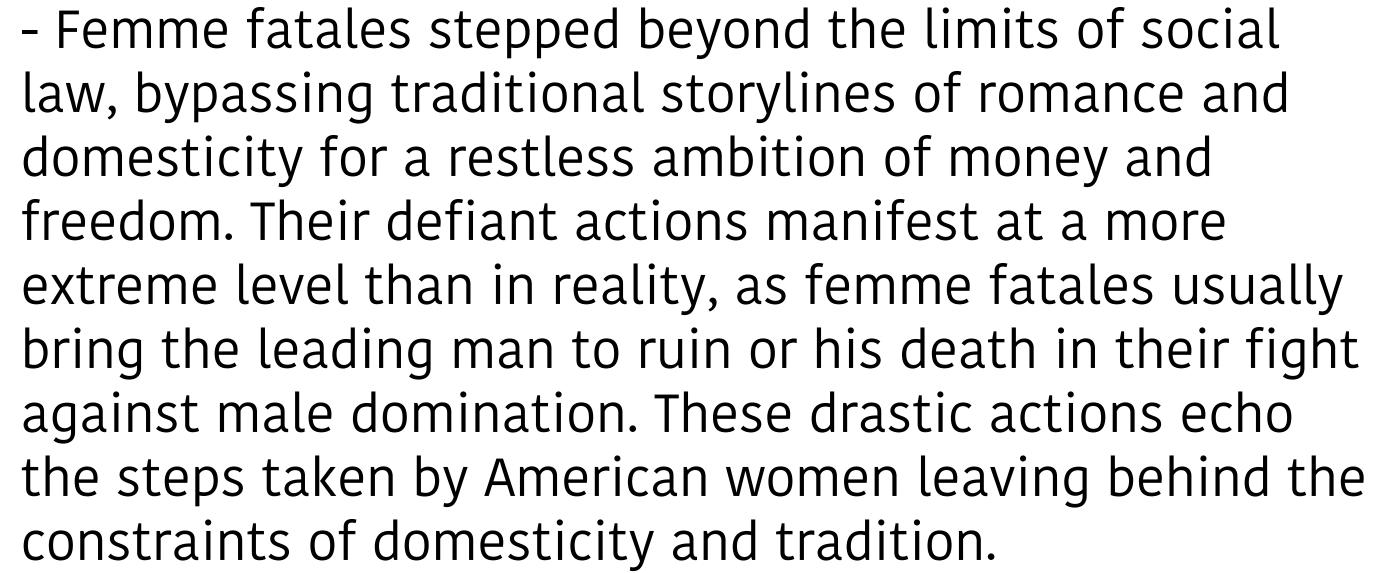
How do the noir films of the 1940s and 1950s interact with and reflect the evolving gender roles in postwar America?

Methods

Cinema and cultural studies lenses were used to perform a close analysis of the noir films *Gun Crazy, Out of the Past,* and *The Reckless Moment* in relation to the historical, and sociopolitical context from which they cannot be separated.

Findings

1. Femme Fatales and the Break from Domesticity - Femme fatales stepped beyond the limits of social



- The way femme fatales are punished in noir is reminiscent of societal backlash against the progressive shift of gender roles. They are not allowed to walk free after overstepping the bounds of acceptable behavior, instead femme fatales are constrained by marriage, imprisoned, tortured, or murdered.



Out of the Past's femme fatale, Kathie, moments after her demise.

Gun Crazy's femme fatale, Laurie,

performing with revolvers for her job.

2. Femme Attrapeés and Traditional Gender Roles

- Femme attrapeés are engrossed in their familial duties and therefore reflect the return to tradition to which society wished to revert. Instead of breaking free from conventions, these characters are loyal and docile women who fulfill the expected roles of partner, wife or mother.
- They are permitted to survive noir narratives because their actions are deemed acceptable when compared to what society at the time viewed as the ideal behavior of women.



Gun Crazy's femme attrapeé, Ruby, cooking with her three children nearby.



Femme attrapeé, Ann, departing town in the final shots of *Out of the Past* .

3. Film Noir's Criticism of Gendered Ideals

- Even though noir films allow femme attrapeés to survive the films' finales, the genre offers a denigrated depiction of this idealized lifestyle. Instead of being represented as content with their role of stay-at-home nurturer, the mothers in film noir are instead depicted as overwhelmed or trapped by their maternal obligations.

Conclusion

- Close examinations of noir films reveal that female film noir characters' interactions with narratives of crime, love and family reflect contemporaneous societal concerns about progressive gender roles.
- Femme fatales reflect the women who have defied norms whereas femme attrapeés mirror the women who reassumed traditional gender roles.
- The tragic end of the femme fatale echoes the backlash to the changing place of women. The femme attrapeés' survival reflects the desire to return to and acceptance of traditional gender roles
- Not even conventional family life escapes film noir's tendency towards criticism.
- Noir was originally popular in the mid 1900s, but its ability to capture and reflect on societal occurrences through the art of film remains critical today as society continues to evolve.

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Overwhelmed femme attrapeé, Lucia, breaks down in *The Reckless Moment*.