Gender Roles and the Institution of Family: A Cultural Interpretation of *Double Indemnity (1944)*

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Abstract

Double Indemnity (1944) is a classic American noir film. This thesis analyzes this film as a representative of the film noir genre, interprets the main character Phyllis Dietrichson from a cultural perspective, discusses the social background of the American society between the first and second waves of women's rights movement, and finally comes to the conclusion that the society's oppressive attitude toward women during this low ebb prepared women and the whole society for the next wave of fighting for more social, cultural, and economic equality.

Key words: Double Indemnity; Noir; Cultural interpretation; Women's rights movement

INTRODUCTION

Culture and film are inextricably intertwined. If we apply the famous question "which was first – the chicken or the egg?" to the relationship between culture and film, the answer is definite: culture was first.

Film is of course the product of culture. According to Edward Jay Whetmore (1987)'s "cone effect" model, certain aspects of real-life experience are used by a communicator to form constructed mediated reality (CMR).

CMR is transmitted to the audience to form perceived mediated reality (PMR) which is in turn applied to real life. In the case of film, the theory means that filmmakers make a film based on real life so that it reflects the contemporary society and culture. The audience see this film, interpret it, and apply their perception to real life, thus in a way allow film to influence culture and society.

As "PMR is a highly selective process" (Whetmore, 1987, p.11), we choose what we wish to perceive and retain. We pay attention to what we regard as meaningful. So the process of perceiving is determined by the individual's knowledge, life experience, perceptiveness, and most of all, cultural background. People of different cultures may form different PMRs. Therefore, in order to fully and correctly understand the message of a film, we need an understanding of its cultural context.

This essay puts the Hollywood film *Double Indemnity* (1944) in its cultural context and tries to culturally interpret it from the aspects of social mediating structure theory and film studies.

Double Indemnity is regarded by most as a classic film noir masterpiece. The story was written by representative hard-boiled detective novelist James M. Cain based on a 1927 crime perpetrated by a married Queens woman and her lover. The film was directed by the outstanding Hollywood director Billy Wilder. It received no Academy Awards, but it was nominated in seven categories: Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best B/W Cinematography, Best Sound Recording, and Best Scoring of a Dramatic Picture.

The term "double indemnity" refers to a clause in certain life insurance policies where the insuring company agrees to pay twice the standard amount in cases of accidental death.

The story happens in Los Angeles in 1930s or 1940s. Walter Neff is a successful insurance salesman for Pacific All-Risk. He returns to his office building late one night. Neff, shot and bleeding, sits down at his desk and tells the

whole story into a Dictaphone for his colleague and friend Barton Keyes, a claims adjuster.

He first meets this seductve woman Phyllis Dietrichson during a routine visit to renew an automobile insurance policy for her husband. They flirt with each other. Phyllis asks how she could take out a policy on her husband's life without him knowing it. Neff realizes that she intends to murder her husband and refuses her.

Phyllis comes to Neff's home and persuades him that the two of them, together, should kill her husband. Neff knows all the tricks of the insurance business and comes up with a plan in which Phyllis's husband will fall from a moving train so that Pacific All-Risk will, by the "double indemnity" clause in the insurance policy, have to pay the widow twice the normal amount.

They carry out the plan successfully. Keyes, a tenacious investigator, at first thinks Mr. Dietrichson dies of an accident, but eventually concludes that Mrs. Dietrichson and an unknown partner must be behind the husband's death. He has no reason to suspect Neff, someone he has worked with for a long time and views with great affection.

Neff is not only worried about Keyes. Mr. Dietrichson's daughter, Lola, comes to him convinced that her stepmother Phyllis murdered her father because Lola's mother also died under suspicious circumstances when Phyllis was her nurse. Then he learns Phyllis is seeing Lola's boyfriend behind her back. Trying to save himself and no longer caring about the money, Neff decides to make the police believe Phyllis and Lola's boyfriend did the murder, which is what Keyes now believes.

When Neff and Phyllis meet, she explains that she has been seeing Lola's boyfriend only to provoke him into killing the suspicious Lola in a jealous rage. Neff is about to kill Phyllis when she shoots him first. Neff is badly wounded but still standing and walks towards her. He coldly says "Goodbye, baby", then shoots twice and kills her.

Neff drives to his office where he dictates his full confession to Keyes, who arrives and hears enough of the confession to understand everything. Neff tells Keyes he is going to Mexico rather than face a death sentence but collapses before he can reach the elevator.

When considered independently, although the plot is rather complicated, the story is far from unusual. The murder of the husband by the unfaithful wife and her lover is nothing new in all societies. But *Double Indemnity* is a representative film during Hollywood's classic film noir period. The prevalent themes of many noir films are the wife murdering the husband and the femme fatale seducing and manipulating man. There must have been a reason for such a film genre to appear and become popular. Therefore, *Double Indemnity* should not be regarded as a usual murder story but an archetype. We need to interpret it in its cultural context.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*

The film noir genre is an American cultural phenomenon. This genre originated in Hollywood and became popular in the US. Although other countries also made some noir films later, the first noir films and a majority of noir films were American.

Film noir was inspired by previous literary and artistic traditions along with the socio-history of the period it grew out of.

The major artistic origin was German expressionism of the 1920s. As a movement, German expressionism spanned many media, including theatre, architecture, music, painting, printmaking and sculpture. Encyclopædia Britannica (2019) defines it as an "artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. The artist accomplishes this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements." It was mainly a European artistic movement but greatly influenced Hollywood films, especially when many European filmmakers immigrated to America in 1920s and 1930s.

However, when we consider film noir as a reflection of American society and culture, we need to pay more attention to its literary origin, namely hard-boiled detective novels, as it is purely American.

Hard-boiled novels, also called pulp fiction, were very popular in America in 1930s. The hero was often a proletarian tough guy detective who walks the mean streets, and often finds himself on the edge of law and crime. There is usually a femme fatale, a sexually attractive woman, especially one who leads men into danger or destruction. The contemporary America is described as an urban and industrialized place where people are in the hands of naturalistic drives. The language was cut short and it was often marked by verbal wit. Many of these works were adapted to the screen, such as the works of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler and Horace McCoy to mention some, and many of the authors were hired by Hollywood as screenwriters.

When we try to have a cultural interpretation of the gender issue portrayed in the film *Double Indemnity*, we need to consider the period in which the original story was written, the film was made and shown, and the socio-cultural context at that time.

Written by James M. Cain, the story first appeared in 1935 in an 8-part serial form in Liberty Magazine and was adapted into a novella *Three of a Kind* in 1943. The film *Double Indemnity*, one of the first noir films by Hollywood, was made and shown in 1944 and the film noir genre reached its heyday in the late 1940s and 1950s. What was the American women's situation like from 1930s to 1950s?

The history of women's rights movements in the United States is divided into three waves by feminist scholars. The first wave refers to the women's rights movement of the 18th to early 20th centuries, which dealt mainly with the suffrage movement. It focused primarily on fighting political inequalities and gaining the right of women's suffrage. The first-wave feminism is considered to have ended with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granting women the right to vote.

When this happened, most American women believed that they had achieved ultimate victory after long and tedious fight. But did they really win? Even though the forces such as the law, the government, the church and the family finally appeared to give in, they did so in name only.

One of the evidence is the situation of women employment. In 1920s and 1930s, women employment had very little improvement in the professional and business fields. There were hardly any female doctors or lawyers. Women employees were also rare in government departments. Even in the area of college staff that opened to women earlier than other areas, women were losing rather than gaining grounds. Most working women were concentrated in the service occupations, at the bottom rung of the employment ladder, and satisfied with doing routine jobs.

When World War II came in the early 1940s, men were drafted to fight, and America needed workers and supplies. Women were encouraged to work. The federal government told the women that victory could not be achieved without their entry into the workforce. Working was considered part of being a good citizen; a working wife was a patriotic person. But this didn't mean that working women (especially wives) were accepted by the public opinion. Many people just assumed that working women's positions were temporary and they would just return to their homes voluntarily as soon as men came back. Although some women chose to stay at work because they enjoyed their newly found independence or the income they brought in was important, most women did return home, voluntarily or not.

Generally speaking, the attitude toward the American women's situation from 1930s to 1950s can be described as an unconscious dissatisfaction.

During the first wave, women tried to fight the traditional white male power structure which had been taken for granted. They failed to overthrow it but did succeed in shaking it. The family unit based on women's responsibility for childrearing, on male supremacy and thus her submission to male authority and the sexual double standard, was severely threatened at its core. People realized, maybe vaguely, that to follow through on Women's rights movement would mean abolition of the traditional family structure, which certainly gave men quite a few advantages. So it was natural that men grew suspicious of women's demand for more power.

On the other hand, women had experienced new opportunities, new independence, and were experiencing their own individuality. The war allowed women to make decisions, and it gave them a chance to fight for their rights. The traditional family structure confined them more than supporting them. "The key event that marked the reemergence of this movement in the postwar era was the surprise popularity of Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. Writing as a housewife and mother (though she had had a long story of political activism, as well), Friedan described the problem with no name the dissatisfaction of educated, middle class wives and mothers like herself who, looking at their nice homes and families, wondered guiltily if that was all there was to life was not new; the vague sense of dissatisfaction plaguing housewives was a staple topic for women's magazines in the 1950s. But Friedan, instead of blaming individual women for failing to adapt to women's proper role, blamed the role itself and the society that created it" (Norton, 2005, p.865).

Thus, the second wave of women's rights movement began in the early 1960s and lasted through the late 1980s. It was largely concerned with issues of social, cultural, economic equality as well as further political inequalities.

CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF THE CHARACTERS AS CULTURAL SYMBOLS

With an understanding of the women's position in the patriarchal family and the patriarchal society, we can easily see the main characters in *Double Indemnity* as not only just characters of a murder story, but also representatives and symbols of different social groups. The film's portrayal of them to some extent reflect the social reality of 1930s and 1940s.

Women and power

Phyllis is the most important character in the film and a classic femme fatale in the history of film noir. The femme fatale, defined simply, is an irresistibly attractive woman, especially one who leads men into danger. This character type represents an attack on traditional womanhood and the patriarchal family. She refuses to play the role of devoted, submissive wife and loving, self-sacrificing mother that mainstream society prescribes for women. She is ambitious in that she seeks independence from her husband. Unfortunately, this independence, usually an economic one, is always achieved through crime as there leaves few alternatives for her in this male power social structure. Her attempts to kill her husband can be regarded as a symbol of women's attempts to break away from the patriarchal family. In order to attain this aim, she uses her feminine sexuality to seduce, manipulate men and eventually destroys them. She is so unprecedentedly strong that she makes men comparatively weaker and in

this way disrupts the male power structure. However, her feminine power is not first-hand as men's power that is gained through political and economic power, but rather second-hand power that comes from being sexy and attractive to men and therefore being able to use their power. It still follows the old pattern of "man conquers the world, woman conquers the man", thus this female power cannot be considered real power or an improvement in women's status. As a punishment for trying to gain power and independence, the femme fatale is almost always destroyed at the end, which shows the mainstream will of maintaining the traditional social and family structure. The femme fatale dies and everything is back to "normal".

We can see Phyllis' demonstration of her "power" when she and the hero Walter Neff first met. Neff stands in the doorway and Phyllis appears at the top of stairs landing looking down. This establishes her dominant position in their relationship throughout the story. She wears only a bath towel on account of being interrupted while sunbathing, exposing her shoulders and legs to Neff's fixed gaze. Later as she comes downstairs into the living room, the camera is focused on her legs (from Neff's point-of-view) where she wears an engraved, gold anklet on her left ankle, flashing it at him. Then her body and finally, her face come into the frame. She is immediately sexualised. After she sits down, with her legs crossed and drawn up sideways, Neff sees her anklet and comments: "That's a honey of an anklet you're wearing, Mrs. Dietrichson." Later in their conversation, he flirts with her about the anklet again:

Neff: I wish you'd tell me what's engraved on that anklet.

Phyllis: Just my name.

Neff: As for instance?

Phyllis: Phyllis.

Neff: Phyllis, huh. I think I like that.

Phyllis: But you're not sure.

Neff: I'd have to drive it around the block a couple of times.

Neff shows a strong sexual interest in her. But where does her sexual power come from? It comes from the suggestion of nakedness under the bath towel, her anklet that attracts Neff's attention to her ankles, and her tolerance of Neff's flirtation. These are all considered by the mainstream value very indecent behavior for a middle class white married woman. In a patriarchal society, sex is only acceptable within marriage for the purpose of reproduction. But Phyllis, or almost all femme fatales, use sex for pleasure and as a weapon or a tool to control men. In this way, they threaten the tradition family and social structures because they control their own sexuality outside of marriage. Women who achieve power this way undermine themselves at the same time.

Phyllis' sexuality reflects a social reality in 1930s and 1940s. After gaining their right of suffrage, women were still dissatisfied and asked for more power. Pathetically, the status quo of women's employment gave them no hope. It was as if they could only turn to their most primitive weapon of female sexuality. This weapon might help them to some extent, but would not bring them any "real" power.

Women and family

Although Phyllis murdered her husband, she, as well as most other femme fatales, is first and foremost a victim of the patriarchal family. She only resorts to murder to free herself from the unbearable marriage with Mr. Dietrichson who tries to possess and control her, as if she were a piece of property or a pet.

Family, instead of offering warmth and support, is a trap that confines her and is associated with unhappiness, boredom, and the absence of romantic love. In the film, we can clearly see that Phyllis is an outsider in her family. The home is not her home, but her husband's home. Her status is only a bit higher than a maid or a piece of furniture. When Walter first enters the living room, the camera shows the audience a pair of framed photographs of the father and his daughter by the first wife — no pictures of Phyllis are displayed, as if she has been excluded from the family unit. Judging from interaction among them, Phyllis is never accepted by Mr. Dietrichson as a wife or by Lola as a mother. She doesn't belong here. Thus she must have a strong sense of alienation.

The family life is also despairingly boring. The night when Neff came to have Mr. Dietrichson sign the insurance renewal, the audience get a glimpse of how this family spend their spare time in the evening: Mr. Dietrichson resting on the couch, Lola and Phyllis playing Chinese Checkers at a table on the other side of the room. They are not playing for fun, just killing time, for Lola soon stands up and refuses to finish the game because "it bores me stiff". The dim low-key lighting creates many shadows and makes the family atmosphere even more gloomy and lifeless. These three people hate each other, yet they spend endlessly boring evenings together like this, perhaps every day. Lola can sometimes escape this family by going out to meet her friends or boyfriend, but Phyllis, who is also young and active like Lola, has to stay with her elderly husband. There is no escape for her except by the illegal means.

Her husband is not just old. What is worse is his attitude to her. He shows no affection, interest, or respect for her, only indifference. Phyllis complains to Neff: "I feel as if he was watching me. Not that he cares, not anymore. But he keeps me on a leash so tight I can't breathe." He controls her physically and economically. "He's so mean to me. Every time I buy a dress or a pair of shoes, he yells his head off. He never lets me go anywhere. He keeps me shut up. He's always been mean to me. Even his life insurance all goes to that daughter of his. That Lola." The lighting and mise-en-scene in the film further intensifies the impression of the family as a

trap or "mausoleum", particularly for Phyllis. She paces the living room as she describes the routine of her life to Walter, crossing and recrossing bars of shadow cast by a window blind — like a caged animal in its cage, a prisoner in her own home.

The distorted relationship between Phyllis and her family is not a special case. This family atmosphere of coldness, entrapment and alienation is omnipresent in almost all noir films. "Film noir offers us again and again examples of abnormal or monstrous behaviour, which defy the patterns established for human social interaction, and which hint at a series of radical and irresolvable contradictions buried deep within the total system of economic and social interactions that constitute the known world" (Harvey, 1998, p.23). Although exaggerations definitely exist, to some extent, film noir reflects the reality of the American society. This negative representation of the family sphere is an attack on the dominant social values. This attack on the status quo family is not an all-out one, but it exists nonetheless. It can be considered an expression of women's vague dissatisfaction with their status.

After winning their suffrage right in 1920, American women still felt oppressed and confined. And this time, they inspected the more intimate social structure – family and marriage, and the gender role. This dissatisfaction with the status quo family probably came into existence after the end of the first wave of women's rights movement, but its expression was postponed by the World War II. During the war, the ideology of national unity helped to gloss over and conceal gender issues. But once the war was over in mid-1940s, this ideology lost its credibility, and the gender issues reappeared and found expression in noir films.

On the other hand, noir films react to this dissatisfaction by punishing femme fatales and defending the patriarchal family. The order is usually restored by assigning femme fatales to a jail sentence or violent death (Phyllis is shot by Neff). Film noir reinforces the male-dominated status quo family by destroying women who threaten the established order. It often depicts transgressions against the family, like a discontented wife murdering her husband. But rather than casting doubt on the traditional nuclear family, these female transgressors exist only to be beaten down and destroyed. Film noir therefore provides an affirmation of the dominant social order and a warning against disturbing it. As is claimed by Claire Johnston (1998, p.109), "Far from opening up social contradictions, the [noir] genre as a whole …… performs a profoundly confirmatory function for the reader, both revealing and simultaneously eliminating the problematic aspects of social reality by the assertion of the unproblematic nature of the Law."

Janey Place (1998, p.67) also believes that film noir tends to destroy the independent woman as a moral lesson to the audience: "The ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it."

CONCLUSION

From *Double Indemnity* as a representative noir film, we can get a better understanding of the gender issues in the American society between the first and second waves of women's rights movement, especially in the post-war era.

After the first wave, the still dissatisfied women gradually realized their newly-earned legal equality did not improve their social and family status much. They began to question the institution of the traditional family and gender roles. The economic independence some of them experienced also urged them to view traditional womanhood in a negative way. The femme fatale in film noir represents the most direct attack on traditional womanhood and family. She refuses to play the role of devoted wife and loving mother that mainstream society prescribes for women. She finds marriage to be confining, loveless, sexless, and dull, and she uses all of her cunning and sexual attractiveness to gain her independence.

However, American society during this period supports the status quo values of community and family, and prescribes strict gender roles for men and women. It was a society obsessed with returning women to their "proper place" in the home. Such a society's reaction to women's request for independence is expressed in film noir.

Film noir emphasizes the danger that independent women represent for men. They tempt men to venture beyond the safety of the family into dark crime. Women in film noir tend to express their independence in sexual terms — they use their sexuality to manipulate men, rather than submitting it to the moral code of a traditional family and the control of a husband. Their sexual independence threatens the men and the family relationships around them by providing a dangerous alternative to the traditional family unit.

Film noir restores order by punishing them with violent death or prison sentence at the end. The message is clear: women who transgress the boundaries of conventional family life meet with and deserve the most extreme punishment, so do the men who fall victim to their sexual charms.

From film noir, we can see how the mainstream American society realized women's increasing demand for independence and power; feels threatened, and reacted negatively by punishing and demonizing women.

But all these oppressions only prepared women for the second wave of women's rights movement from early 1960s to late 1980s. The femme fatale, in spite of her inevitable death, leaves behind the image of a strong, exciting, and unrepentant woman who defies the control of men and rejects the institution of the family.

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