

Evelyn Drake

ENGL 367—Intro to Film

Professor Spadoni

April 25, 2024

### Fortune and Fate: Greed, Desperation, and Destiny in *Detour*

In the film *Detour* (Edgar Ulmer, 1945), the motif of money as a source of suffering and turmoil is intricately woven into the film's narrative form. The plot is driven by the character Al's attempt to cross the country to visit his lover, Sue. Because he cannot afford to travel any other way, he is forced to hitchhike—this circumstance sets the stage for a deep exploration into the association between money and suffering. As Al digs himself deeper and deeper into a world of crime, deception, and inevitable mortality, the film's inclusion of the motifs of death and fate further forms the association between money and suffering. From Al's initial encounter with death during the scene where Mr. Haskell dies, to Vera's ominous warnings about fate, the film also raises existential questions about the certainty of death. Through the careful use of narrative structure, setting, camera positioning, music, and dialogue, the film weaves both the motifs of money and death into a compelling, cynical, and cohesive cautionary tale about greed, the fragility of life, and the inevitability of fate.

Firstly, *Detour* sets up this association between suffering and money not even two minutes into the movie (1:35). In this scene, Al is sitting next to a man at a restaurant. Positioned on the same side of the bar, the two men have a conversation while drinking their coffee. While the man with the dark hat appears open and talkative, Al's body language is closed off as he drinks his coffee with his head down. After the stranger gathers his attention, the camera moves

ever-so-slightly closer to Al's face while its focus is primarily on the stranger, leaving Al's face slightly blurry (1:47). The man takes a few steps closer to Al, and the audience can see his hopeless and despondent expression. The emphasis on Al's face, which takes up about a third of the frame horizontally, clearly indicates his distress, leaving the viewer to wonder about his backstory. Eventually, Al snaps at the man, indicating that something is clearly wrong. The first mention of money occurs when the stranger asks the waitress to "give [him] change for a dime." The man uses the money to play a song on the diner's jukebox, which immediately distresses and enrages Al. As the song plays, the camera cuts to a close shot of Al's upset facial expression, further emphasizing his discomfort. While this association is somewhat subtle, the significance of the film starting with a small example of how money causes Al to suffer should not be overlooked. This sets up the motif of money as a source of significant distress for Al—something that will be expanded upon significantly throughout the film. Through the emphasis on Al's negative facial expressions and body language, as well as his behavior towards the man who asks for money and uses it to play a song on the diner's jukebox, the negative association of money with suffering that occurs throughout the film is highlighted for the first time.

Later, Al receives news that his lover Sue is temporarily leaving him to travel to Hollywood. This obviously makes Al upset, which drives the events that transpire throughout the film. Directly after their intensely emotional conversation, the camera dissolves into a scene where Al is performing a piano piece at the club he works at (9:51). Despite the frantic pace and positive tone of the song, cuts to Al's face reveal his true troubled and depressed demeanor. This plays into another one of the film's motifs—impersonation. As he puts on this positive front to the diners that he has his back turned to, his true sadness is disguised. When he finishes the song, a man approaches him, saying: "Say Robert, you hit the jackpot this time. Ten bucks," and hands

him the money, which Al hesitantly and solemnly accepts. It is important to note that \$10 in 1945 was worth much more than it is in today's society, an important detail that modern audiences may overlook. As Al turns around to look at the man walking away, the camera cuts to a close shot of his face which takes up the majority of the screen (11:36). This emphasizes the extent of his negative feelings and disappointment despite the large amount of money he just received. While this is happening, his narration says: "So when this drunk handed me a ten-spot after a request, I couldn't get very excited. What was it, I asked myself? A piece of paper crawling with germs. Couldn't buy anything I wanted. It couldn't..." As the dialogue trails off, the viewer is left to draw their own conclusions about the end of the sentence, with some possible interpretations being "...bring Sue back" or "...fill the void in my heart." This scene clearly emphasizes Al's negative feelings towards money, directly challenging the idea that money is capable of buying happiness or soothing any sort of emotional pain. The narration accompanying this interaction highlights Al's disillusionment with money's inability to fulfill his emotional needs. Along with the emphasis on Al's negative facial expressions, these characteristics of the scene reinforce the motif of money, demonstrating that this will be a recurring issue throughout the film.

After this, Al decides he needs to visit Sue to restore their relationship. He inserts coin after coin into the payphone in an attempt to reach her, another small but notable instance of the film's money motif. After calling her and assuring her that he'll be there, the screen fades to an image of a map demonstrating his journey, interspersed with shots of him hitchhiking (13:55). His narration during this montage states that hitchhiking is the only way he can afford to cross the country, later stating that "Even after hocking everything, [he] only had enough money to eat," further emphasizing the importance of money. Directly after this, he states: "Money. You

know what that is. It's the stuff you never have enough of. Little green things with George Washington's picture that men slave for, commit crimes for, die for. It's the stuff that has caused more trouble in the world than anything else we ever invented, simply because there's too little of it. At least I had too little of it." This is the second instance where Al disparages money—while he emphasizes its importance in the society in which he lives, he clearly feels negatively about the concept of it. Furthermore, Al's dialogue in this scene sets up the plot and main conflict of the film, as his inability to afford transportation besides hitchhiking gets him into the terrible situation he faces at the end. As Al embarks on his journey across the United States, his dialogue elaborates on his negative feelings surrounding money, and he notes that his lack of it will drive his actions throughout the film.

Next, the film shows Al's desperate attempts at hitchhiking until he is eventually picked up by a man named Mr. Haskell. After they stop to eat, Haskell generously offers to pay for Al's meal, remarking "If it's the money, don't worry about paying for it. This time it's on me... You make your first million, maybe you can do the same for me." Haskell's statement also foreshadows Al's future monetary gain. While this dialogue doesn't really contribute to the overarching plot in the way that money does several other times throughout the film, the mention of money in so many different conversations brings it to the viewer's attention, reinforcing this motif. At night, Al drives them farther while Haskell sleeps. Al eventually notices that Haskell is unresponsive, and he stops the car and panics. Haskell has died, and this introduces another motif—death. Al realizes the circumstances of Haskell's death are suspicious, stating that "If Haskell came to, which, of course, he couldn't, even he would swear I conked him over the head for his dough." In this scene, money really begins to drive the film's plot. Al is aware of the fact that heinous crimes are frequently committed for the sake of earning money, as he mentions

earlier during the montage of him hitchhiking. In an attempt to avoid this accusation, he drags Haskell's body and hides it in a ditch while ominous music plays, emphasizing the gravity of his situation (23:45). He states that while he had no intention of robbing Haskell, he needed to take his money in order to purchase gas for the car. He then says: "Besides, it was stupid of me to leave all that money on a dead man," potentially because it would go unused or stolen otherwise. He also mentions the association of money with social status, remarking that "The owner of such an expensive car would never be wearing [his clothes]." This event also reinforces the film's impersonation motif, as Al realizes that he must convincingly impersonate Haskell until he can safely abandon his car. Al's narration during this scene further emphasizes the importance of money and its association with death—he recognizes that Haskell's money seems to be an obvious motivation for his death, and he decides to pocket it, which inevitably causes him problems later down the line.

Eventually, Al arrives at a hotel with all of Haskell's possessions. He awakes from a dream in which he clearly feels troubled about the circumstances of Haskell's death. Frantic and distressing music plays as he wakes up, further emphasizing his guilt as he grapples with his fate (29:43). He then begins to investigate Haskell's possessions, stating: "The first thing I found out was that I had \$768. This was a lot of jack, but believe me, it was the kind of money I'd rather not have." This is significant because it further emphasizes the film's association of money with crime, and Al knows that the fact that he took Haskell's money makes the circumstances of his death even more suspicious. As Al goes through Haskell's possessions, he finds a letter addressed to his distant dad in which Haskell poses as a salesman, further contributing to the film's motif of false identities/impersonation. The frantic music combined with Al's

acknowledgement of Haskell's money, and the danger that inherently comes with it, further emphasizes the motif as money as a source of his trouble and unhappiness.

After Al leaves the hotel, he inevitably has to stop for gas. At the gas station, he offers a woman named Vera a ride, and the two drive off. Eventually, Vera, who rode with Haskell from Louisiana, accuses Al of killing and impersonating Haskell and asks him where his body is. When she reveals this to Al, a dramatic musical sting plays as she asks him "Where did you leave his body?" (35:37). Once again, music is utilized to convey the gravity of Al's situation. Despite this, Vera has no intention of turning Al in to the police—she wants to get something out of this situation as well. Specifically, Vera is motivated by her greed and desire for Haskell's money, and the film has been priming the audience to recognize money's association with crime and suffering this entire time. She asks to see Haskell's money and tells Al that the only way to get away is to sell Haskell's car. However, the viewer may be skeptical of her motives given the way money has been portrayed throughout the film. Furthermore, this scene introduces the motif of fate to the audience. Haskell's narration says: "Whichever way you turn, fate sticks out a foot to trip you," exemplifying Al's feelings of helplessness and doom. Overall, the introduction of Vera's character, portrayed as distrustful and greedy, elaborates upon the film's association between money, crime, and trouble and complicates the plot even further.

When the two eventually arrive at a hotel, they begin to fight. This scene contains numerous mentions of death and fate—significant motifs found throughout the film. Al tries unsuccessfully to convince Vera that he didn't kill Haskell, bringing the topic of death back to light. Slightly later, Vera muses on the nature of life, death, and fate, telling Al that "Life's like a ball game, you gotta take a swing at whatever comes along before you wake up and realize you're in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning." This is especially meaningful given the next thing she says: "There's

plenty of people dying this minute that would give anything to trade places with [Al],” warning Al that death is inevitable and “It’s only a question of when.” Vera’s dialogue in this scene describes fate and the inevitability of death, continuing the death motif that reminds the viewer of their own mortality. Al’s guilt is further demonstrated when he attempts to call Sue and hangs up on her without speaking to her. Sue’s repeated calls of “hello,” along with cuts to Al’s face as he sits in silence, serves to emphasize the disconnection between the two as a result of Al’s fate (49:15). The dialogue in this scene shifts the motif in focus from money, the arguable motivation for Al and Vera’s actions, to death and fate, symbolizing the inevitable consequences of their situation.

The next morning, the two drive the car to a dealership in an attempt to sell it. As they drive there, Vera tells Al: “You think we can get \$2,000?,” to which he replies: “I don’t know, but don’t worry. I’ll squeeze as much out of this guy as I can.” In addition to exemplifying money and its association with greed, these lines of dialogue are very significant to Al’s character development. If he was truly just concerned about selling the car to evade the police, there would be no reason for him to try to gain as much money as possible. When the two arrive at the car wash, a feeling of tension is created because the two are impersonating Haskell and his wife in order to sell the car without arousing any suspicion. This scene further contributes to the film’s false identity motif; identity theft comes with serious consequences which furthers the film’s suspenseful atmosphere. The dealer offers Al \$1,600 for the car, although Vera haggles with him and offers \$1,850 for it, and the two parties eventually compromise on the price. The repeated mentions of large sums of money (which would seem even larger for audiences in 1945) emphasizes the severity and scale of their crimes. As the film progresses, money becomes increasingly problematic yet desired for Al, which causes him to dig himself into a deeper and

deeper hole of despair, emphasizing the direct connection between money and his suffering.

When Al looks in the car's dash compartment, he finds Haskell's wallet, which Vera decides to pocket. While Al is more apprehensive about his identity theft, Vera has no qualms with benefiting financially from the situation as much as possible. This is further exemplified by the fact that when the two flee from the dealership after Al is unable to produce the name of Haskell's insurance company, Vera tells him that she wants to keep the car. Al and Vera's unsuccessful attempt to sell the car further highlights the film's motifs of impersonation and financial greed through their actions and dialogue.

Finally, during the climax of the film, the two of them get into a significant argument over their financial circumstances, and Al eventually tells Vera: "You're being a goon. That's the way people end up behind the 8-ball. Once they get a few dollars, they become greedy and want more." This is significant because Al is, once again, specifically and directly mentioning the consequences of greed and the pursuit of money. Vera, who is becoming increasingly drunk, threatens to call the police and eventually locks herself in the room with the phone. The phone's cord is tangled around her neck in a way such that Al inadvertently strangles her in his attempt to break the phone line under the door. Afterwards, the film ends with a shot of Al walking away as a police officer pulls up and arrests him. As he walks through the night, he passes a foreboding sign that reads "DANGER," which emphasizes the severity of his circumstances (1:06:52).

When Al gets into the police car and rides off, he ruminates on the nature of fate: "Fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all." This line of dialogue ties the film's themes of greed, fate, and death all together, as he is ultimately resigned to the consequences of his actions and destiny.



Overall, the motif of money in *Detour* is used to explore themes of greed, desperation, and resignation to fate. Money serves as a constant source of Al's suffering throughout the entire film, and his desperate attempts to avoid arrest through impersonation, combined with Vera's greed and fatalistic acceptance of her death, form a cautionary tale about the futility of escaping fate. Furthermore, the film's motif of impersonation drives the plot forward and helps create a tense and suspenseful narrative, as Al digs himself deeper and deeper into his inevitable fate. By the end of the film, he feels profoundly guilty about his circumstances, but he is forced to live with the consequences of his actions. *Detour's* motifs of money, impersonation, fate, and death are created and reinforced through the film's use of dialogue, narrative form, stylistic techniques, setting, and music.