

The Quintessential Femme Fatale

Marisol Figueroa

Department of Personalized Learning, Northern Arizona University

HUMA 381: Reflections Soc/Postwar Cinema

Professor Pamela Hunter

January 18, 2023

The Quintessential Femme Fatale

In “The Lethal Femme Fatale in Noir Tradition” by Jack Boozer, the quintessential femme fatale of classic film noir is described as being “criminally depraved” and “a catalyst for criminal behavior in men” (Boozer, 1999/2000). Furthermore, in “Dames in the Driver’s Seat: Rereading Film Noir”, Jans B. Wager describes the quintessential femme fatale as “always causing her own destruction or, at the very least, containment within the prison walls or marriage” (Wager, 2005). That is, according to Wager, the term femme fatale implicates the female character in “her own inevitable demise” (Wager, 2005). To provide some historical context, the femme fatale archetype of classic noir arose from a “militarization of male circumstances and attitudes” that increased the defensive stance against women in the paid workforce, especially those who exhibited financial independence (Boozer, 1999/2000). This “militarization of male circumstances and attitudes” stemmed from veterans coming home from World War II and assuming they would once more “wield economic authority and retake command of the home front” (Boozer, 1999/2000). During the 1940s and 1950s, “ambitious women” conjured paranoia that was evident in the storylines of classic films noir, in which femme fatales were portrayed as criminally depraved, catalysts for criminal behavior in men, and responsible for their own destruction (Boozer, 1999/2000). Two examples of quintessential femme fatales of classic noir are Kitty Collins from “The Killers” and Irene Neves from “Sudden Fear”; of course, both women meet the criteria for quintessential femme fatales by being responsible for their own destruction, criminally depraved, and a catalyst for criminal behavior in

men. Thus, the quintessential femme fatale causes her own destruction, is criminally depraved, and is a catalyst for criminal behavior in men.

The quintessential femme fatale causes her own destruction. In “The Killers”, femme fatale Kitty is responsible for her own destruction. She teamed up with “Big Jim” Colfax to hire two hitmen to have the Swede assassinated. Life insurance investigator Riordan and police officer Sam Lubinsky discover that she and “Big Jim” are responsible for the Swede’s death. Before “Big Jim” could absolve her of her participation in the crime, he passed away and it is implied that law enforcement held Kitty responsible for her actions. If Kitty had not conspired with “Big Jim” to have the Swede murdered, she would have never had to worry about being held accountable by law enforcement. So, clearly, Kitty is responsible for her own grim ending. In “Sudden Fear”, femme fatale Irene is also responsible for her own destruction. When she and her lover Lester find his wife Myra’s original will, they discover that most of her fortune will be turned over to a foundation (however, unbeknownst to them, Myra was editing her will so that Lester would inherit her fortune). Irene then encourages Lester to murder his wife so they can obtain her money and they begin concocting an elaborate murder scheme. Though, neither of them realized that they were being recorded. When Myra learned of their plot, she conceived of a murder scheme of her own. Lester became aware of this and in revenge, began to chase her in his car. When Lester tried to run Myra over with his car, he mistaked Irene for Myra and accidentally killed Irene (and himself). If Irene had not suggested to Lester to kill Myra, there would not have been so much animosity between the two and Lester would have never tried to run Myra over with his car (which led to her own death). So, evidently, Myra was the one that caused all the

trouble in the film that led to her accidental death by encouraging Lester to kill Irene. So, quintessential femme fatales Kitty Collins from “The Killers” and Irene Neves from “Sudden Fear” both cause their own destruction. And so, in that way, the quintessential femme fatale causes her own destruction.

The quintessential femme fatale is also criminally depraved. In “The Killers”, femme fatale Kitty stole jewelry and had no problem with allowing the Swede to take the blame for it and spend three years behind bars. She was also involved in a >\$250,000 payroll robbery organized by her crime boss partner “Big Jim”. During this robbery, she convinced the Swede to take all the money for himself at gunpoint and escape, only so she could steal it back. To make matters worse, Kitty was also involved in the Swede’s murder by hiring two hitmen with “Big Jim”. All these actions demonstrate a propensity towards criminal conduct and a complete disregard for human life. Kitty reveals gross indifference towards the Swede’s life by allowing him to spend three years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit, stealing from him, and then murdering him; thus, femme fatale Kitty Collins was criminally depraved. In “Sudden Fear”, femme fatale Irene followed her old flame Lester (who became married to Myra) to San Francisco. She urged Lester to kill Myra so they could enjoy her inheritance; she then began plotting an elaborate murder scheme alongside Lester. By putting forward a murder plot so casually and readily, Irene reveals her lack of concern for human life - that is, her criminal depravity. So, quintessential femme fatales Kitty Collins from “The Killers” and Irene Neves from “Sudden Fear” are both criminally depraved. Thus, in such a manner, the quintessential femme fatale is criminally depraved.

Additionally, the quintessential femme fatale is a catalyst for criminal behavior in men. In “The Killers”, femme fatale Kitty Collins convinced Swede to participate in an armed robbery. And during that armed robbery, Kitty instigated Swede to take all the money at gunpoint and escape. Furthermore, she also hired two hitmen to shoot Swede to death. In “Sudden Fear”, femme fatale Irene Neves suggested to her lover Lester that they should kill his wife Myra for her inheritance. So, quintessential femme fatales Kitty Collins from “The Killers” and Irene Neves from “Sudden Fear” both incite men to engage in criminal behavior. And so, in that way, the quintessential femme fatale is a catalyst for criminal behavior in men.

And so, in conclusion, the quintessential femme fatale causes her own destruction, is criminally depraved, and is a catalyst for criminal behavior in men. It is crucial to understand the hallmarks of the femme fatale archetype because media portrayals of women affect how society perceives and treats them. If women in film are portrayed as causing of their own destruction, criminally depraved, and catalysts for criminal behavior in men, the audience will internalize this and subconsciously begin to regard women as such. Consequently, women will be feared, treated with suspicion/contempt, and placed under repression. Fortunately, educators around the world are bringing to our attention the archetypes of women in film so we can call them into question and prevent them from negatively clouding our judgment. For a more equitable future, we must examine and evaluate the media’s representations of women in all major films.

References

- Boozer, J. The lethal femme fatale in the noir tradition, from *Journal of film and video*, Vol. 51, No. 3/4, (Fall/Winter 1999/2000), pp. 20-35, Illinois.
- Wager, J.B. (2005). *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir*. Austin: University of Texas Press.