

# The Paradox and Argument for Marriage and Family in the Film Noir

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There are common techniques, emotions, settings and character traits considered conventional to the film noir genre. One such overarching genre convention is the way societal norms are subverted. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton write, “all the components of film noir yield the same result: disorientating the spectator, who can no longer find the familiar reference points” (24). In other words, film noir problematizes the perceived verity of social conventions, forcing a glimpse into alternative societal norms. One of these subversions is the binary of good and evil. Robert G. Porfirio provides an existential explanation, “[i]t [ film noir,] places its emphasis on man’s contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values, or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates” (81). This is to say that the protagonist is cast into a world (either by chance or choice) where they must discover their own moral value, leading to synthesized binaries and complicated depictions of social value.

However, this is only true at the narratological level. Rhetorically speaking, the narrative has the opposite normative effect on the audience. The film noirs under investigation are products of the 1940’s and 50’s—a time when Hollywood films were regulated by the Hays Code. This Code sought to preserve (conservative) social conventions through film by “setting forth general standards of ‘good taste’” (The Hays Code 1). Therefore, any subverted morals, or relativist interpretations of those morals were prevented by the code. One such stipulation in the code reads: “[t]he sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld” (The Hays Code 1). It is in this way that this essay investigates how the existential world of the film noir, with morally subversive romances between protagonists and femme/homme fatal(e)s, paradoxically argue for the endorsement of traditional marriage.

The noir hero embodies existential motifs that lead to a futile self-awareness, since by their conclusions they gain certain wisdom at the expense of losing everything else, particularly love. This can be seen in films like *Double Indemnity*, *Detour*, *D.O.A.*, and *Sudden Fear*. In these cases, the protagonists embark on journeys where love, whether gained or lost, proves to be an absurd illusion, all the while rhetorically re-asserting marriage and the home as preferable conservative goals to their subversive depictions. This essay will investigate this motif in the above-mentioned films by first outlining the whore/sweetheart binary portrayed in the films. Next, the absurd illusions of love will be explicated. Finally, a rhetorical analysis, in the vein of narrative criticism will be applied to demonstrate how these films ultimately argue for traditional conventions of marriage and family.

The institution of marriage and the family hold an important position in the film noir. Sylvia Harvey writes,

Through its manifestation of a whole series of customs and beliefs, the family functions as one of the ideological cornerstones of Western industrial society. It embodies a range of traditional values: love of family, love of father (father/ruler), love of country, are intertwined concepts, and we may see the family as a microcosm containing within itself all the patterns of dominance and submission that are characteristic of a larger society. (2)

This means that romantic interests that lead towards marriage, are foundational to preserving hierarchical structures within society. Since the film noir is most often dominated by the male voice, the search for romance is characterized by the male “finding the essential nature of female difference” (Hollinger 244). On female sexuality, Harvey distinguishes a binary between the “childless whore, or the boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts” (3), which provide the foundation for the search for the female difference. For our purposes here, the “whore” represents that which destroys the institution of marriage, and the “sweetheart” is that which seeks to preserve it.

In *Double Indemnity*, the character Phyllis is married, but she represents the

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“whore” binary. Not only does she scheme with Walter to kill her husband, but she turns on Walter too, when their crime is close to being uncovered. In this sense, Phyllis represents an overt disregard for the family, and as such, with influence from the Hays Code, dies in the end. *Detour*, too represents this characterization. The character Sue, who begins as a “sweetheart”, leaves Al for Los Angeles because she is more concerned with her entertainment career, than she is with Al, who wants to marry her. Though Sue commits no crime, legally speaking, culturally, she is no different from Phyllis. Both have an utter disregard, and damaging intentions toward the family.

*D.O.A.* and *Sudden Fear*, offer a unique perspective to the binary. Both Paula, of *D.O.A.*, and Myra of *Sudden Fear* seem to initially represent the “sweetheart”. *Sudden Fear* is also unique in that it is told by Myra’s female point of view. Regardless of this, however, she represents the dominant male discourse towards marriage and the family. Both women want nothing more than to preserve the family. Paula goes out of her way to let Frank know she loves him and wants to marry him, and Myra is distraught when she discovers that her marriage was a sham. However, it can be argued that these “sweethearts” have “whorishness” forced upon them by the absurdity of events. Paula, who is perhaps the “purest” of “sweethearts” of the four women, loses Frank, the man she loves, in the end. She had succeeded in getting Frank to admit he loves only her, but the fact that Frank dies, and the family is never realized, makes Paula a “failed woman”. That is, within the parameters of the film and plot, and within the general existential absurdities of the genre, she has given herself to love with nothing in return—characteristic of the “whores”, Phyllis and Sue, who end up family-less. This is to say that Paula, through no fault of her own, is at the mercy of fate, which forces her into the “whorish” binary in the same way that circumstances force innocent men into criminality as criminals in the genre (as is the case with the protagonist Al, in *Detour*).

Myra on the other hand, who loved her husband with possibly the same amount of passion as Paula to Frank, has “whorishness” forced upon her in a different way. Since she uncovers Lester’s intention to kill her for the inheritance, she kills him and his girlfriend first. Granted, she retracts from her plan, but it is too late and with the events

already in motion, she succeeds in not only becoming a “(black) widow”, but also destroying any future marriage between Lester and his girlfriend, Irene. In this way, she has committed two crimes against the family.

Robert G. Porfirio writes on existentialism in film noir, “[i]ts more positive aspect is captured in such key phrases as ‘freedom,’ ‘authenticity,’ ‘responsibility’ and ‘the leap into faith (or the absurd).’ Its negative side [...] emphasizes life’s meaninglessness and man’s alienation; its catch-words include ‘nothingness,’ ‘sickness,’ ‘loneliness,’ ‘dread,’ ‘nausea.’” (81). What this reveals about the existential world of film noir, is that it is run by choice and chance. Though choice and chance can lead to “good” outcomes, even in the film noir, in regards to love in the movies under discussion, they always lead to nothingness and loneliness. Despite the fact that there is sympathy in the cases of Paula and Myra, they prove to ultimately be “whorish” women. While Paula and Myra are victims of circumstance, the existential world they inhabit suggests that they had choices that they didn’t take. For example, Paula could have left Frank early on instead of chasing a man who obviously was not concerned with marriage or the family. Similarly, Myra could have gone to the police instead of plotting events to murder her husband and frame his girlfriend. In the film noir there are always ‘what-ifs’, and when it comes to reckoning with the outcomes of events, the old adage is true: ignorance is no excuse.

Illusion plays a big role in the film noir, and love, which is the seed that sprouts marriage and family, proves to be a seed that sprouts the exact opposite. In regards to the men that “love” these women, they too end up with nothing by the choices they make. Porfirio writes in regards to the “femme noir” attributing the same characterization to the femme fatale, they are “domineering women, castrating bitches, unfaithful wives and black widows [which seem] to personify the worst of male sexual fantasies” (87). In this way, the pursuit of love ends in not only the “whorification” of the female, but also, the de-masculinization of the male. This is relevant to the movies discussed, including *Sudden Fear*, a “femme noir” (with a female protagonist and a male love interest/villain).

Lester, in *Sudden Fear*, is unique in that he is not driven by love, but money and

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revenge against Myra. He represents the *homme fatal*, and like Phyllis, Sue, Paula and Myra (to some extent), he represents destruction to the family. He is de-masculated in two ways. First, like Walter, Al, and Frank, his plans lead to a futile end with nothing gained, and in his case, death. Second, he is de-masculated by the way Myra out-smarts him. This is different from Walter, who gets the “upper-hand” on Phyllis; Al, who had illusions about the validity of his love for Sue; and Frank, who comes to love Paula, knowing he will die within hours. In all these cases, it can be said that the male characters are in control of their narrative, but in the end realize there were great illusions about their love, and thus end up with nothing. In the case of Lester, he is in a narrative in the female dominant voice, and therefore, Myra can also be included here as a “male voice” in that she too, in the pursuit of love, and the decisions she makes, ends up without the prospective family. This is to say that she is her own male dominant voice and her own *femme fatale*. What can be deduced from this dynamic, from the view of the women who seek love, and the men who seek love, is that in every case the family proves an illusion without winners that ends as a mere idea that was never real in the first place. As will be shown, this paradoxically serves to argue *for* the family.

The rhetorical method used here is narrative criticism that generally speaking sees culture as a performance of stories that are constantly emerging, playing upon each other, and making moral arguments. John Rodden writes,

[A]ll stories [...] persuade us (or at least a few readers) of something. [...] [W]e as readers enter a world that is animated by values. Whether we grant or withhold assent, whether we are “moved” to embrace the story’s *Weltanschauung* or not, we never the less confront that world’s axiology when we enter it. (165-166)

Narrative criticism offers a way to locate the cultural argument of value located in film noir’s destruction of marriage and family.

Walter R. Fisher writes that the narrative paradigm contains some basic characteristics. First, the paradigm helps resolve the dualisms of modernism (Fisher 249). That is, the world is not evenly split between binaries. In the film noir the

audience often finds themselves oscillating between binaries, upon which the audience is catalyzed into making moral judgments.

Second, “narratives are moral constructs (249). That is, all narratives were created based on moral influences and continue to make moral arguments. The issue of authorship comes up here. The noir films were not only adapted, directed, and acted in, but were also morally and culturally bound by a conservative American culture. The Hays code guaranteed films of the period contained the “correct” moral argument. As such, it can also be said that every moral implies its opposite, since a moral argument is an argument against the negation of that moral. In film noir, the moral situation is that superficially, marriage and the family is destroyed, but the opposite moral is argued through implication, and so there is an obvious interplay between moral binaries.

Third is the use of reason, which “gathers within it the logic of technical reason and the *logos* of myth” (249-250). In this way the audience is able to exercise critical and creative faculties by uncovering the implied *myth* of marriage and the family, through enthymetic reasoning of the Hays code, the character’s actions, and the persuasive result. The first “myth” is that the audience is engaged with a cultural artifact that is embodied with moral arguments (i.e. the Hays Code). The second “myth” is the morality from the story-level (fabula). In noir, this is the overt destruction of marriage and family by either the homme/femme fatal(e)s, or the male or female protagonists. The third “myth” is at the level of the audience who is confronted by two “myths”, the overt argument (destruction) and its covert negations (perpetuation), and must reinforce one of the “myths”. It is this act of judgment that can be seen as the rhetorical persuasion of the film, which is Fisher’s fourth point: resolution of “problems of public moral argument” (250).

The moral argument in film noir is not argued through the negation of its overt morality, but by the juxtaposition of the first two “myths”. In destroying marriage and the family, Walter faces either imminent death or prison, in *Double Indemnity*, and Phyllis, who ruined her own marriage is killed for it. In *Detour*, like in *D.O.A.* there is unreciprocated love, which argues against liberal romances. *Detour* argues that career

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women are not conducive to marriage and the family, and *D.O.A.* makes the same argument in terms of womanizing. *Sudden Fear* also is an argument against unreciprocated love, but like *D.O.A.*, is an argument for family by upholding the integrity of the family. That is, in *D.O.A.*, despite Frank's death, Frank affirms value toward the family. Likewise, in *Sudden Fear*, when Myra catches herself in the mirror and is unable to kill Lester, there is an affirmation of conservative binaries in that she cannot kill her husband. Myra doesn't end up a "black widow", legally speaking, but a more traditional "widow" who has legally lost her husband.

It is in these ways that the film noir argues for a traditional view of marriage and the family. The whore/sweetheart binary sets up the moral dilemma, which can also be applied to men, as seen in Lester and Frank. From this dilemma, the love that results is illusory. Since lovers cannot fully occupy the "sweetheart" side of the binary as a unity, there can only be a contamination of the "sweetheart" binary as its negation slips in. This is seen in Myra and Paula, and also in Frank and Walter. Finally, through this illusion of the "contaminated sweetheart", a re-purification of that binary is ultimately argued by outlining the inevitable destruction of characters actively "contaminating" the "myth" of the family.

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