The Evolution of the Femme Fatale: Female Archetypes from Poe to Chandler

From the said beginning of detective fiction in Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* to Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, detective novels have at least one important thematic formula in common: the detective is portrayed as the only man for the job. Poe’s Dupin uses a rare mixture of logic and intuition to see that the lost letter is in plain view. Conan Doyle’s Holmes is necessary to restore or impose order and civilization on the wild moors. Hammett’s Continental Op is the only person that Poisonville fails to fully corrupt, and Chandler’s Marlowe is the only man who solves the mystery of Regan’s disappearance. However, this trait, seemingly necessary for the plot of the detective story, shows a subtle transition from the need for the detective’s intuitive leap to his ability to undermine the influence of the figure of the femme fatale. As with the early fiction, the detective is the sole character able to solve the crime at hand, but as the genre progresses he is indispensable less for his seemingly supernatural powers of deduction and more for his lack of vulnerability to the femme fatale. In a literary sense, the male detective becomes necessary to restore the order of the male patriarchy and subjugate the female, placing her into her archetypical roles. The evolution of this female siren, the femme fatale, in detective literature has a distinct development from the early days of the victim in Poe to the deadly archetype seen in the Chandler and Hammett novels and film noir. The creation of the archetype of the femme fatale from the first detective fiction follows a movement from one female stereotype, the muse/angel, to the opposite, the monster.

The evolution of the femme fatale stems from a long literary tradition of portrayal of women in two different archetypes: the angel, and the monster. Illuminated in their book of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar recognize the male author’s use of the female as a muse who embodies “the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her.” (p.17) The angel is the perfect woman, the male’s ideal of the virginal female. She is categorized by the male’s idea of perfection and purity.
Dante’s Beatrice, for example, is the perfect angel, seated next to the Virgin Mary, guiding Dante on his spiritual journey. Always pictured in the Divine Comedy as wearing white and associated with the number three (the divine number of perfection) she embodies spirituality, perfection, and virginity.

The opposing stereotype is the image of the monster. This places a negative personification on the part of the woman who refuses to fall in line with the “angel” ideal. Thus, “the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy”. Any female refusal (or inability) to conform to this angelic stereotype is then represented by the monstrous or villainous feminine character. Gilbert and Gubar claim that this is propagated by the male author’s anxieties or fears of women’s autonomy. The archetype of the monster then “represents both the author’s power to allay ‘his’ anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend monster) and simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained place” (p. 28). In contrast to the angelic female, the monster is characterized by deceit, treachery, and sexuality. The conflict between these two figures is especially strong in the Bible, among many other places. The first testament contains the classic Western “monster’ figure, Eve. Eve, who brought sin into the world, is contrasted with the Virgin Mary in the second testament, who brings the savior into the world. Just as Mary (like Beatrice) embodies virginity and purity, Eve is seen as a sexual or passionate figure.

Detective fiction parallels these archetypes, showing a progression from the angel or “damsel in distress” in early stories, to the monster or femme fatale in later ones. This development also has a clear correlation between it and societal changes in women’s roles. The femme fatale, in the same manner as the monster, shows the male author’s attempt to keep the female character in her “textually ordained place”.
In Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the only female figures are victims. In *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Dupin and the narrator are both male, as is the prefect. The only women are non-actors, victims of the double murder. Again in *The Purloined Letter*, the female, unnamed, is the victim of the theft by Minister D--. Females are not involved in the plot whatsoever, except as inspiration for the case. This mirrors Gilbert and Gubar’s statement that women are used by male authors as muses and “defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power”. (p.21) Rather than the diabolical monster, the women in Poe’s detective stories are practically absent.

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Arthur Conan Doyle includes females as parts of the plot, but as tools that are manipulated by the men around them. Far from the femme fatales, the women in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are largely innocent, used by the main actors in the story, men. Though Beryl Stapleton tricks Henry Baskerville into courting her, it is only because her husband forces her to do so. In fact she attempts to disobey him secretly, by warning Watson (accidently, instead of Henry) saying “Go straight back to London instantly.” When Watson proceeds to question her, she says she cannot tell him, but warns him again to “never set foot upon the moor again.” The other female in the story, Laura Lyons, is also influenced by the villainous Stapleton. She is portrayed as an informant for Holmes and Watson, only after “the position of affairs is made clear to her.” Above all, Lyons is called an “unfortunate woman” of a husband who “proved to be a blackguard and deserted her” and of Stapleton. Holmes states, in his final explanation to Watson, that though evidence may have implicated the women, “both were left with a strong suspicion against Stapleton.” Finally, clearing them of all wrongdoing, Holmes claims “however, both of them were under his influence, and he had nothing to fear from them.” Conan Doyle’s portrayal of women in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* cements their stereotypical roles as “angels” or damsels in distress. The men in the story are the players who commit and solve the crimes, while women are completely innocent, only victimized and saved by the male influence.
Hammett and Chandler, writing in the 20s and 30s, begin the transition to the femme fatale as known in film noir and the hard-boiled school of detective fiction. In her book *The Femme Fatale: An Erotic Icon* Virginia Allen defines the figure as a “woman who lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelmingly seductive charms” (Hales 225, Allen 2) Far from the passive, innocent females in Doyle and Poe, Hammett and Chandler form the femme fatales as staples in the hard-boiled detective fictions. In Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, the female character of Dinah Brand is one of the first examples of the archetypical femme fatale. Described as “a soiled dove ... a de luxe hustler, a big league gold-digger,” Brand is “an expert in her line”. Robert Albury, who murdered Donald Willsson for love of Dinah Brand, warns the Op that “without being able to say how or when it happened...you’ll be telling her your life’s history, and all your troubles and hopes.” Again dissimilar from the other stories, Brand has extensive power over the other characters in the book and over the plot itself. Most noticeably, she is an overtly sexualized woman who uses the one asset that the men in Poisonville do not possess, her sexuality, to manipulate the characters. As the Op crudely observes, “I gathered she was strictly pay-as-you-enter.” Though all of the characters in *Red Harvest* are corrupt and manipulative, Brand is seen as more dangerous than the others because of her sexuality. She cons the other criminals, who are usually only concerned with money, into paying her for sex. Further, she has a power over the men that eventually leads them into dangerous situations that would not have existed if not for her sexual influence. As the Op reminds her “Donald Willsson was killed because of you” and tells her “you seem to have a gift for stirring up murderous notions in your boy friends.” And, despite his resistance to her sexual advances towards him, the Op admits, “Even I haven’t escaped your influence.”

The “gift” the Op refers to is her allure and sexuality. Dinah Brand is a dangerous character because the sexual power that she holds over the male characters in *Red Harvest* is an influence that they cannot possess and are vulnerable to. This same power is ultimately her downfall. In the final hours of her life, the Op enumerates the multitude of men who may have her in their sights, because
she manipulated them with her sexuality. This is what sets Dinah Brand apart as a character in the underworld, and the femme fatale as an archetype. Though the Continental Op is closest to her in the book, he is seemingly the only male character impervious to her advances. Just as it is sexuality that distinguishes Dinah Brand from other characters, it is this invulnerability to the sexuality that sets the Continental Op apart from the corruption in Poisonville. The femme fatale is a trap in which men are “caught, absolutely caught”, as Albury says. However, that same trap causes her downfall, making the one male vulnerability backfire on the female.

Again in *The Maltese Falcon* Hammett creates the femme fatale character Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Though it is a largely male driven plot for most of the story, Spade realizes that it was she who killed Archer by luring him upstairs in order to implicate Thursby. Incidentally, Spade claims that he knew because her sexuality was the only thing that could have exposed Archer to vulnerability. This again suggests that sexuality is the only asset a woman can use to best a man, and thus the quality that makes the femme fatale dangerous and the detective invincible. Though she, like Dinah Brand, is clearly an intelligent character, she is not as smart as Spade, who turns her in. This sets up a clear dichotomy between intellect and charm, which is reinforced when Spade confronts her. Instead of appealing to his logic or rationality, she turns on her charm asking (love). Again Spade is the one who wins the battle at the end because he can resist her pleas and charm and turn her in. The femme fatale thus creates the stereotype of the woman as the monster or the deceitful charmer, and the man as the creator of order and justice and an intellectual.

Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* cements this image of the femme fatale. Carmen Sternwood is the epitome of the sexual, dangerous femme fatale. In contrast to *Red Harvest*, the main villain is a woman. Carmen attempts to seduce Marlowe and murders Regan for the mere fact that he refused her sexual advances, a fate which Marlowe almost falls victim to as well. Carmen’s main motive is sexual in nature, whereas the other characters such as Eddie Mars, Geiger and most
of the men in *Red Harvest* are motivated by pure greed. Carmen also follows Gilbert and Gubar’s monster stereotype, with the sexual female being the monster who will not follow the angel’s virginal role written for her. It is also interesting that Chandler writes Carmen’s character as insane. As Vivian says, “She’s not normal”. Marlowe then agrees not to turn her in if Vivian institutionalizes her “Somewhere far off from here where they can handle her type, where they will keep guns and knives and fancy drinks away from her? Hell, she might even get herself cured”

This is not an uncommon trait of the femme fatale in the detective story, claims Barbara Hales. In stories such as these and the incredibly popular film noir genre, there is often a “relationship between mental illness and criminality” (p. 230) Hales posits that the portrait of “the femme fatale as psychotic criminal is a monstrous sexual entity who lies, steals, and murders.” (p. 232 hales) This is again another attempt to categorize or stereotype the female who does not fit the mold of the angel. Carmen is then different from any of the male villains we have encountered, who are seen as worthy, clever opponents. Chandler portrays Carmen as insane and maniacal rather than diabolical. As Marlowe sarcastically sneers, “cute little thing, isn’t she?” Carmen is further subjugated and scoffed at, instead of the often respectful deference Holmes and Dupin give their opponents.

In the end Marlowe comes out on top because he can resist the advances of Carmen and her sister Vivian to do his job. Though it is his intellect and intuition that makes him fill the gun with blanks, thus allowing him to survive and solve the crime, it is ultimately his self-control in the face of the temptress that is the driving force behind his character. This personality trait, rather than the intuitive leap in Holmes or Dupin, makes Marlowe and the Continental Op the only men to solve their respective crimes. As Marlowe tells Vivian, “she was in my bed – naked. I threw her out on her ear.” This denial of the female seduction shares a common thread through Hammett and Chandler,
not merely as an isolated scene in the novel, but as an integral trial of character that the detective must pass.

In the case of *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*, it is clear that the female villain is inherently different from the male in almost every respect. She is sexual, bold, and much less intelligent. While her use of sexuality is usually her main way of controlling her situation, the male detective eventually overcomes her by taking this power away and putting her in jail or an institution. Thus, the woman who uses her sexuality is essentially choosing that over intellect, and must ultimately lose to the man who can resist her. Even the fate of Dinah Brand, who was not a villain, reinforces an implication that the woman who uses her sexuality to compete in the male underworld will ultimately meet her demise because of it. The Continental Op, Spade and Marlowe all choose intellect over sexuality, proving their superiority over the female.

It is also significant that the creation of the femme fatale in the writings of Hammett and Chandler takes place in a time of change in the roles of women in the United States. The years during and following World War I were ones that upset the domestic positions of women. During the war, women were needed to work in spheres that had previously only been occupied by men, especially industrial work. This drastically altered the expectations of women as homemakers and men as breadwinners. With the end of the war and the return of the soldiers, women did not want to quietly go back into the home. This ultimately led to confusion about the roles of women in society and the fight for women’s suffrage. In 1920, the 19th amendment was finally passed, granting women a right they had not previously possessed: the right to vote. The question of how women were to fit into society was one that permeated the culture of the United States, and detective fiction is no exception. *Red Harvest, The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Big Sleep*, published in 1929, 1930, and 1939 respectively, were written in the middle of this “woman question.” The femme fatale is often seen as a response to this, or at least a consequence of the changes in roles.
Virginia Allen recognizes this formation of the femme fatale, who is "the diametric opposite of the 'good' woman who passively accept[s] impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, [and] the control and domination of her sexuality by men" (Hales 227, Allen 4). This again reflects a clear dichotomy between the “diametric ‘good’ woman” or angel and the femme fatale or monster. This further mirrors Gilbert and Gubar's theory that the monster is an attempt to overcome the male fears of “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained place.”

Echoing these sentiments Barbara Hales suggests “she is a symptom of male fears about feminism, acting as an emblem for specific historical moments.” (p. 228) Writing the women into roles of femme fatales, who reject the position of the domestic sphere for the masculine world of crime (and ultimately lose to the male detective), then becomes a way of retaining a semblance of male authority in the face of female empowerment.

Though in the case of Dinah Brand or O'Shaughnessy the femme fatale is not an unintelligent character, they are shown as using the one tool that men do not have and are in fact vulnerable to: their sexuality. In these stories, the women who use sexuality to manipulate, rejecting the domestic sphere for the masculine underworld, are villains or “gold-digger[s]”. This attempt to enter a male-centric world and control it ultimately gets the femme fatale killed, jailed, or institutionalized, scorning her vice and valorizing the male detective. It is then reflective of Gilbert and Gubar's theory that male authors show a pattern of writing women characters that do not fall in line with the angel stereotype into “their textually ordained place.” It is worth noting that they specify the male author is the only one to do this, and that these previously discussed works that place women into the two opposing stereotypes are male-written.

It is not surprising then that Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1916) does its best to subvert the passive angel stereotype present in her predecessors, but does not project the mold of the femme fatale in her successors. By casting Evie Howard as the co-villain, Christie at
least attempts to equalize the female character with the male without portraying her as the evil, sexual monster in the femme fatale. It is important that Alfred Inglethorp is as responsible for the murder as Evie Howard, putting both on equal footing. Also, Christie does all she can to convey that anyone in the household is a suspect, regardless of gender. Though Evie states, “Murder’s more of a violent crime. Associate it more with a man,” Mary Cavendish replies, “Not in a case of poisoning.” (p.6) While this serves to foreshadow the outcome of the book, it also places suspicion on characters of each gender.

Evie Howard is also portrayed as a positive and domestic figure throughout the story, which Christie overturns in the plot twist. Howard seems to be the only sympathetic character, painted as the matronly, protective type. She appears to be the only character watching over Mrs. Inglethorp’s best interests, asking Hastings to “look after her” and saying “I’ve protected her as much as I could.” (p.7) This follows the standard angel or domestic stereotype that is seen in Poe and Doyle, and the opposite of which is personified in the femme fatale. However, Christie deliberately subverts this in the plot twist where Evie Howard is revealed to be a co-conspirator in the plot to murder Mrs. Inglethorp. Whether Christie is knowingly trying to discredit a female archetype in male-written literature is unclear, but she is certainly aware of the convention itself, as she exaggerates it in her red herrings and plot twist. Though Howard is a villain, she differs from the femme fatale in many important aspects. First and foremost, ‘the femme fatale is a sexual entity.” (Hales, 227) Evie Howard is described by Cavendish as “old Evie” who is “not precisely young and beautiful.” (p. 2) Hastings calls her “almost manly” with “a large sensible square body” that is a far cry from the sexual being of the femme fatale. (p.3) Evie Howard commits her crime through pure intellect and planning, not through the use of sexuality as manipulation.

Without the advantage of sexuality, The Mysterious Affair at Styles does not contain the “true test” that Hammett and Chandler write for their detectives. At no point does Howard attempt to
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seduce Poirot to get away with her crime. Thus, Poirot has to rely on the classic intuitive logic present in Holmes and Dupin to solve the crime. Intuition and intellect set Poirot apart from the other, less intelligent characters, not his ability to resist the sexual advances of the femme fatale. Thus, Christie successfully creates a story where the female character is on the same level as the males, and does not fall into the stereotypical roles of angel or monster. Interestingly, Christie is also most famous for her creation of the detective Miss Marple. Incidentally, none of the above male novelists wrote a female detective character.

However, in a historical perspective, the character of Evie Howard can be seen as a step in the development of the femme fatale we see in Hammett and Chandler. While the very early novelists such as Poe and Doyle portray women as passive angels or muses with no autonomy, Christie creates a co-conspirator in Evie Howard, Hammett then writes of the sexualized Dinah Brand and the treacherous Brigid O’Shaughnessy, and finally Chandler creates the epitome of the femme fatale in the insane Carmen Sternwood. Thus the detective stories from Poe to Chandler can be seen to mirror the male created stereotypes of the angel and monster that Gilbert and Gubar claim permeate male-written poetry.

The femme fatale in the hard-boiled detective novel, in response to societal questions of women's roles, is the archetypical female monster figure, reflecting a manner of allaying the male fears of the female empowerment at that time. The femme fatale cannot be a symbol of a positive, strong female because she is never on the same intellectual level as the detective. She is categorized by her manipulation of male characters through her sexuality. If the test for the male detective, the unique trait that distinguishes him from other characters, is his ability to deny the advances of the femme fatale, she can never be seen as more than a sexual being. Ultimately, the femme fatale is defeated by the male detective's use of intellect and adherence to a certain code of honor. This then
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removes the supposed “one” inherently female asset that can overpower the male, reestablishing order and reinforcing male authority.

The evolution of the femme fatale in detective fiction reflects the male tendency to establish authority by writing female characters into two determined stereotypes, the angel and the monster. The encounter with the femme fatale character in the hard-boiled school shows a clear progression from one stereotype to the other. The arrival of the femme fatale coincides with a social upheaval that called women’s roles into question, demonstrating that the move from the angel to the monster was in response to a fear of loss of established gender roles. Thus the male-written detective story removes the one vulnerability to the loss of this establishment, the assumed one advantage the female had over the male, by defeating it.

Works Cited