

Murder, Mugs, Molls, Marriage: The Broken Ideals of Love and Family in Film Noir

Noir is a conversation rather than a single genre or style, though it does have a history, a complex of overlapping styles and typical plots, and more central directors and films. It is also a conversation about its more common philosophies, socio-economic and sexual concerns, and more expansively its social imaginaries. MacIntyre's three rival versions suggest the different ways noir can be studied. Tradition's approach explains better the failure of the other two, as well as their more limited successes. Something like the Thomist understanding of people pursuing perceived (but faulty) goods better explains the neo-Marxist (or other power/conflict) model and the self-construction model. Each is dependent upon the materials of an earlier tradition to advance its claims/interpretations.

[Styles—studio versus on location; expressionist versus classical three-point lighting; low-key versus high lighting; whites/blacks versus grays; depth versus flat; theatrical versus pseudo-documentary; variety of felt threat levels—investigative; detective, procedural, etc.; basic trust in ability to restore safety and order versus various pictures of unopposable corruption to a more systemic nihilism; melodramatic vs. colder, more distant; dialogue—more or less wordy, more or less contrived, more or less realistic; musical score—how much it guides and dictates emotions; presence or absence of humor, sentiment, romance, healthy family life; narrator, narrational flashback; motives for criminality and violence— socio-economic (expressed by criminal with or without irony), moral corruption (greed, desire for power), psychological pathology; cinematography—classical vs. mannered.]

One of the central plot drivers of much noir is adultery, unrequited love, or romantic love. Its understood companions, marriage and family, often hover on the borders as either an unattainable ideal, a farce from which to be escaped, or on occasion a hope that can be found, if only at the end of the noir film with a happy ending.

I'm dissatisfied with neo-Marxist readings of these films that reduce love to sex and marriage to artificial institutions; I'm especially dissatisfied with those readings that assume that marriage must be a socio-political and economic form of oppression that is used to squelch its participants, especially that of women, and one that supposedly noir exposes for its ideological deceptions. Such approaches feel reductive, not because the social and economic are not part of love and marriage. They certainly are! A truth we ignore to our peril, yet such readings tend to flatten our people (even characters) and overlook any number of other factors—faith, heritage, loyalties, rituals, small joys and sorrows, honor, friendship, the land, community, authority, justice, sacrifice, patience, endurance, self-possession, fear, craft, courage, order, method, science, respect, and so on. Persons are more round—they are aesthetic, ethical, philosophical, and theological beings. And all of this within the historicity and narrativity of our lives. [Might help to look more at Christian Smith's book.]

A good point of comparison is how such readings of detective fiction reject the classical humanist readings. Classical readings, such as those of P.D. James or W. H. Auden, see in detective fiction's solution of a crime an affirmation of justice, personal guilt and culpability, and an assurance of order. Neo-Marxist readings think the classical ones only reinforce bourgeois power and prejudices and hide from the satisfied reader the inherent abuse in the real system. My objection is not that such abuses do not exist, but that a simple class-reading is as reductive as the reduction of which they accuse the classical humanist reading. Likewise, such readings attribute too much seductive power to the genre—a knowledgeable reader or viewer may enjoy the restraints of the classical whodunit and its softening of criminal act or world for the purposes of the genre without denying the systemic side of crime and murder or the complexities of real world crime. Thirdly, such readings also are reductive in really understanding the rich social imaginaries that detective fiction often taps in to. They tend to treat all

social relations as competitive and potentially usurious—what makes for human satisfaction is limited and most be fought over.

The same follows for noir's portrait of marriage and family. A social imaginary approach to family and noir will recognize the wide gamut of moral ideals, codes, and failures. It will also recognize a fuller toolset of worldviews, virtues, rules, expectations, loyalties, and so on. The economic and sexual are only two parts of broader practices. Certainly there are films and motifs that lend themselves to this reading, but by and large, the ideal that hovers just on the other side of much noir, remains somewhat intact, even if it is a world that most of these characters cannot obtain or that they reject to their ruin and often death. None of this denies that directors, screenwriters, and promoters may be playing both sides of the fence, seeking to keep the censors at bay, as well as draw on the desire for the illicit in their audiences even as they confirm, sometimes in *deus ex machina* fashion, the moral ideals of marital fidelity and true love's bliss.

I think we know instinctively that death (via murder or execution) disrupts the sharing-in nature of love and marriage; noir is about the (continual) disruption of love and marriage or the seeking of pseudo-versions of love and marriage in anomic measures. Noir often seems to violate covenant and gift. Too often in the world of noir relations are based on fear and power, theft and harm, as well as on honor and its display and wealth. While the later need not be destructive if pursued in a way that contributes to general human flourishing, if pursued with the assumption that one must take rather than give from the diminishing treasure of human fulfillment, the end is finally always destructive.

I have a theory that the way love, marriage, and divorce and remarriage are handled in noir illustrates the weak foundations that the American social imaginary of marriage in the period. But just as noir is a diverse conversation (cluster concept) involving a number of diverse, interacting human ways, so noir's treatment of love and family can run from simply idealism to simple nihilism and numerous configurations in between.

Films that lend themselves to extended treatment: *On Dangerous Ground, Fallen Angel, The Desperate Hours, They Live by Night, Moontide, Mildred Pierce, Daisy Kenyon, Cat People, The Red House, House on Telegraph Hill, The Dark Corner, Deadline at Dawn, The Prowler, Secret Beyond the Door, Caught*

Noir tends to break promises (those of loyalty, friendship, marriage, good government); this disrupts the fundamental reality of blessing. The characters of noir are often under the curse for the breaking or the promises that hold together community.

In general, in these films the sexual free woman is a femme fatale, though there are exceptions—*The Fatal Woman*, for example (though this can be treated as a gangster film or transition film to noir). The sexually free male is also generally treated as a cad or a predator, though again there are exceptions. The love-life of the private investigator Phillip Marlowe—compare Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* with Marlowe in *The Big Sleep, Murder, My Sweet, and The Lady of the Lake*, also *The Brashier Doubloon*. (Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly* actually proves why foolishness leads to destruction.) The forms of the films lead at times to Marlowe finding true love, but in the series, this doesn't carry over like it would say in *The Thin Man* series. New film, new woman, not Nick and Nora forever. Still, these aren't the celebrated illicitness of 007. The sexually faithful man or woman is generally associated with a good marriage, though again there can be exceptions—such as the henpecked husband or childless wife. (We understand the wife in *The Prowler's* temptations, even if her infidelity and its future course lead to terror.)

The world of noir is an adult world. Family life with young children is even a less pronounced theme, typically on the border of noir—needing to be protected. (Examples—*Panic in the Streets*, *The Big Heat*.) Likewise, sibling rivalry tends to be between adults. (*The Brothers Rico*, *The House of Strangers*, *The Double Mirror*.) When children are more central, the film tends to be on the border of noir, such as *The Night of the Stranger*, or outside noir but still looking in, based on either the occasional gesture or association, such as *The Fallen Idol*, *The Curse of the Cat People* (*Amy and Her Friend*). *The Window* is one exception to this rule.

The post-noir British heist film *The League of Gentlemen* is one that clearly critiques the ideal in numerous ways. Each character wants to escape his domestic or sexual limitations in some form; none of them seem to have the resources to pledge a commitment to the long-term adaptation that loyalty offers or the healthy and honest encounters that are needed. The characters wish to change by escaping rather than by changing themselves.

Femme fatales are seldom (if ever) also nurturing mothers. Most adultery in noir is the husband with the unattached or (fatally attached/ kept) woman or the wife who is the fatale is in a loveless marriage without children. (Exceptions?) *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is sort of an archetypal example.

Sometimes we have sympathy for one of the persons involved, such as in *Scarlett Street* or *The Prowler*, as often we do not, for example in *Double Indemnity*.

Obsession is neither love nor true community, and the obsessions of noir characters are often from a failure to trust in covenant or to hold out for shalom/peace. How seldom do we see the counter-world of waiting and hospitality in noir films! Obsessive claims are epistemically reductive; they make it hard (or impossible) to see and experience a larger present world. Obsession refuses to wait or wonder before mystery. Mystery is almost always a threat. In this sense, while *mise-en-scene* can be aesthetically powerful, it can also be cognitively reductive. This is not to say that *mise-en-scene* is therefore automatically wrong in what it does—craft and art must restrict in order to heighten. Yet the viewer of noir must have the moral resources to understand how noir fits into a larger vision of reality. It reduces to highlight not to hide. (The shadows do not always hold fear and danger.)

The Prowler invokes the presence and need for children but against that of murder and deception. This is a film I don't particularly care for, but I can see why some are drawn to it. It would seem to target the class and sexual politics of marriage and of consumption and the American Dream, yet it also taps into for better or worse the authentic desires of a woman for a marriage with children, and her devastating sinful choices and their consequences to her, as well as to the man who seduces her and uses her.

Caught is another variation on this theme, though in this case the woman married the rich destructive personality. *Caught* is also a different variation because Leonora likely marries for money and leaves Smith once she realizes she is being used, but her pregnancy complicates the new life she has found.

Then there are the Bluebeard theme films—*Bluebeard*, *Gaslight*, *The Lodger*—those in which the woman or wife is subject to a psychotic male predator, who may also be her husband. *Gaslight* is important for a number of reasons—in part because the house where the original murder occurred contains for Paula memories. (This might be fruitfully compared to Lang's *House by the River*—another film in which the house becomes a lesson in its inhabitants' psychologies.)

Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* is more profitably compared to Hitchcock's *Rebecca* but it is part of the Bluebeard theme. There's also some Bluebeard in *Caught*.

Some examples of noir (or poetic realist) films that affirm marriage and its ideal as obtainable are: *Moontide*, *Fallen Angel*, *Panic in the Streets* (though not the main theme), *On Dangerous Ground*, *The Big Heat* (not the central theme, but the ending monologue to Dave's dead wife is brilliant). Jean Gremillon's poetic realist *Remorques* (Stormy Waters) explores the destruction and loss of adultery as part of a larger tapestry of themes. The ending alone is worth the film. The ideal is sharply (if ambiguously) affirmed. Worth comparing with *Moontide*.

Deadline at Dawn is really about the diversity of possibilities and the costs of protecting marriage and love in an environment that would destroy it. Edna represents one kind of cynicism—a seducer and blackmailer of men. Sleepy and Babe are both foolish men who fall in love with her. Her brother Val, equally crooked, still has some measure of loyalty to her. Gus still loves his wife who abandoned them. His daughter and Jerry have a child. June is divorced from Sleepy. The “poor rag” unsuccessfully proposes to June. Alex has a real family he speaks of, though they have their issues apparently—not perfect. June's brother is in war, and her mother doesn't know what kind of life June has fallen to. All this makes Gus's actions more complex; He confesses that he killed Edna in the heat of the moment, out of love for his daughter and his grandchild. One of the ironies is that the true killer has our complete sympathy by the end, though we can later look back and realize that Gus' actions were more morally ambiguous along the way. The film really has no true villain—only the dead Edna and Val earn our disapproval. Jerry who we are set up to distrust, turns out to actually love his wife and is ashamed of his addiction to Edna's temptations. The last word of the film (like *Fallen Angel*) is “home” as Alex and June depart for Norfolk. While not as central to its core, *The Man I Love* also explores various possibilities for love and marriage in a melodramatic twister.

All Night Long (as a contrast to those who would try to destroy it—it's a reworking of Othello after all). Compare with *A Double Life*

Daisy Kenyon is an interesting twist on this—the woman having begun in an affair turns to a real marriage and discovers it is right, while the man conducting the affair destroys his marriage and practically his children.

There are too many to list who offer love with the promise of marriage at the end as a kind of reward for surviving the noir world—*I Wake Up Screaming*, *This Gun for Hire*, *Ministry of Fear*, *Lady in the Lake*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *His Kind of Woman*, *The Blue Gardenia*, *Key Largo*, *Phantom Lady*, *Deadline at Dawn*.

To a certain extent—*Cat People*, though this is a film that explores what love is anyway and what one bases a marriage upon.

Blue Dahlia is an interesting mixture of these—a double estrangement and ultimately death with a coming together of the “innocent” couple on each side.

Films in which the characters are unable to obtain that ideal in the end, though they desire it—*High Sierra*, *Gun Crazy*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Out of the Past*, *D.O.A.* The first two as couple on the run films perhaps assume a genre specific, though a neo-noir film like Stone's *Natural Born Killers* cynically manipulates this. *They Live by Night* is different because we get to see young first love bloom between Bowie and Keechie. The early *You Live Only Once* is a couple on the run movie only in the last third, yet it has a similar dilemma of the world keeping the couple from finding peace.

Films that obtain it but one wonders why [almost *deus ex machina*]—*Gilda*, (maybe) *Nightmare Alley*, *The Fallen Idol*—perhaps not really noir), *His Kind of Woman*

Films that distort family to keep a woman from a man are *Mr. Arkadin*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, *The Red House*

Other strained relations to family members—*Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *White Heat*, *Mildred Pierce* (which has a femme fatale but it is the daughter to the mother.)

White Heat is particularly interesting because Cody the sadistic (and psychotic) thus does love his mother, and even wants some kind of relationship with his two-timing wife.

Films where the family is not kept intact (excluding the obvious adultery) or is challenged to breaking—*The Big Heat*, *The Wrong Man*, *Call Northside 777* (in this case it is always affirmed, but the unique circumstances of falsely accused Frank Wicek in prison create a blended family of sorts at the end once he is released.) *The Desperate Hours* is an especially interesting one because we have two families, the family that is being held prisoner, and the two brothers who are part of the escape trio. It deserves more prolonged study.

Also *The Red House*, *The House of Strangers*, *The Brothers Rico*—the breakup of families (in which the parent-child or sibling relationship is more at stake); in a way *The Amazing Mr. X*.

The bonds of siblings that drive the plot in strange ways: *The House by the River*, *Ladies in Retirement*, *The Seventh Victim*, *The Man I Love*

Not sure *The Set-Up* fits this picture easily. But certainly the boxer's relationship with his wife is key; she has her own important strand in the film, and they both "win" in the end since she receives him back from his career. (Compare this with *Body and Soul* in which marriage is put off until the end.)

Films that use marriage or the offer of marriage for perverse ends-- *Brighton Rock*, *Criss Cross*, *House on Telegraph Hill*, *The Night of the Hunter* (though I refuse to reduce this film to noir. It transcends it.)

House on Telegraph Hill is particularly interesting because the Polish camp survivor assumes the identity of a dead friend in order to escape her own ruined post-war possibilities. The husband obviously married her to further establish his claim to the fortune. She, however, takes the son as her own and continues with the mindset the remainder of the film.

Films that don't quite fit the pattern for one reason or another-- perhaps *The Quiet American* (if one considers it noir), *The Petrified Forest*, *The Killing*.

The Killing shows us the lives of the various criminals, of which two have "good" marriages—one in which the last big heist is hoped to make an easy, domestic life possible; the other in which the aging ill wife needs medical treatment the husband can't afford. Of course, the plot comes apart because at its center is the weak man in an adulterous marriage, whose low-class femme fatale draws her lover and his thug friends into things.

What I struggle with in particular is how a theology of marriage and family, as well as a history of these, might interact and give some higher meaning to these themes.

[I will need to research the changes in philosophy of marriage, as well as think through further the complex possibilities of the Hays Code in actual resulting practice—it may have almost singularly kept the genre orbiting more surely around the traditions of Judeo-Christian wisdom discussed below.]

Nonetheless, formally the plots more likely than not show the consequences of the foolish. There are different ways to contextualize this. American Christianity had an influence on the expectations of audiences, as well as indirectly the censorship of the Hays Office. There was, thus, pressure during the 30s-50s not to reward the unjust and immoral, some of it written into the Code, others more implicit. The theorists of natural law would not be surprised that the plot forms of noir would condemn certain vices. At the same time, theologically, the wisdom school would argue that such consequences are written into the fabric of the creation. Despite the subversive (or double-minded) actions of producers and directors in the noir genres, the knowledge of the wise order of the universe remains and haunts our human stories.

The world of noir is a world out of phase with the order of wisdom. The opening chapters of Proverbs repeatedly warn of the consequences of pursuing an agenda of theft, violence, sexual vice, and other obsessions with power and status. A Thomist understanding of misplaced loves fits here, too. The vice-ridden figures of noir—gangsters, femme fatales, protagonists who give into temptation, corrupt cops and officials, even the psychotic—are defying the order of wisdom. Yet they often possess good qualities gone awry—intelligence, leadership, friendship, loyalty, love, courage, beauty, charisma. These at times are aimed at perceived goods, though they seek the good in the wrong ways, at too quick a pace, or in causing others to suffer while seeking to avoid it themselves. And they at times act in sacrificial ways that partially redeem their earlier actions.

The world of noir cannot exist by itself; it exists in tandem with the good world, the world of human flourishing (i.e. of shalom). The world of the gangster is often a shadow of the world of commerce; the common adulterous plot driver is dependent upon the longed for worlds of romance, marriage, and family; the investigation of crime, the police procedural, and the murder mystery all bear some desire for or approximation of a world of order and justice.

Even the grotesqueries of the psychopathic are feeding off the normal and healthy. At times, in earlier noir (40s) especially, the protagonist is the good man (less often good woman) who is pulled into the noir world. (This is also true in 1954 *Nightfall*.) Other times, the person (as often a woman as a man) is lazy, jaded, and so on but finds some inner virtue to rise to the occasion.

Sometimes the policeman, reporter, or official has grown weary in fighting evil and needs renewal. This happens to some of the chiefs in *The Big Heat* and is the key shift in *On Dangerous Ground*.

Life and death are at the center of the way of wisdom; so they are at the heart of noir. Death haunts noir in numerous ways, most often murder and execution, but also the death of broken relations. Life (shalom) is always being offered as the better way or being threatened by the noir world. *On Dangerous Ground* is a good example of that choice starkly placed before the protagonist. Simone Weil in her essay on *The Iliad* speaks of the way force is used to reduce persons to things; unidirectional force violates essential human dignity. Redemptive suffering is the refusal to be thus reduced.

Death (especially with a gun) is often treated instrumentally in noir—murder or killing simply removes something in the way, yet it can also act as a gift of the good death or just even a desired release. Its use in the film can provide the audience with fear, dread, a poetic judgment, or even excitement and pleasure. Part of this has to do with the death's place in the place, its marginal or central purpose.

Deaths in the beginning, especially in detective investigations, are to be solved and explained. (deaths before the beginning often also haunt the film, such as *The Red House* or *The Body Snatcher*).

Deaths near the end tend to be about poetic justice, or at least about judgment on the characters' crimes.

In the middle, deaths if focal points, are often the result of love triangles. These the lovers carry out in hopes of a perceived new free place and context.

If the deaths are marginal, they speak of the business of killing in gangster culture or part of a string of killings to inspire fear.

Love and/or marriage is often the promise of life/shalom being offered the characters, provided they can survive the threat in question. In noir, adultery or involvement with the femme fatale more often than not lead to the path of death. Without love, the key characters of noir are often incomplete, missing essential self-knowledge. The place of peace is often restored only in the end for the protagonists, and this often includes such sense of better self-regard as well as regard of the other. Presence in particular is evidenced in the close-ups of two persons regarding each other in a loving gaze, rather in half-cloaked suspicion. The romantic gaze is often the easiest cinematically to employ, but it is not the only one. There are perhaps other ways to explore the loving gaze or its lack-- *Ladies in Retirement* asks how we regard or do not regard the mentally ill. *On Dangerous Ground* certainly explored the police detective's inability to see those he deals with until the journey into the rural snow. *The Petrified Forest* and *You Only Live Once* might also be explored for this theme/pattern.

Faith and trust in God is not a key theme in much noir. There are notable exceptions—the religious mother figure, such as in *Call Northside 777* and *The Wrong Man*, whose prayers seem to be efficacious, or the mother's whose are not, as in *The Brothers Rico*. There are a number of places where a figure, more often a woman, will give lip service to the language of prayer. Priests can play positive roles, such as in *I, Confess* or in *You Only Live Once*. (The pre-noir *Angels Have Wings* or the post-noir *On the Waterfront* also come to mind.) There are obvious examples of faith being corrupted in *Night of the Hunter* or (if one can count it here) *Black Narcissus*. In general, though, faith in noir is vague at best, and at times, nihilistically absent. The horror noir raise questions here, too. E.g. *I Walked with a Zombie*—which spirituality wins out?

The stylized world of speech in noir is also worth thinking more about. . . How do its various forms — terse, stupid, witty, formulaic, cruel, etc.—represent foolish or wise speech? The code of honor and shame reigns in many noir interactions, especially male ones. This is often manifested in premeditated, as well as spontaneous actions of anger and abuse. (In particular, those films that employ speech in profound ways, such as *Deadline at Dawn* or those who almost entirely refuse speech.)

Certainly the pattern of deceptive speech is repeatedly carried out in noir. I can't think of a film noir without it. Sometimes deception is what advances the plot, such as the detective films—Spade and Marlowe; but also the police procedurals. In both types, they must discern the false and true witnesses. *Panic in the Streets* is a variation on the both. Deception can also advance the plot in the case of femme fatales or male seducers. Spy thrillers use deception in the cat-&-mouse mode, while in the various battles between criminals and the law, it plays a key secondary role. The corrupt reporters in *Ace in the Hole* and *Sweet Smell of Success* are another example. What about the general pattern of the noir narrator recalling the events?

But there are also lack of discernment, failures of prudence, and other forms of foolishness in speech. Is There are positive examples, too. But in general these tend to be spontaneous expressions of the heart. Rhetoric is mostly judged. Exceptions? Lack of prudence can also be manifested in hopes of gaining status and/or the girl. This is especially clear in the gangster desire for wealth and the fatal, adulterous

desire. Both lead to the plot unraveling or to the fatal misstep. The various forms of the set-up are dependent on the protagonist's being hostage to desire over discernment.

Work is a theme of some importance, especially the criminal and gangster's claim to be wealthy, to have the trappings of clothing, food, cars, women, status and to have them more quickly than their straight counterparts. In several themes, the temptation to pull one more heist or job, then retire is a plot complication almost guaranteed to blow up in the person's face. Often, this in order to gain the trappings of legitimacy or the east life. The virtues of poverty or moderation are held up on occasion but as often to be rejected by the doomed protagonist. Bribery is an important subtheme, too.

Prv 16:10ff. for several proverbs speak to wise qualities that should mark the good ruler. The corrupt political leaders of noir (either weak and in the pay of mobsters, or stronger but manipulative and shadowy) violate these ideals.

Taken together, all of this, then, raises the issues surrounding audience response. Certainly producers, directors, and promotions often included violence and sex to appeal to (male) audiences. They understood and intended for that which the plots ultimately condemned to be desired as illicit or at least unattainable. It is well-known that young boys often emulated the gangsters that met their deaths in the films, and the femme fatales or even bad girls reformed were not that far removed from the pin-ups.