Femmes, But Not So Fatale:
The Changing Female Portrait in the Hard-Boiled Tradition

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Abstract

This essay analyses how the portrayal of femmes fatales has changed in the hands of three American innovators of the hard-boiled genre: Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961), Raymond Chandler (1888-1959), and Ross Macdonald (1915-1983). Femmes fatales play a pivotal role in the course of the hard-boiled detective’s quest, and often prove worthy opponents of the detective. Typically, their enticing beauty and potent sexuality lure the detective into danger, and their intelligence is used to manipulate men, and sometimes women as well. As the nature of a detective's employment has evolved to bring him into contact with different social groups, the typology of femmes fatales has also changed. In later hard-boiled fiction, the detective is no longer found only on the mean streets of urban settings. He enters the realm of the wealthy and middle-class suburbs, and meets women of various ages and social backgrounds. Macdonald’s femmes fatales, usually depicted with strong Oedipal overtones, are often the victims of circumstance. This essay examines: (1) how Hammett established the archetypal femmes fatales in two characters, Brigid O'Shaughnessy in The Maltese Falcon (1929) and Dinah Brand in Red Harvest (1927); (2) how Chandler expanded the typology and introduced psychological interest in the depiction of the femmes fatales through the creation of Eileen Wade in The Long Goodbye (1953) and Elizabeth Murdock in The High Window (1942); and, (3) how Macdonald rewrites these character traits, explores the motivation of each character’s crime and investigates the ambivalent treatment women receive in society. Macdonald’s women, such as Mildred Hallman in The Doomsters (1958) and Sarah Johnson in The Blue Hammer (1976), kill for complicated reasons involving love, fear, greed and vanity, and often because of their unfair treatment.
Keywords: femme fatale, Ross Macdonald, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, victim
1. Introduction

The typology of hard-boiled femmes fatales has changed as the narrative scope of the genre has expanded. In early private eye works, women characters are often associated with the underworld; many are social outcasts or hold socially unacceptable professions, whether or not they are characterized as good or bad. Milly, a prostitute in Carroll John Daly’s *The Snarl of the Beast* (1927), Mona Mars, a nightclub singer married to a gangster boss in Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939), and Inés Almad, a robber in Dashiell Hammett’s "The Whosis Kid" (1925) are examples of such women. Nonetheless, the nature of a detective's employment brings him into contact with different social groups. For instance, the detective, the Continental Op's investigation of a jewellery burglary in *The Dain Curse* (1928) introduces him to Alice Leggett, a scientist's murderous wife. The detective's increased mobility brings Chandler's private eye, Philip Marlowe in touch with people from social strata no longer confined to the underworld. His investigations in *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The High Window* (1942) take him to wealthy neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, where he meets two distinct types of femmes fatales: Carmen Sternwood, a seductive, psychotic killer from an upper-class family, and Elizabeth Murdock, a wealthy and manipulative widow who has murdered her husband. In Ross Macdonald's fiction, the rise of an American suburban middle class introduces a new breed of femme fatale to the genre, including women of various ages and social backgrounds. His women characters kill for complicated reasons because of psychological abuse or socio-economical inequity.

This essay intends to examine: (1) how Hammett established the archetypal femmes fatales in two characters, Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) and Dinah Brand in *Red Harvest* (1927); (2) how Chandler expanded the typology and introduced psychological interest in the depiction of the femmes fatales through the creations of Eileen Wade in *The Long Goodbye* (1953) and Elizabeth Murdock in *The High Window* (1942); and, (3) how Macdonald rewrites these character traits, explores the motivation of their crimes and investigates the ambivalent treatment women receive in society. It further investigates how Macdonald’s femmes fatales often suffer psychological trauma and social oppression which lead to their crimes.

The most significant feature of femmes fatales is their overt sexuality, symbolic of evil and deviancy. However, female sexuality is problematic. On the one hand, it symbolizes feminine strength through procreation and maternity. Along with this, it represents feminine frailty which exposes women to exploitation and abuse. On the other hand, female sexuality is often described as predatory. Women prey on fundamental male desires and inevitably expose their male counterparts’ vulnerability.
and their own sin. This deviancy in female sexuality becomes the source of evil. Sexuality also symbolizes the origin of guilt, "as the driving motive behind the detective story's central crime" (Svoboda 566). The early representation of female sexuality in the genre such as in Hammett’s and Chandler’s works, which presents women as a threat and danger to the detective, gives way in Macdonald's works to a representation of human injustice triggered by extreme socio-economic and psychological conditions. In exploring the essence of these femmes fatales, Macdonald not only raises questions about the treatment of women but also reminds the reader of the complexity of human relations in an increasingly complicated and complex society.

2. Hammett's Femmes Fatales: Brigid O'Shaughnessy and Dinah Brand

John Cawelti suggests that sexuality "is an object of pleasure, yet it also has a disturbing tendency to become a temptation, a trap, and a betrayal" (153). This ambivalence highlights a femme fatale's inevitable attraction to her male counterparts along with the potential danger imposed on him. She threatens his existence and challenges his moral and psychological strength. Cawelti continues: "the desirable and disturbing female is usually presented as blond and big breasted….  This combination of qualities inevitably suggests a latent symbolism that combines the images of virginity… and motherhood" (153-54). Although many femmes fatales do not match Cawelti's physical description, the image of virgin-mother is essential for them to ensnare men. A femme fatale’s deceitful virgin-mother manifestation with its Oedipal overtones elicits her male counterpart's protective instincts, his yearning for maternal comfort, and, ultimately, jeopardizes his safety. When the detective's paternalism is encoded with chivalry, a femme fatale's pretence of fragility makes him particularly vulnerable.

Brigid O'Shaughnessy, in Hammett's The Maltese Falcon (1929), who first appears as a pleading, helpless woman, epitomizes the femme fatale's beauty and pretence of virginal frailty. Her sexuality is immediately used to her advantage. In her first appearance in Sam Spade's office, she presents an attractive feminine image: tall and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere. Her body was erect and high-breasted, her legs long, her hands and feet narrow… her full lips more brightly red. White teeth glistened in the crescent her timid smile made.

(Maltese 4)
Her "pliantly" sexy feminine features are perfectly opposed to the non-feminine ones of Spade's secretary, Effie Perine (3). O'Shaughnessy’s "uneasy" eyes (4), "pleading" and "confused" voice (5, 8), trembling lips (5), and blushing face (7) are contrived to
create a girlish vulnerability. She has a mesmerizing power on both sexes. First, Spade's business partner, Miles Archer, immediately falls under her spell and fights to serve her (10). Soon Perine is charmed and demands that Spade protect her (42). Although Spade knows how dangerous O'Shaughnessy can be and cautions his partner: "You'll play hell with her" (10), he himself cannot help being attracted to her.

O'Shaughnessy's strength lies not only in her sexuality but also in her cunning intelligence. Her physical strength also contrasts with her frail looks, making her exceptionally dangerous. Spade is able to see through her innocent disguise when she tearfully and forcefully confesses her past in order to win his sympathy and trust. He cannot help but admire her cunning, sarcastically remarking, "You're good. You're very good" (Maltese 35), and "you are dangerous" (36). Those who she cannot charm she buys, as she tries to buy Spade with her body, and Cairo, a homosexual character, with money. She is afraid of those who exist beyond the power of her sexuality, such as Cairo, and another homosexual, Wilmer, the gunman (87). Contrary to her "schoolgirl manner" (55), O'Shaughnessy demonstrates a great deal of physical strength, clearly shown when she attacks Cairo (69, 73), although she subverts her "becoming shyness" by doing so (55).

Throughout the narrative, O'Shaughnessy feigns vulnerability to elicit sympathy and support from men, and then manipulates one man after another. In spite of her sexual power, she fails to attain her goal. James Shokoff suggests that O'Shaughnessy's strength is weakened by her misunderstanding of her role according to the conventions set by male tradition (60). She fails to recognise Spade's personal code of ethics in the moment of crisis. First, in contrast to Effie Perine's absolute loyalty to Spade, O'Shaughnessy repeatedly betrays him and jeopardizes his life. Spade's loyalty to his unworthy partner is not extended out of love or respect, but professionalism, the ultimate code for a detective. When Spade chooses Archer over O'Shaughnessy, she is perplexed, utterly failing to understand Spade's credo. She fails to comply with a code of loyalty that is essential to Spade's existence, but expects him to extend this loyalty to her in return. That is why Spade will not "play the sap" for her (Maltese 215). Secondly, O'Shaughnessy does not understand that conventional ideas of security and love are meaningless to Spade. She does not understand Spade's story about his client, Flitcraft, who discovers the unpredictability and hazards in life. Flitcraft discovers the best way to deal with a crisis is to jump into the mix of the unexpected instead of vainly attempting to avoid the unavoidable. Spade's world is full of dangerous variables such as those posed by O'Shaughnessy and her gang. He understands the love which O'Shaughnessy promises is as volatile and deadly as the falling beam in Flitcraft's story. Her betrayal and misunderstanding
of Spade proves her undeserving of Spade's comradeship in spite of the fact that she possesses an intelligence and strength compatible with those of the detective.

Dinah Brand, in Hammett's *Red Harvest*, demonstrates intelligence and resourcefulness equal to those of the detective, the Op. Her eccentricity also marks her as, if not a lovable, definitely an intriguing femme fatale. In contrast to O'Shaughnessy's beauty and ostensible vulnerability, Brand is "A soiled dove,... a de luxe hustler, a big league gold-digger" (*Red 22*), and an outfront villain from the very beginning. Her peculiar trait of caring lures men into her service. For instance, she breaks up with the young bank cashier when his money runs out for fear that he will embezzle funds. In turn, the cashier is deeply grateful to her for her thoughtfulness. She is tough enough to stand up to men, marking her as a different type of femme fatale. Unlike O'Shaughnessy's enticing sensuality, Brand's bulky physicality marks her as a model of matriarchal strength: "She was an inch or two taller than I [the Op], which made her about five feet eight. She had a broad-shouldered, full-breasted, round-hipped body and big muscular legs. The hand she gave me was soft, warm, strong" (*Red 32*). This strong appearance projects a sense of maternal security, confirmed by her strong handshake, giving her an aura of protection and tenderness. Nonetheless, Brand is as deceitful and manipulative as O'Shaughnessy.

Compared with O'Shaughnessy's carefully matched attire (*Maltese 4*), Brand's carelessness toward her appearance not only gives her a comic look but also contradicts the stereotype of the sexy femme fatale: Her coarse hair – brown – needed trimming and was parted crookedly. One side of her upper lip had been rouged higher than the other. Her dress was of a particularly unbecoming wine color, and it gaped here and there down one side, where she had neglected to snap the fasteners or they had popped open. There was a run down the front of her left stocking. (*Red 32*)

This picture of eccentricity, on the one hand, expresses her complete self-assurance, and on the other, it puts men at ease and keeps them, therefore, off guard. Her weathered appearance is also different from the schoolgirl looks of O'Shaughnessy: "Her face was a face of a girl of twenty-five already showing signs of wear. Little lines crossed the corners of her big ripe mouth. Fainter lines were beginning to make nets around her thick-lashed eyes. They were large eyes, blue and a bit blood-shot" (*Red 32*). This weariness delineates her worldliness and her ability to sustain herself in a rough town, and gives her a hard-boiled edge. She has seen enough of the world, done enough and learned enough to work things to her advantage. That is why she can take "her pick of Poisonville men" (32) and manipulate them in every possible manner. Her physical strength also reinforces her
tough manner, as when she hits a gangster with her fist: "It was a very respectable wallop – man-size" (105).

Her action also speaks of a seemingly trustworthy picture as when she takes the "lunger" (T.B. sufferer), Dan Rolff, under her wing. Certainly her favoritism has its self-serving purpose, which is to seek alliance and foster subjugation. In return, Rolff pledges his loyalty and love and works as an errand boy. A young victim of Brand's allure, Robert Albury, describes her charm: "You'll be disappointed at first. Then, without being able to say how or when it happened, you'll find you've forgotten your disappointment, and the first thing you know you'll be telling her your life's history, and all your troubles and hopes" (Red 27). Her power resides in her ability to generate a caring and nurturing image that many men find heart-warming and reliable. Even the tough Op begins to tell her about his self-disgust after a series of deaths (154). In fact, however, her maternal disguise veils her mercenary motives. In one instance, when Albury's money runs out, Brand cuts him off. She uses the same tactic on a union organiser, Bill Quint, to wheedle strike information from him, allowing her to make a great profit in the stock market.

Although she is equal, or even superior, to the Op in intelligence and strength, her absolute lack of morality eventually consumes her. The Op is incorruptible. Money and power mean nothing to him; in contrast, Dinah's ferocious appetite for money readies her to betray any confidence any time. She exploits men into giving her information and siding with her. She thus consolidates her power in a man's world. When the tide turns, she betrays the men who serve her without any remorse. Her greed drives her to surpass men in a predominantly male racket, but takes its toll on her life.

3. Chandler's Femmes Fatales: Eileen Wade and Elizabeth Murdock

Deviant sexuality as symbolic of evil remains a strong defining indicator of Chandler's femmes fatales including Carmen Sternwood in The Big Sleep (1939), Helen Grayle in Farewell, My Lovely (1940), and Eileen Wade in The Long Goodbye (1953). At the same time, an asexual, motherly type emerges, among which Elizabeth Murdock in The High Window (1942) is the best example.

In his critical analysis, "A Hard Cheerfulness", Stephen Knight pinpoints Chandler's anxiety over female sexuality: "Evidently, feminine power in or over men is not enjoyed at all, and sexual unease comes strongly through all Marlowe's encounters with men and women" (78). Gillian Plain holds the same view that Chandler's "representations of the feminine are harsh and unforgiving, delineating a female sexuality that is perceived as threatening even as it attracts" (61). It seems to
Marlowe, sexuality conceals an almost supernatural potency that poses a serious danger to masculinity. A seductive kiss can be a kiss of death, as Marlowe realizes in discovering the truth about the death of Regan when Carmen lures him to the deserted oil wells in *The Big Sleep* (211), and when Eileen Wade seduces him in order to kill him in her bedroom in *The Long Goodbye* (213).

Plain’s analysis further highlights the key role sexuality plays in Chandler’s femmes fatales: “If you cannot tell your femme fatale from your virginal innocents, you’re likely to be in serious trouble,” (31) as evident in Eileen Wade. Eileen Wade, in *The Long Goodbye*, who uses her sexuality to overcome her humble background, and who is as psychotic as Carmen, typifies Chandler’s femmes fatales. She deceives the detective in a more sinister way for all her seeming domesticity. The detective needs the fulfilment of love and sex; therefore he is vulnerable and sometimes falls prey to women. His vulnerability stems from his loneliness. In Marlowe's imagination, a perfect woman means outward beauty and domestic virtues. Consequently, he cannot resist Eileen, who, fantastically beautiful like “a golden dream” (219), represents the perfect female image of the detective's dream. She also convinces the detective of her chastity: she loves her husband, devotes herself to his well-being and suffers for his alcoholism and violence. Every time she summons Marlowe, she appears threatened by her husband's violence, which evokes the detective's sympathy. Marlowe is not only blinded by his chivalry but also by Eileen's projection of an ideal womanhood.

Eileen is fantastic, but she does not aggressively exhibit seductiveness, and risk putting off the detective who abhors overt sexuality such as that flaunted by Carmen and Grayle (*Sleep* 10-11, *Farewell* 119, 242). In Marlowe's eyes, she is perfect: "a lovely dish and no mistake" (*Long* 108). Her seeming perfection places her on a pedestal and adds to her a mysterious property: "She was unclassifiable, as remote and clear as mountain water, as elusive as its color" (90). This unreachability enhances her "almost paralysing" (95) power which is testified to when the detective falls under her spell:

> I touched bare skin, soft skin, soft yielding flesh…. She was making some kind of a whistling noise in her throat. Then she thrashed about and moaned. This was murder. I was as erotic as a stallion. I was losing control. You don't get that sort of invitation from that sort of woman very often anywhere. (*Long* 213)

When Eileen, "that sort of woman", a representative of noble womanhood, summons Marlowe, he is flattered. Her invitation to sex becomes all the more compelling and
rewarding. Her lust provokes Marlowe's equally oppressed desire. The whistling noise signals the lure of the deadly Sirens. It is Marlowe's own projection of perfect femininity that leaves him all the more vulnerable. Were the detective not deceived by his own preoccupation, he would not be so completely captivated.

The irony is that Eileen's artificial appearance, which provokes the detective's imagination, is rooted in her pathological state of mind. She lives in the fantasy of a perfect but non-existent love affair, and her jealousy upsets the balance, pushing her toward insanity.\(^1\) Behind her pretended elegance and frailty, she is licentious, contrary to the chaste image she projects. Marlowe, bewitched at first, only sees her in the aftermath of reflection: "I thought of the first time I had seen Eileen Wade and the second and the third and the fourth. But after that something in her got out of drawing. She no longer seemed quite real" (Long 317). Her charm lies in her unreality and in the detective's obsession with that unreality. Eileen is another femme fatale whose reinvented self cannot survive exposure. The psychopathologic condition that leads Eileen to kill is innate and emphasizes the abnormality, as expressed by the conventions of the genre, of potent female sexuality.

The maternalism of female sexuality, as suggested by Cawelti and illustrated by Dinah Brand in *Red Harvest*, later manifests itself in Chandler's other femme fatale, Mrs. Elizabeth Murdock in *The High Window* (1942). Mrs. Murdock is a mother, but she is not very motherly. She does not charm men or women with maternal warmth. Money is the source of her power. Her possessive relationship toward her son rings with Oedipal overtones. Mrs. Murdock kills her husband and coerces her naïve secretary, Merle Davis, into believing that she (Merle) is the unintentional killer.\(^2\) Mrs. Murdock, a selfish and ruthless person who kills to maintain her self-interest, feigns charity to manipulate an innocent girl, lies to keep her murderous secret, and intimidates to solidify her authority, is the exact antithesis of the traditional expectation of motherly generosity and care.

Non-human characteristics, e.g. inorganic materials, animalistic comparisons, grotesque appearances, delineate the deviant and criminal nature of Chandler's femmes fatales. Mrs. Murdock is no exception. In her first appearance, she projects stern authority:

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\(^1\) Her lover, Terry Lennox, has lost his good looks in the war and hence lost his appeal for her. Terry is married to a promiscuous woman who seduces Eileen's present husband and provokes her to kill. Eileen's husband knows about the murder, which also motivates Eileen to kill him.

\(^2\) Elizabeth Murdock pushes her husband out of a window, killing him. Her act is captured on camera by a petty criminal who later blackmails her. However, Mrs. Murdock plays with Merle's feeble psychology and convinces Merle that she has killed her husband by accident in a state of panic. Mrs. Murdock keeps Merle by her side to silence her, using her as a cheap servant to protect herself from the police.
She had a lot of face and chin. She had pewter-colored hair set in a ruthless permanent, a hard beak and large moist eyes with the sympathetic expression of wet stones…. Her thick arms were bare and mottled. There were jet buttons in her ears…. Her voice had a hard baritone quality. *(High 6)*

Contrary to the traditional tender and loving image of a mother, Mrs. Murdock appears cold and tough. Hard inorganic materials – "pewter", "stone" and "jet" – reinforce her forbidding persona. Her baritone voice comically indicates a false masculine presence. However, "There was lace at her throat, but it was the kind of throat that would have looked better in a football sweater" *(High 6)*. The lace, a delicate accessory, is supposed to enhance her femininity; instead, it becomes a sign of ridicule for her lack of femininity.

Instead of representing a favorable maternal image, Mrs. Murdock deliberately attempts to intimidate. She tells Marlowe, "don't let me scare you" *(High 7)*. She repeatedly exhibits an aggressive manner: "She pushed her jaw at me and muscles in her neck made hard lumps" (10); "Her mouth snapped open and her teeth glinted at me" (129); her "big gray face hardened into even ruggeder lines" (11); "She turned the color of a boiled beet" (11). Her tightening muscles, menacing gestures, and morbid color bespeak her grotesque nature and criminality.

More significantly, Mrs. Murdock's relationship with her son draws attention to a new theme – the Oedipal complex. Her possessiveness cripples her son. Her jealousy and hatred toward her daughter-in-law, Linda, drive her away and plunge her son into despair. Her stranglehold over her son's finances compels him finally to steal the family heirloom (a rare coin), initiating Marlowe's investigation.³ Ironically, Marlowe's investigation discloses her own crime. It is a case motivated by an Oedipal complex. This motivation becomes more pervasive in Macdonald's novels, which are replete with Oedipal themes.

**4. Macdonald’s Oedipal Women: Femme, But Not So Fatale**

In Macdonald's Archer novels, women often turn out to be murderesses as well as victims of circumstances. Macdonald himself points out: "Perhaps because, in our society, I regard women as having, essentially, been victimized. In nearly every case the women in my books who commit murders have been victims. People who have

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³ In *The High Window*, Marlowe is hired by Mrs. Murdock to recover a rare gold coin, which is stolen by Leslie, his employer's son in order to pay gambling debts. Mrs. Murdock believes that Linda, her daughter-in-law has stolen the coin and intends to use the investigation to blackmail Linda into an easy divorce.
been victims tend to victimize" *(Self-Portrait 89)*. Macdonald's exploration of the dark psyche of the female murderers echoes Barbara Hales’s claim that the portrayal of the femme fatale signifies the evil and chaos of the war and post-war period in her study of Weimar and Hollywood film noir (226).

The traditional hard-boiled femme fatale is a single-minded caricature: her sexuality combined with her wicked intelligence makes her evil. Her charm and camouflage enable her to stand apart from human considerations and she acts for her own interest. However, Macdonald's femmes fatales are invariably placed in a broader social context, especially in familial and societal terms. They are often victims of traumatic circumstances. When analyzing the characteristics of murderesses in her perceptive *Murder by the Book?*, Sally Munt points out that women become the victims of “domestic imprisonment” and “domestic claustrophobia” (22). Maureen Reddy asserts similar claims, arguing that “women’s entrapment in domestic life and powerlessness in their primary reality, the family,” in her historical survey of women villains in popular fiction. Mildred Hallman in *The Doomsters* (1958) is a typical product under “present social conditions [which] drive women to madness by requiring women’s self-abnegation and service to a patriarchal system… while depriving women of power, property, and meaningful work” (Reddy 39). Mildred, a child of poverty and broken marriage, contrives to marry a homosexual man from a rich and powerful family, and is determined to transform him into a heterosexual and to live happily ever after. In the process, she is abused by other family members. First, out of resentment and jealousy, her possessive mother-in-law forces her to abort her pregnancy. In order to keep what she has and to fulfil her hope of fortune and love, Mildred commits murders. Consequently, she is blackmailed by a family doctor and the local police. She finally loses her mind along with her goals. Macdonald rewrites the stereotype of the femme fatale into a pitiable figure facing horrendous traumas, and, at least in the case of Mildred, raises questions of women's treatment in society. Oedipal complications in family relationships become the breeding ground for femmes fatales in Macdonald’s narratives.

Noticeably, the orthodox image of the nurturing mother is perverted in the portrayal of two mothers, Mildred Mead and Sarah Johnson, in *The Blue Hammer* (1976). At the time, it depicted the most ambivalent attitude toward motherhood found in Macdonald's works. Neither woman directly commits murder but their guilt-ridden lives contribute to homicides. Deep suspicion of female sexuality in the genre resurfaces in the representations of Mildred and Sarah. Both characters exhibit Freudian issues of troubled childhoods. The actions of both mothers are more or less responsible for their sons' abnormality.
Although she does not participate in the action, Mildred is the real centre of the case because her deception instigates a chain of violent incidents. A beautiful and licentious model in her day, Mildred's sexuality rewards her: she becomes a mistress to rich men. Nevertheless, she is also "a hardy soul" (Hammer 125); she preys on men "like a kestrel or some other small birds of prey" (202). Mildred gives birth to an illegitimate son, William, fathered by a poor teenager, Jack Biemeyer, but she makes a mining tycoon, Felix Chantry, believe that William is his. William grows up to be a talented painter and a psychopathic killer.

All the misfortunes in the narrative are traced to Mildred's sexual indiscretions, introducing a note of fear and resentment against female sexuality, characterizing Virginia Allen’s definition of a femme fatale: a “a woman who lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelmingly seductive charms” (preface). William's illegitimate status leaves him his father's outcast, while his half-brother is honored and respected. When his half-brother steals his paintings and his lover, he kills him. Mildred arranges his escape, paving the road for future crime and “beginning to draw human lives into its vortex" (Hammer 67). Mildred's influence is not limited to her own house. Her intimate relationship with Jack Biemeyer, the client of Lew Archer, the detective, results in constant conflict between Biemeyer and his wife, to the detriment of the mental health of Biemeyer's daughter. William is also responsible for the suffering of his wife and son. In her portrait, "Mildred Mead's face struggling up out of the limbo of the past" (92). Mildred's past is closely and menacingly connected with the present, provoking violence and death.

The guilt of Mildred's past becomes more deadly when the son whom she condones continues to kill. The circle of violence and torment widens and overwhems. Her despair is revealed in her suicide attempt: "She looked like a woman staring down into her grave. The life of the city seemed to freeze in widening circles around her" (Hammer 249). All she sees in the landscape, and in herself, is death. Mildred is neither a murderer nor a victim, but her position as the origin of sin marks her an ambivalent character. Her deceit, originally meant to gain a better life for her and her son, eventually leads to futility and despair.

Mildred's daughter-in-law, Sarah Johnson, is another victim of Mildred's. William abandons her and her son. She eventually finds him and confines him at home. Her tormented relationship with William continues to deteriorate as they take up residence in a depilated house: "Their cohabitation was more like a prison sentence than any kind of marriage" (Hammer 236). Their son, Fred, lives under a shadow of violence, alcoholism, poverty, and shame. He sees his parents "both troubled people" (118), and believes that they play psychological warfare against each other: "For ruining himself and his life, and ruining her life. I've seen her stand and watch him
staggering from wall to wall as if she took pleasure in seeing him degraded. At the same time, she's his willing slave and buys him liquor. That's another form of revenge – a subtle form" (118). The distinction between the tormentor and the tormented in William and Sarah's relationship is blurred by their pathological conditions. Their self-torture and struggle only thwart Fred's growth, which looks exceptionally stunted: "He looked… like one those tired boys who go from youth to middle age without passing through manhood" (30). Furthermore, Sarah's psychopathic intrigue prolongs the crime of the past and allows it to continue.

In her first appearance in the narrative, Sarah "carried herself with a certain clumsy authority, but her voice was small and girlish" (Hammer 20). This doubleness of her character undoubtedly originated in her life of masquerade. On the one hand, Sarah is a willful woman who enjoys wielding authority over her husband as is evident when she stops him from talking to Archer: she "peered sharply into his eyes like a diagnostician, and gave him a little slap of dismissal" (90). On the other, "She's a woman who refused to be a full woman" (118), according to her son. She demonstrates immaturity – she has a girlish voice and giggles like "a wild young girl" (68). The pretence and struggle of her life blurs and distorts her identity. She appears to be a "woman who had giggled a moment ago had been swallowed up like a ghostly emanation by her body" (68). The mental somersaults she performs in order to control a psychotic husband and to raise a normal son are equally demanding and consuming. The change of psychology shows when she tries to lie her way through her difficulties: "Her face changed, groping for an expression that could accommodate the doubleness of her life" (223). She gradually loses herself, as her husband did, in obscurity.

Despite her own abnormality, Sarah obviously struggles to maintain a sense of normalcy for her son, embodying her maternal strength. Her son is her hope and the origin of her strength: "He's the only one of us with any future"(Hammer 37). This hope gives her strength and also strengthens her possessive feelings over him. Fred's friend complains of Sarah: "she wants Fred all to herself" (25). The Oedipal complex is double-edged. Her attachment to Fred encourages and sustains him to do well, but it burdens him as well.

Sarah's behavior does not directly contribute to her husband's murders. However, her knowledge of the murders marks her as far from innocent. As one of the victims rightly accuses her:

She's one of those wives who can watch a man commit murder and feel nothing. Nothing but her own moral superiority. Her whole life's been devoted to covering up. Her motto is save the surface and you save all. But
nothing got saved. The whole thing went to rot, and people got killed while she stood by and let it happen. (*Hammer* 238)

Self-deceit, callousness, and hypocrisy with a touch of stubborn strength, constitute Sarah's complex character. We see in Sarah a very intriguing woman who teeters between sanity and insanity and between lies and reality, and yet genuinely loves her son. It is hard to depict accurately a woman capable of cruelty, indifference and love. She is "like some amorphous sea creature trying to dodge an enemy, perhaps evade reality itself" (238), as Archer says of her in his final analysis.

Her weakness exists in her resentment and manipulation of her husband, in her poverty and shame, and in her pathological condition. Nonetheless, her desolation is acute in her struggle with life as Archer sympathetically observes: "The day had been too much for her, and the night hung over her like a slowly gathering wave. She looked down into her cupped and empty hands, then put her face into them. She didn't sob or cry or say a word. But her silence in the midst of the muffled freeway noises sounded like desolation itself" (*Hammer* 66). Her intense moment of powerlessness is the most powerful expression of nihilistic angst in the novel and among the most effective in Macdonald's writing.

Mildred Mead and Sarah Johnson are not themselves deadly, but their indulgence of killers and indifference to the misery of others result in chaos and death. Their attempts to control and manipulate men rupture human relationships and inflict pain upon the innocent. Their own sufferings also underscore the unfair treatment of women in the society of the day and expose the hypocrisy of the family myth.

### 5. Conclusion

Hammett's portrayals of femmes fatales – O'Shaughnessy and Dinah Brand – demonstrate a female strength and intelligence almost compatible to male characters. They, however, are morally inferior and therefore they must fail in their struggle with their male counterparts. Chandler's female characters are, with few exceptions, predominantly beautiful but sexually corrupt. The attitude toward female sexuality expressed by his detective, Marlowe, is bound together in a paradox of fear and admiration.

In Macdonald's later works, women are developed and transformed, and given more complexity and depth as their worlds grow more complicated and less predictable. Female sexuality remains at the centre of the narrative; it becomes a tool to appraise female virtue and a challenge to male strength in keeping with the hard-boiled convention. Its deviancy generates trouble and suffering. As the genre
expands to reflect an increasingly complicated society, psychology and socio-
economical conditions are incorporated into the representations of women's
conditions and broken families. In his depiction of femmes fatales, Macdonald
ruptures the confines of the genre. In so doing, his women characters are no longer,
or at least not utterly, hard-boiled.
Works Cited


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