

HISTORICIZING THE FEMME FATALE: FROM SENSATION FICTION TO FILM
NOIR

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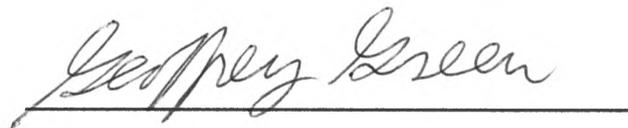
Master of Arts
In
English: Literature

by
Matina Marie Tryforos
San Francisco, California
May 2018

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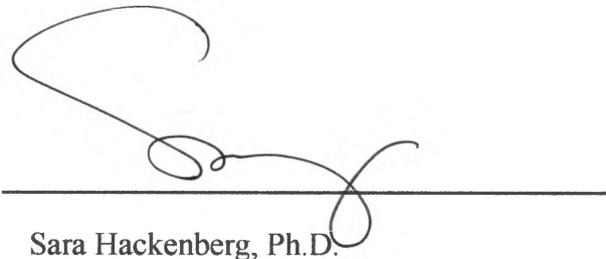
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I certify that I have read *Historicizing the Femme Fatale: From Sensation Fiction to Film Noir* by Matina Marie Tryforos, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree: Master of Arts in English Literature at San Francisco State University.

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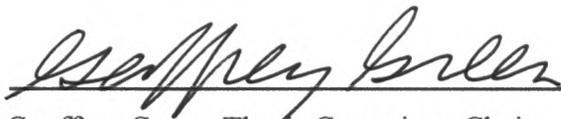
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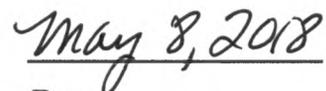
Matina Marie Tryforos
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This thesis analyzes the *femme fatale* as a teacher figure in sensation fiction and film noir. I argue that as an archetype character the *femme fatale* has many iterations throughout literary and cinematic history who function to disrupt the social fabric. I show how the nineteenth-century fatal governess from sensation fiction helped pave the way for the dangerous teacher figure of film noir. I demonstrate the shared concerns between sensation fiction and film noir, which create space for the deadly teacher figure to break down social boundaries and expose injustices. Her narrative forces society to look in a moral mirror and reconsider socio-historic circumstances. In this way, she plays a figurative or symbolic role as a teacher to society; she shows women that they too can find ways to achieve agency of body, mind, and spirit. This thesis works to broaden the understanding of the working woman *femme fatale* by identifying and analyzing sensation fiction's dangerous governess and film noir's teacher figure.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Geoffrey Green, Thesis Committee Chair



Date

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Introduction

I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace. If my experience of life has not been very long, it has at least been manifold...

— narrator of *Lady Audley's Secret* (ch. 10 446)

‘Oh, what is that in heaven where grey cloud-flakes are seven,

Where blackest clouds hang riven just at the rainy skirt?’

‘Oh, that’s a meteor sent us, a message dumb, portentous,

An undeciphered solemn signal of help or hurt.’

— “Amor Mundi” by Christina Rossetti (9-12)

The first epigraph gives us the final words of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s classic sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret*. The unnamed narrator has just revealed that the story ends with the *femme fatale* Lady Audley dead in an insane asylum while her aristocratic connections live happily ever after. The “good people” are assumed to be the aristocrats who have all made appropriate marriages and abandoned the Gothic Audley Court where Lady Audley’s once captivating “pre-Raphaelite portrait” gathers “the blue mould which artists dread” (ch. 10, 445-6). The narrator subverts the meaning of the ending in questioning if readers will object; this indicates there are reasons to object to

the happy ending or question how good the “good people” really are. In turn, we must wonder if the deadly Lady Audley is as bad as she seems. The narrator leaves the reader questioning the fate of Lady Audley and implies that maybe her ending is objectionable as well. The ability to cause doubt and ambiguity is at the core of the *femme fatale*'s identity. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas discusses the way Lady Audley complicates the pre-Raphaelite images of sexualized women in a way that made them both sexual and virginal; fearful and desirable (23). Lady Audley may die in the end, but her memory and portrait (even if deteriorating) remain; as do the lessons she teaches about social inequality. One could say that sensation fiction and film noir's fatal woman breaks down the binary pre-Raphaelite and Gothic romance novel heroines were typically held to. Like Lady Audley, the *femmes fatales* I examine in this thesis break down stereotypes and challenge social structures.

Moreover, the dark, foreboding imagery pre-Raphaelite poetess Christina Rossetti uses to describe the world in her poem “Amor Mundi” encapsulates the Gothic environment of film noir and sensation fiction that the fatal woman thrives in. The meteor pierces the black clouds as an undeciphered sign. Similarly, the *femme fatale* disrupts the fabric of society. One attribute of the *femme fatale* is that she is unreadable, an enigma, a mystery, and for this reason she can also be seen as “an undeciphered solemn signal of help or hurt” (Rossetti 12). She is seen as a deadly threat by some and as a sign of a brighter future with choices by others. As an archetype, the *femme fatale* can be found throughout literature and film. This thesis examines the *femme fatale* of nineteenth-

century sensation fiction and mid-twentieth-century film noir. More specifically, I look at the figure of the governess in sensation fiction and the schoolmistress in film noir as representations of the deadly working woman. My focus is on the relationship between the deadly working woman's labor (whether criminal or legal), her ability to actively seek independence, and the moral lessons we learn from such an analysis.

Scholars have established the long history of the *femme fatale* that goes back to the Bible's Eve or Salome, the ancient Greek's Helen of Troy, or the great Queen of Egypt Cleopatra. As these examples demonstrate, the *femme fatale* is often stereotyped as a seductress who preys on men in order to get what she wants; she is ruthless, unforgiving, and dangerous if not deadly. Analyzing the *femme fatale* in this way is crucial to understanding the ways in which she is constantly reincarnated throughout literature and cinematic history. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe's anthology *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* claims the fatal woman remains a "recurrent presence in both popular and high culture" as a "perennial site of uncertainty, raising challenging questions and inviting further investigation" (1). Like a mirror, her presence forces audiences to question or challenge their own position in a patriarchal society. The deadly dame's persistent presence in literature and cinema is the very reason it is crucial to define her within her specific cultural context. A locally specific historical examination of the fatal woman breaks down the stereotypes and myths that surround her character. Such an examination reveals the social inequalities and sexual stigmas working women overcame (Hanson and O'Rawe 7).

Sensation fiction and film noir are both born in times of rapid social upheaval and change; this is one quality that links the genres. Likewise, the fatal woman arises as a central figure when women were working to gain more freedom by challenging patriarchal social structures. In Julie Grossman's book *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-up* we find an examination of the *femme fatale* from the psychoanalytic Marxist idea that she is a product of cultural ideation (3-5). In other words, the *femme fatale* is a product of her environment or the collective ideals of her society and the labor she performs. The deadly characters I focus on are working women in two different ways. On the surface, she is gainfully employed (often in a respectable home or school) as a successful governess, teacher, or nanny. Below the surface, she schemes, plots, lies, and deceives in order to make sure she achieves the agency she desires. As I will demonstrate, this counter-work or corrupt activity can be seen as legitimate work the deadly dame must (sometimes by force) participate in so she can achieve independence. Ultimately, the *femme fatale* accesses social power through her use of sexuality, intelligence, and labor (both on and off the books). The dangerous teacher figure takes on a symbolic role as she shows audiences the harsh realities working women faced.

Mary Ann Doane, in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* explores the idea that male anxiety surrounding women's sexual agency in twentieth-century film noir is grounded in nineteenth-century literature and historical moments of

trauma that disrupt the established social structure (2).¹ For example, sensation fiction reflects moments in first-wave feminism when suffragettes were fighting for the right to vote, own property, divorce their husbands, and work for class mobility. Film noir reflects moments in second-wave feminism, post-World War II, when men returned from war to find that women dominated new fields of work in an unprecedented way. Working women were less inclined to stay home and raise a family. As a result, they were often seen as a threat to bourgeois domestic ideals. Julie Grossman builds on the relationship between Victorian literature and film noir through an examination of the *femme fatale*. She even coins the term “Victorinoir” in order to describe the shared characteristics between the genres.² For instance, both genres share dark, Gothic settings, a combination of realism with an element of melodrama, a shocking fascination with crime, the presence of the fatal woman, and instills the audience with feelings of anxiety.

Furthermore, Julie Grossman claims the *femme fatale*'s narrative “can be usefully redefined as sharing an identity with the *femme moderne* who haunted nineteenth century texts ... before the flourishing of film noir in the 1940's” (95). Due to the gender and

¹ For more on the history of the working woman as she disrupts society in film noir see *Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood* by Dennis Broe and *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir (1941-1991)* by James F. Maxfield. For more on the history of sensation fiction's governess see *The Female Servant and Sensation Fiction: 'Kitchen Literature'* by Elizabeth Steere as well as *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* by Jennifer Hedgecock.

² See the chapter “Looking Back — Victorinoir: Modern Women and Their Fatal(e) Progeny of Victorian Representations” from her book *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*.

labor anxieties that arise during these times, the *femme fatale* arises like the phoenix from ashes to break down binaries and serve as a ray of hope for women suffering under similar social restraints that the characters find themselves in. As she works towards autonomy, she serves as a lesson of what to do and a warning about what not to do. The *femme fatale* is smart and cunning; she reads others while remaining unreadable in order to protect herself from potential societal repercussions to her unconventional, independent lifestyle. Grossman's goal is to "illuminate these women's narratives rather than mystifying women as objects or heroes" (5). In this way, the historical contexts can be seen as snapshots of time periods when women were seizing opportunities to control their own destiny and challenge the patriarchal social structure of their time. For that reason, approaching the *femme fatale* from a more understanding perspective is a worthwhile endeavor as her strength, courage, and independence become the highlight of the story. Based on the idea that the Victorian *femme fatale* serves as pre-history for that of film noir, this thesis works to show the relationship between sensation fiction's deadly governess and film noir's sensational schoolmistress.

This thesis analyzes the *femme fatale* as a teacher figure who is comprised of contradictions that yield a lesson we can learn: that women can break free of restricting social expectations to find an awakened sense of self. The dangerous working woman, whether she be found in sensation fiction or film noir, is a woman who provides a lesson about the possibilities and limits of female desire that is too often circumscribed by hetero-normative sexuality and socio-historic constructs. As Jennifer Hedgecock claims

in *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* the *femme fatale* is more than a stereotype; she breaks down binaries and exposes social inequality. The reiterations of the fatal woman function as “part of the evolving assertiveness on the part of women” (3). That is to say, we can trace how sensation fiction’s governess breaks new ground that paves the way for film noir’s schoolmistress. In sensation fiction the fatal woman “is a literary signpost of the changing roles of women in the nineteenth century, a period when middle-class women begin organizing more radical feminist movements, and ... she foreshadows later protests against society’s treatment of women” (3). For instance, Part One of this thesis focusses on sensation fiction’s deadly governess. Her story exposes the inhumane work conditions and sexual stigmas governesses had to navigate on a daily basis. Part Two focusses on the sensational schoolmistress of film noir who revolts against bourgeois and patriarchal values as they work to gain the agency they desire.

We can see how the nineteenth-century deadly governess morphed into being either a teacher or a nanny by looking at the evolution of the position. The Victorian governess did much more than take care of the children, she was also a private educator. By the mid-twentieth century the governess position was considered outdated and split in half: the boarding school teacher (who is also responsible for taking care of the children) or a private nanny employed in the home. That is why we see a separation between the duties of nannies and teachers in film noir; although, I argue the boarding school teachers seem to have more responsibilities than sensation fiction’s governess. The boarding

school teachers I analyze from the films *Les Diaboliques* and *The Children's Hour* do more than take care of the students and teach, they also run the finances, do the cleaning, and manage the business of the school as well. And speaking to the power the governess figure possesses, we can turn to a definition (obsolete since the eighteenth-century) that considers the governess “a goddess of an activity, sphere, or place.” In this sense, we see that the governess maintains her role as a source of power even if society may have let that aspect of her identity be silenced or ignored.

The contradictory nature of the *femme fatale* and her undeniable power is a topic some scholars such as Mary Ann Doane, Laura Laffrado, E. Ann Kaplan, Foster Hirsch, Jennifer Hedgecock, Julie Grossman, and Helen Hanson (to name a few) have wrestled with for decades.³ Despite theoretical variations in approaches (i.e. Marxist versus psychoanalytical, or socio-historical), these scholars examine the *femme fatale* and her narrative from a feminist perspective. Therefore, some common points of agreement are illuminated: 1) The *femme fatale* is a reflection and/or product of the social and historical times of unrest and trauma. The context in which she arises is not only historical, but often political. 2) The *femme fatale* is typically reduced to a seductress who represents male fear and anxiety. Even when she does not appear as a young, sexy woman, she still

³ In 2001, Foster Hirsch acknowledged the misogyny in the 1981 edition of his book *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*. He wrote a new introduction and revised some of his work to incorporate more feminist ideas. Also refer to *Women in Film Noir* by E. Ann Kaplan, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* by Helen Hanson, and *Uncommon Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writing* by Laura Laffrado.

uses her sexuality in order to access social power. However, this is just one small aspect of her identity. 3) The *femme fatale* also actively works to achieve agency; and in doing so, she disrupts society's ideas about sexual morality as she paves the way for working women. She is a psychologically-complex woman whose experiences teach us about the challenges women faces in their pursuit of a holistic agency that incorporates mind and body.

This thesis is further divided into two parts with a conclusion. The first is focused on the ways in which sensation fiction's deadly governess disrupts social and domestic structures in order to impart the idea that women can be empowered. To start, sensation fiction is a sub-genre of mystery that combines elements of realism, melodrama, and the Gothic that burst onto the literary scene in the eighteen-sixties. As Winifred Hughes describes in her book *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*, it was shocking, different, and "agreeably grotesque" (5). The genre reflected a national "state of mind known as "Sensation Mania" (5). That is to say, readers were enthralled with these new exciting stories that were accessible in highbrow magazines as well as lowbrow penny dreadful newspapers. As Hughes notes "Everyone from the lady in the house to the lowest scullery maid was reading these 'feverish productions' with feverish voracity" (6). Sensation fiction was a literature for everyone: it was exciting, horrific, interesting and appealing. Its unique combination of realistic characters in extraordinary circumstances also exposed class and gender inequalities. Sensation fiction emerges at a time of increasing literacy among the working class (and up until this point, typically

semi-literate) and is an “undisputed example of ‘democratic art,’ not only being read by all classes of society but having its origins in the less-than-respectable quarters of lower-class literature” (6). Sensation fiction also gave us one reincarnation of the working-class *femme fatale* in the form of the governess.

Part one examines how the Victorian *femme fatale* works to challenge the confining institution of marriage as she seeks independence. More specifically, I look at *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *The Octoroon: or, The Lily of the Louisiana* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and “Behind a Mask; or a Woman’s Power” by Louisa May Alcott. *Jane Eyre* provides a foundation for the figure of the nineteenth-century deadly governess. She is what Laura Laffrado refers to as an uncommon woman who breaks social customs. The deadly governess Jean Muir from “Behind a Mask” masquerades in order to win the heart and hand of the family patriarch. She may start as the governess, but she has plans to gain a title in order to access social and financial freedom. Braddon’s fatal woman Pauline Corsi proves to be a true source of power. She is not only marginalized as a working woman but marginalized for her race as well because she is mixed-race; her mother was a slave. Despite being twice-Othered, Pauline achieves independence for herself and others. All three of these characters threaten the patriarchal social structure through masquerade and behind-the-scenes work that furthers their personal goals of financial freedom. We learn that the dangerous governess’ power is implicitly tied to her ability to understand marriage as a social contract and find her place of power within that framework.

Sensation fiction's dangerous governess also serves as a foundational figure for part two's analysis of the sensational schoolmistress. As the late Victorian novels offer a "pre-history" for film noir, so too does the *femme fatale* (Grossman 94). Sensation fiction appealed to readers in part due to its use of realism. Its central figures are often considered working-class members of society. It is this quality, that allows the over-worked and under-paid governess to reveal the very real social injustices governesses experienced. Additionally, Grossman points out that societal trauma affects the representation of women in popular culture texts. She explains how social trauma (such as the struggles over the late nineteenth-century feminist movement and post-World Wars shifts in gender roles) "dislocates men from their former sense of being the prime movers of culture" (9). As a result, we see the "resurgence of misogynistic discourse during times that provoke gender distress" (13). At the same time, the societal trauma opens a door for women to gain more agency through labor and it is this narrative that sensation fiction (and later film noir) make room for.

When it comes to defining film noir, we must turn to the genre-defining book *A Panorama of American Film Noir (1941-1953)* by scholars Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton. They too recognize film noir's connections to nineteenth-century gothic, crime novels and point out that both "shed light on forbidden worlds" (7). Film noir is known for depicting the dark underbelly of society with stories full of anti-heroes and tragic endings. It is often visually recognized by its combination of realism, German Expressionism, dark lighting, severe angles, the use of mirrors, and labyrinth-like urban

environments. Like sensation fiction, film noir actively seeks to disrupt social structures. Furthermore, as a result of McCarthyism, exiled and harassed film makers driven by unfounded guilt, translated their paranoia and anxiety into a close examination of a sympathetic, working-class criminal “or psychotic killer whose underground life menaced society” (Broe 86).⁴ Thus, in locating the marginalized and repressed individual within a specific cultural moment of trauma, film noir provides an opportunity to bring together the cultural, aesthetic, and psychic depths of the event in popular culture.⁵

One working class character film noir refocus on in the fifties and sixties is the working-class woman struggling to survive in a society that holds her down. For example, the 1940s more familiar image of the *femme fatale* is more commonly represented as a single woman dripping in money (or seeking such wealth) and sex appeal like the Sternwood daughters from *The Big Sleep* or *Mildred Pierce*'s Veda Pierce. But, in the fifties and sixties that shift in genre reimagines the *femme fatale* as a hard-boiled, psychologically-complex, working-class woman who challenges the

⁴ One American social trauma that influences film noir is the fear of the Cold War. This fear led to Senator Joseph McCarthy's Communist witch-hunt that fostered political hysteria, especially in Hollywood where studios and executives cooperated with the government (Hirsch 200). As a result, film noir becomes a genre steeped in Marxism that works to undermine “the established order” (Borde 98). This shift in genre also emphasizes the value in exploring deep cultural consciousness and its psychological effects on traumatized individuals.

⁵ Refer to “Voices from the Deep: Film Noir as Psychodrama” by J.P. Telotte from the anthology *Film Noir Reader 4* for more on psychological trauma and film noir.

patriarchal power structure. Part two looks at two such *femmes fatales* from the films *Les Diaboliques* directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot and *The Nanny* directed by Seth Holt. Film noir's fluidity creates space for the *femme fatale* to expose and critique the community she is a member of. A rather tired and limited critique of the dangerous working woman sees her as merely a trope for the destabilization of the domestic woman.⁶ My readings attempt to give psychological depth and socio-historic context to the sensational schoolmistresses. Furthermore, the conclusion extends my argument that social power is implicitly linked with sexual agency in noir with a queer reading of *The Children's Hour*.

According to *Noir Anxiety* by Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, the "source of the anxieties and fatalism of noir" is represented in the "breakdown of patriarchal authorities" through the characterization of the *femme fatale* (xiii)." So, while she may be the site of anxiety and fear she is simultaneously breaking down the system that denies her agency. Part two and the conclusion examine the archetype *femme fatale* as she is represented in film noir by working women, specifically schoolmistresses and the closely related nanny. For example, the unnamed nanny from the twisted film noir *The Nanny*, is ambiguously evil as she simultaneously appears like the ideal, caring, and devoted Nanny and a self-serving murderess. Nanny may have murdered a little girl under her care and

⁶ See Julie Grossman's essay "'Well, Aren't we Ambitious,' or 'You've Made up Your Mind I'm Guilty': Reading Women as Wicked in American Film Noir" for the full theoretical contexts, values, and limitations of this argument.

allowed the victim's ten-year-old brother to take the blame and serve time in a juvenile correctional facility. *Les Diaboliques*' Nicole Horner embodies unscrupulous greed as she plots to potentially kill both her married lover and his wife. And in a twist on the concept of the *femme fatale*, *The Children's Hour* provides an example of an innocent school mistress Martha Dobie. She is stigmatized and treated as sexually deviant due to false accusations from a cruel pupil. In the end she dies a painful and grisly death.

Overall, this thesis works to build on the scholarship of the *femme fatale* by narrowing my examination down to the ways in which the devious governess or instructor figure unsettles traditional gender roles as she slips from late nineteenth-century sensation fiction into mid-twentieth-century film noir. In sum, film noir's dangerous teachers and nannies challenge patriarchal structures of power and serve as society's moral mirror. The dangerous working woman is a complicated character who illuminates the possibilities that come with sexual power. One way this power is reflected is in the characters' relationships to the (patriarchal) social construct of marriage. Sensation fiction's governess grinder performs to find power in marriage on her own terms. Film noir's deadly teachers are single women who have romantic relationships outside the structure of marriage. And *The Children's Hour* shows us what happens to women who dare challenge the idea of hetero-normative relationships. These teachers are not just a teacher within the narrative, but also a figure who attempts to raise the collective social consciousness regarding the injustices working women faced. We can view film noir and sensation fiction's deadly working women as psychologically-

complex, powerful characters who expose deep-seated truths about their social circumstances.

Teachings of the Ground-down Governess in Sensation Fiction

Presentiments are strange things! And so are sympathies, and so are signs, and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the lay.

— *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

Nineteenth-century sensational fictions by Louisa May Alcott, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Charlotte Brontë offer a feminist perspective of their society and establish the governess *femme fatale* as a staple of the genre. In the above epigraph *Jane Eyre* describes a dream, but she could be describing the function of sensation fiction or herself as the fatal governess. At the height of sensation fiction's popularity, the genre was met with harsh judgement from bourgeois readers and conservative authors who outright dismissed it (or ground it down) as low-brow, amoral, and unworthy of being considered true literature.⁷ The genre's popularity with the working class was seen as a foreboding sign to realist authors and the upper class who were afraid their lifestyle was under threat. Sensation fiction was written for a newly literate working-class audience and offered a critique of society that threatens aristocratic and patriarchal systems. As scholar Andrew Mangham explains in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation*

⁷ For more information on class attitudes towards sensation fiction see chapter 8 "Sensation, Class and the Rising Professional" by Mariaconcetta Costantini and chapter 13 "Sensation Fiction and the Publishing Industry" by Graham Law from *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* edited by Andrew Mangham.

Fiction, the “sensation novel is obsessed with ‘in-between’ spaces that provide a no-holds-barred area for asking controversial questions” (4). Sensation fiction and film noir exploit the ambiguous and rapidly changing boundaries to delve into the depths of society in order to raise important questions about class, gender, and race.

Sensation fiction’s dangerous working woman blurs the lines between class and gender which creates ambiguity. She occupies both the working-class world to which she belongs and the aristocratic world she works for and aspires to join. This in-between space allows her just enough room to begin to teach us new ideas through her quest for financial and/or domestic autonomy. For instance, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë serves as a foundation for the sensation fiction genre; while the character Jane Eyre is seen as a proto-fatal governess. Additionally, this chapter takes a detailed look at the duplicitous governess Jean Muir in Alcott’s most widely read serialized sensation fiction “Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power.” Alcott’s governess Jean Muir is often seen as Alcott’s response or adaptation of Brontë’s Jane Eyre.⁸ And last but not least, this chapter analyzes the oft overlooked sensation novel *The Octoroon; or, The Lily of Louisiana* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. The unscrupulous governess Pauline Corsi truly disrupts the social order and lives to tell the tale, unlike Lady Audley. Like Jane Eyre’s description of a dream, the *femme fatale* signals times of social unrest and change. At the same time,

⁸ Refer to Showalter’s anthology *Alternative Alcott* and Madeleine Stern’s *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*. Articles by Christine Butterworth-McDermott and Sara Hackenberg provide more information on the relationship between Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Alcott’s “Behind a Mask.”

she is a sign of hope and possibility to many women readers. The *femme fatale* in all her reincarnations proves to be a “mystery to which humanity has not yet found the lay” (Brontë 187).

Winifred Hughes work *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* defines sensation fiction as a sub-genre of mystery that disrupts societal conventions. Hughes describes the true essence of sensation fiction as “wild yet domestic” (16). Sensation fiction combines qualities of realism and romance in order to probe beneath the surface of society, revealing the unrestrained Victorian *femme fatale*. On one hand, realism can be seen as the antithesis of sensation novels. Nineteenth-century realism is known for its focus on middle- and labor-class life. Realism abounds with ordinary people in everyday circumstances who (through excruciatingly detailed descriptions) reveal the intricacies of social life. At times realism moves into the realm of sociological investigations and can be seen as moralizing. One character that contributes to the moralizing aspect of sensation fiction is the ground-down (by her demanding aristocratic employers) governess. Telling the realistic story of the governess reveals the unjust circumstances they had to endure. In this sense, the governess is trying to teach bourgeois employers to treat people with dignity and respect. In another way, the fatal governess is teaching working women that there is a way to overcome and achieve a higher standard of living even if it is risky.

On the other hand, romance is a literature trend steeped in imagination and extreme feelings that represents the wild, passionate side of humanity.⁹ For this reason, sensation fiction authors embraced negative and positive intense experiences such as love, rapture, horror, nostalgia, or melancholy. As Hughes observes, sensation fiction takes the ordinary person from realism and puts them in a romantic world of extraordinary (and often horrific) circumstances (17). A trademark of romance that carries into sensation fiction is the dominant role of the Other, the bizarre, and/or macabre that bring elements of the Gothic tradition to sensation fiction.¹⁰ In the end sensation fiction, combines the everyday mundane details of realism with the mythic imagination of romance to create a genre that subverts social constructs. Often times, the fatal governess is rendered Other because she chooses a path of independence that challenges society's idea of what women should or should not do.

Sensation fiction's deadly governess occupies a liminal space as she lives as a worker who can pass as a woman of leisure. Her adaptability challenges the patriarchal structure and creates a new space or avenue for women who want and/or need to support

⁹ For more information on romanticism and the Victorian *femme fatale* see the anthology *Popular Fiction by Women 1660-1730* by Paula R. Backscheider and John J. Richetti and the book *Fatal Women of Romanticism* by Adriana Craciun.

¹⁰ For an overview of Gothic influences in sensation fiction refer to "Sensation Fiction and the Gothic" by Laurence Talairach-Vielmas.

themselves. That is to say, British and American women of the mid to late nineteenth-century had limited options in life. They could be a wife and mother, a servant in a domestic house, a prostitute or bar maid (often one in the same). And in creating more work opportunities for women, the governess was revolutionary.¹¹ Elizabeth Steere's book *The Female Servant and Sensation Fiction 'Kitchen Literature'* investigates the unstable class dynamics found in sensation fiction. Steere's criticism focusses on servants besides the governess. However, she still reaffirms the governess' position as ambiguous and dangerous. The governess is in a "paradoxical occupation" because she must "be a gentle woman;" at the same time, she must be "a dependent domestic employee" or servant (Steere 47). On the surface the job of a governess sounds like a wonderful escape from a life of arranged marriage, homelessness, prostitution, or joining a convent. A governess is valued for her knowledge and expertise and entrusted with the education of aristocratic children. She is even paid a salary. However, Richard Dunn provides historical context that describes Victorian aristocrats who mingle "pride and meanness" and "compound affection with cruelty ...who like to boast of 'keeping' a governess,

¹¹ For more information on the social conditions of the Victorian woman I suggest chapter 3 "The Cultural Phenomenon of the Mid-Century *Femme Fatale*" from *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature* by Jennifer Hedgecock. Also, refer to these chapters from *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*: "Sensation, Class, and the Rising Professional" by Costantini, "Sensation Fiction, Gender and Identity" by Tara Macdonald, and "Sensation Fiction and the New Woman" by Greta Depledge.

when they know they are insufficiently maintaining an educated person to do double the work of the domestic drudge, at scarcely the wages of the lowest menial” (437).

Furthermore, a Victorian exposé entitled “The Governess Grinders” details her grueling schedule starting at 5:45 am and not ending until late at night.¹² The governess was not just expected to teach the children their basic education, music, and manners. She was expected to nurse, bathe and dress the children, and do her mistress’s “fancy sewing” after the children were in bed. She was often expected to teach the elder children with an infant on her lap (Dunn 437). Governesses were expected to teach, do the duties of a nurse and a lowly needle-maid; yet, they were far under-paid than someone doing just one of those positions. So, a governess position might appear as a step up, but they were often treated miserably by fellow staff and employers, unfairly compensated, and inherently misjudged. Elizabeth Steere corroborates the mistreatment of the governess when she reports that *The Times* referred to being a governess in the 1850s as “white slavery” (47). Even Rochester demands that Jane Eyre give up her “governessing slavery at once” when he attempts to negotiate a marriage with her (Brontë 230, ch. xxiv). These examples depict the unjust real-life drudgery of being a governess and reveal the exploitation of her labor.

¹² This article can be found in the “Contexts” section of the Norton Critical Edition of *Jane Eyre* edited by Richard Dunn. Additionally, Gabor J. Boritt’s article “Punch Lincoln: Some Thoughts on Cartoons in the British Magazine” also details the horrors of being a nineteenth-century governess.

Sensation fiction authors found the governess was the perfect character to explore the boundaries of class mobility in a quickly declining aristocratic society (Steere 97-99). The governess knows how to come back from dire situations and turn them around to suit herself. She can adapt to new circumstances and survive in the face of adversity. While some may see her actions as evil manipulation, she is in fact taking calculating steps to regain control of her own life. The steps she takes serve as lessons for other women; so that they too can work towards sexual and social agency. A classic example of sensation fiction's deadly governess is Lady Audley (originally Helen Talboys; also known as Lucy Graham, Lady Audley, and Madame Taylor) from *Lady Audley's Secret* also by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Helen Talboys steals a dead woman's identity and becomes the governess Lucy Graham. As Lucy Graham, Helen becomes a governess, then a teacher, and eventually marries Sir Michael Audley which completes her transformation to Lady Audley. Besides faking her own death and creating a new identity, she attempts two murders (her nephew via arson and her estranged husband by throwing him down a well). Despite her many transgressions (and eventual death in an asylum), her active work to survive (if destructive) transcends her death. We must remember that as a single mother, abandoned and with little prospects, she did what she thought was necessary to maintain her hard-won lifestyle (Hedgecock 102). Like the schoolmistress in film noir, sensation fiction's fatal governess teaches women that they can escape the drudgery, write their own story, and be a success.

This chapter provides a feminist re-thinking of sensation fiction's insidious governess that sympathizes with their vulnerable social position and focusses on their empowering role in the late nineteenth-century. The literature trope of the fatal woman is often described as a seductress out for herself who is willing to commit crimes in order to achieve her goals. The problem with assuming she is an evil seductress is that it reflects the collective patriarchal gaze. We can see this reflected in the introduction's epigraph by Braddon. The narrator asks the reader to step outside of the status quo thinking and consider Lady Audley's experience. In fact, Elaine Showalter found that many women readers often see the fatal woman as a feminist icon: a role model for women in similar situations. The *femme fatale* was a "heroine who could put her hostility toward men into violent action" (*Literature* 160-1). This aggressive working woman who unabashedly gets what she wants provided an outlet for Victorian women. It was cathartic to read about a character who overcomes (even if through violence) and reflects their own new ideas about women's role in society.¹³ The dangerous governess serves as an early sign that women can break out of society's expected domestic roles. Additionally, Elizabeth Steere's research indicates that Braddon suggests sensation literature can be seen as an "instructional tool" (99). If sensation literature is an instructional tool for women to lift themselves up, the governess is the ultimate teacher. She often overcomes dire

¹³ For more information on the ways in which sensation fiction reflected the views of women refer to "The Contemporary Response to Sensation Fiction" by Janice M. Allan.

circumstances and survives in an environment that does not provide the same opportunities for independent women as it does for men.

Mary Ann Doane asserts that the *femme fatale*'s most fundamental quality is her ability to disrupt; and this disruptiveness renders her dangerous. The *femme noire* subverts social and sexual expectations and can be seen as a representation of the “fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the social landscape” (2). Early twenty-first-century critics (such as Jennifer Hedgecock, Laura Laffrado, Elizabeth Steere, Julie Grossman, and Madeleine Stern) come to the psychoanalytic conclusion that the fatal woman is a misogynistic representation of male fear and use this insight to re-read the *femme fatale*. They see the *femme fatale* as a multi-faceted, powerful woman rather than the reductive idea that she is a fatal temptress. Critics agree that women readers looked up to the governess and often forgave her crimes rather than condemning her for them (Grossman 4; Hedgecock 70-75; Hughes 44). Many Victorian readers were also women who were struggling with the desire to break free of society's constraints. The main reason the *femme fatale*'s crimes are forgiven is because the women are seen as “powerless over their own circumstances” and “forced to enter into work” (Hedgecock 90). Her crimes or “transgressions” are seen as part of the natural process anyone goes through on their journey to find their own “sense of identity” and autonomy (Hedgecock 90). In this sense, the fatal governess has to work two jobs: the one that she is (poorly) paid to do and the behind the scenes work it takes to accomplish her goal of upward class mobility and independence—goals that disrupt the fabric of society.

I find it helpful to think of the fatal governess as a *femme fatale* with three definitive traits: 1) she poses a threat to sexual and social patriarchal expectations 2) she actively works to find agency 3) she teaches audiences about the restrictions and capabilities that come with realizing one's whole self (mind and body). When we think of a *femme fatale*, we often imagine a beautiful woman who exudes sexuality from her posture down to the way she speaks and moves. However, in sensation fiction we find a fatal governess who may not be traditionally beautiful, like Jane Eyre and Jean Muir but is still powerfully compelling. Indeed, Jennifer Hedgecock points out that the Victorian *femme fatale* "does not always bear a sexuality that is blatantly predatory" (7). During the Victorian age female sexuality was strictly policed; an independent woman had to be able to blend in with society in order to gain her independence. In fact, the fatal governess often seduces men with her chaste behavior and innocent good looks rather than present herself as overtly sexual. As Hedgecock suggests, we see the governess often "resists being objectified as a seductress" because she successfully conceals her sexuality in order to manipulate and exploit her way to power (7). In other words, the dangerous governess understands marriage as a social contract and finds power within that framework. For example, Jane Eyre will only marry if there is mutual love and respect. Pauline Corsi proposes marriage as business deals to multiple men. And Jean Muir plots her way into a life of leisure as the wife of Sir John Coventry. Together they teach us that marriage on your own terms provides a sense of empowerment and can lead to social power.

Furthermore, Hedgecock makes a distinction between the more traditional portrayal of the fatal woman as a sexual predator and the seemingly blatant non-sexuality of the Victorian *femme fatale*. Hedgecock determines that the deadly governess' veiled sexuality provides a subversive quality and allows her to remain relatively safe as she carries out her ambitious plans (6). For instance, Jean Muir hides her age and sexual past by appearing young, beautiful, innocent, and honest (qualities valued by the patriarchy). She quietly and patiently plots and manipulates until she achieves access to power and wealth by marrying the Coventry patriarch. The dangerous governess is not afraid to alter her appearance or hide her sexual past in order to achieve her personal goals. Her mastery of masquerade helps her work at her job and behind the scenes to accomplish her goals.¹⁴ Additionally, Pauline Corsi is a beautiful and vigilant governess who keeps a secret hidden for thirteen years. Each governess uses masquerade to veil something about her identity, so she can be autonomous. As Hedgecock claims, the Victorian *femme fatale* is not necessarily overtly sexual, but she "affects men and must have an effect on them" (9). Each of the governesses has men falling at their feet and uses that to access social power.

The masquerading governess is an unknowable enigma who actively works to gain financial and/or domestic autonomy. Julie Grossman's book *Rethinking the Femme*

¹⁴ Masquerade is explored in more detail throughout this chapter. For further information I suggest: Hedgecock's chapter "The Femme Fatale Masquerading Beyond Fallenness," *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Woman's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* by Lyn Pykett, specifically the chapter "Mary Elizabeth Braddon: The Secret Histories of Women," and two chapters from Mary Ann Doane: "Masquerade Reconsidered" and "Veiling Over Desire."

Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for her Close-up claims that the *femme fatale* has “a myth of unknowability” about her and is often represented by “enigmatic characters” who are in fact misunderstood (86). A main point I make about the ground-down governess (and the sensational schoolmistress) is that her actions are often misinterpreted and taken out of context, giving the appearance of pure evil. In this context, the duplicitous behavior, the masquerading, the rotating identities, and at times criminal acts are a necessary evil. The governess is an ambiguous character whose work towards agency is shocking or unethical at times. She is breaking new ground; creating a new path for working women from a small in-between space: the space between an educated, working governess and an educated lady of leisure. The fatal governess aspires for more than the never-ending grind of unappreciated servitude. In this way, her plotting and scheming can be considered legitimate work or counter-work since some of her actions are ethically wrong. Her counter-work must go undetected so her ability to perform, work, and teach becomes crucial to her success.

Finally, the dangerous governess teaches us about the importance of having a whole sense of self that incorporates body and mind. The governess represents a hard-working woman who does what it takes under poor circumstances to find independence even if it means rebelling against social conventions. As a working woman struggling to make it, the deadly governess becomes a reflection of society because she exposes the

social injustices the emerging New Woman fought to change.¹⁵ The fatal governess is also a sign of hope for the future because (unlike film noir's deadly dame) sensation fiction's governess finds a measure of success. For instance, Jean Muir (although her deceptions are discovered) remains married to Lord Coventry, finds financial security, and becomes a Lady. Pauline Corsi gains financial independence not just for herself, but for at least four others as well. Although she is eventually exiled to France, she is free and independent. And Jane Eyre teaches women they do not have to sacrifice their sense of self in a marriage. These characters teach us that it is possible to create social change and it is okay for working women to seek a life of financial and domestic autonomy. They also show us that finding autonomy within the social constraints of marriage can lead to finding social power outside of marriage as we will see in part two.

Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* provides insight into the unjust world of sensation fiction's deceptive governess. Sandra M. Gilbert's article "*Jane Eyre* and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking" names *Jane Eyre* as "one of the greatest and most influential novels in the female literary tradition" (353). The character Jane Eyre provides a new representation for working women who craved independence. Jane Eyre is also one

¹⁵ For more on the New Woman, first wave feminism, and sensation fiction see "Sensation Fiction and the New Woman" by Depledge, "The Sensation Legacy" by Lyn Pykett, and Pykett's book *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Woman's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*.

of the foundational characters for the fatal governess (Hughes 8). Jane Eyre, like the other governesses, overcomes adversity, works to support herself, achieves financial independence, and marries on her own terms. Jane Eyre uses the liminal space of the governess to challenge the restrictions placed on her from the patriarchal society. And although Jane Eyre is not your typical sex goddess, she is a danger to Victorian ideas about sex and marriage because she refuses to conform to domestic or social expectations. Her success (despite the convenience of an unexpected inheritance) paves the way for later deadly governesses, such as Jean Muir and Pauline Corsi.

Gilbert describes the passionate feminist awakening occurring at the time Brontë wrote and published *Jane Eyre* as a type of “hunger, rebellion, and rage fostered ... by a coercive cultural architecture” (353). Working women (including authors of sensation fiction) found themselves trapped because there was no secure place for them in the male-dominated working world.¹⁶ Being trapped within rigid Victorian social expectations drives fatal women such as Jane Eyre to achieve success by rebelling against the “cultural architecture” with “subversive strategies” that “undermine the structures of oppression” in both sexual and social relationships (Gilbert 353). Jane Eyre subverts patriarchal structures of oppression first by beating the odds as her aunt Mrs. Reed’s detested, orphan niece (Brontë, ch. iv) and then surviving her time spent as a student and

¹⁶ See also “Sensation, Class and the Rising Professional” by Costantini and Hedgecock’s chapter “The Cultural Phenomenon of the Mid-Victorian *Femme Fatale*.”

teacher at the deplorable Lowood Institution (Brontë, ch. vi). She works to support herself through difficult circumstances because she sticks to her principles. Jane Eyre is a rebel at heart who subverts patriarchal sexual expectations when she finds multiple jobs and supports herself rather than marry Rochester or St. John.

The dangerous governess is not necessarily overtly sexual, but she subverts sexual expectations. Jane Eyre does not lead with her sexuality (or chasteness) like Lady Audley or Jean Muir or approach marriage as a business deal like Pauline Corsi. Even so, both St. John and Rochester desire Jane for her intelligence. Still, Jane Eyre refuses to conform to Victorian patriarchal domestic expectations and marry her cousin St. John to become a minister's wife (351; ch. xxxv). Instead she prefers to be independent rather than married for the wrong reasons—in this case that would be any reason other than love and respect. Her refusal is an act of rebellion. Hedgecock claims that with *Jane Eyre* “Brontë criticizes inadequate portrayals of women that apply old conventional stereotypes and ignore the realities of economic or domestic pressure on women” (82). For instance, Jane Eyre refuses to be Rochester's mistress and St. John's wife when either one of those proposals would free her from her drudgery. Additionally, Laura Laffrado contends in her book *Uncommon Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth Century U.S. Women's Writing* that uncommon women who diverge from “conventional gender scripts” set an example as “subversive alternative female models” (4). In this way, Jane Eyre teaches other women they can choose to marry for love and live an independent life.

Marriage does not have to be an unhappy institution that robs women of their selfhood and free will.

Jane's awareness of what she tells the audience and her language about her work indicate that she has to be secretive and careful with her actions regardless of how good her intentions may be because men will see her as a threat if she is not careful about how she presents her story. As the narrator of her own story, her language reflects the way she sees herself or at least the way she wants to be seen by a male audience. We can see her use of language as her masquerade; her efforts to be seen as conforming with patriarchal social structures while simultaneously undermining them. For example, Jane describes her efforts to gain independence as "schemes," although I would hardly call answering a job advertisement a scheme (ch. 10, 73). A scheme refers to the plots and plans people make (sometimes in a secretive or deceptive manner). On one hand, one might read Jane answering the job application alone and without permission unacceptable (a more patriarchal view). On the other hand, one might understand her need and desire to work as necessary for an honest living. The implication is that it is unacceptable for Jane to seek employment without a man's permission. Jane appears to be apologetic for answering a job posting but she still gets the job despite efforts to stop her.

Jane Eyre undermines class boundaries as an educated, single, working woman who keeps herself continuously employed. She breaks down class barriers as she transitions from working-class to an independently wealthy woman married to an aristocrat. She may not be overtly fatal, but death seems to follow her everywhere she

goes—from the tragic death of her parents, her best friend Helen, her aunt, and long-lost uncle to the violent death of Bertha. Although Jane is in no way the cause of these deaths, she willingly benefits from the deaths of her uncle and Bertha. As many critics agree, Jane Eyre has a bit of a fairy tale ending at other’s expense. She achieves financial freedom due to an unexpected windfall inheritance. She is able to marry Rochester because his first wife (Bertha) dies in a house fire. Unlike the deadly governess in sensation fiction, Jane Eyre does not pose a criminal threat, but she does disrupt the fabric of society, like the *femme fatale*. In the end, Jane Eyre teaches us that women can stick to their principles and be valued for their intelligence and work ethic. She shows us that marriage can be founded on mutual love and respect without taking away a woman’s free will.

“Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power”

Louisa May Alcott’s “blood and thunder” story “Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power” is about a mysterious governess who takes a position with the Coventry family in order to gain financial freedom. Jean Muir is the calculating, deceptive, and successful Scottish governess who infiltrates the Coventry family and causes all the men to fall in love with her. Ultimately, she marries the patriarch advancing and securing her position in society as Lady Coventry. Jean Muir has a shady past as a divorced actress that she must keep hidden in order for her plan to work. She uses her talents as an actress and her liminal position as a governess to write her own story. From the beginning, one of the sons, Gerald Coventry, is suspicious of her act. After Jean feigns a spell of sickness, he

whispers, “Scene first, very well done” to which Jean replies, “Thanks, the last scene shall be better” (7). We see from the beginning that Jean Muir is calculating, planning her every move, and thinking about her manipulations as a performance (similar to her previous work as an actress). She masquerades until she is caught, at which point she has already secured her position as Lady Coventry. Jean Muir manipulates men, hides her sexual past (as a divorced woman), masquerades as a governess, and obtains her goal of upward class mobility and financial security. As a success, Jean Muir is a sign that working woman can achieve their goals (albeit through deceptive means) and that the space in-between classes is maneuverable and can be broken down.

Jean Muir poses a sexual threat in more ways than one way. First, unlike Jane Eyre, Jean Muir uses all her talents as an actress in order to make herself beautiful. The “haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty” uses make-up, pearly dentures, braided hair extensions, and her acting skills to look and act like a nineteen-year-old governess (12). Jean Muir poses as a governess in order to support herself and find an aristocratic husband. As a result, every time she is doing her job as governess, she is also performing. On top of this, Jean Muir has an elaborate plot to cause all three Coventry men: Sir John, Gerald, and Edward (Ned) to fall in love with her. In this sense, Jean Muir is the classic *femme fatale* seductress. Jean considers her seduction her primary work. Consider the first morning she meets the family for breakfast. Before breakfast, Muir already spent a significant amount of time doing her hair and make-up. She also walked in the garden to catch the attention of Sir John Coventry: the patriarch of the Coventry family and uncle

to Gerald, Ned, and Bella. On top of that, she tames Hector the horse immediately gaining the affection of Edward. Before her first breakfast, she already has two of the Coventry men interested in her (14-17). As the narrator notes "...Miss Muir quietly ate her breakfast, feeling well satisfied with her hour's work" (18). That hour's work is the time she spent seducing Sir John and Edward, not time spent as Bella's governess. Jean then goes on to work as Bella's tutor; another job she does quite well.

Like the *femme fatale* of film noir, Jean Muir uses her sexuality to gain access to social power. Unlike film noir's schoolmistress, Jean Muir must hide her sexual past and appear chaste, virtuous, and innocent as that is what will help her gain access to power in the nineteenth century. Some scholars may object to my claim that Jean Muir truly challenges the patriarchy because she marries Sir John Coventry and agrees that she will change her manipulative ways at the end of the story. The argument is that although Miss Muir challenges the social structure by masquerading as a young governess and seducing the men of the family; ultimately, she subscribes to Victorian values in her marriage and vow to change her lifestyle. I agree that is a valid argument against the threat Jean Muir poses to Victorian domestic ideals. However, I argue that we can see her marriage as a continued performance that successfully challenges the institution of marriage. She teaches us that the role of wife can be a performance that leads to social power. Now, her vow to change may seem like a submission on her part but she made the terms of her marriage. She chose Lord Coventry and set about winning his heart by reading to him. She is playing a role she created for herself in order to leave the working-class life behind

and enjoy a life of relative ease. Jean Muir's understanding of marriage as a social performance teaches women that they too can find a place of power within the patriarchal framework of marriage in order to have a secure financial future.

Jean Muir reveals the depths of her performance in a series of letters she wrote to an old friend Hortense (another struggling working woman). The women correspond to keep in touch and more importantly keep each other apprised "of all adventures, plots and plans, and share whatever good fortune fell to the lot of either" (97). Suspicious of Jean Muir, Edward tracks down Hortense and buys Jean's letters from her with the intentions of exposing her manipulations to the family. He presents the family (minus Sir John and Jean Muir) with the letters Jean wrote and they are damning. In them Muir details her plans to seduce and win over each family member. In fact, the letters reveal that Jean Muir is an exceptionally observant woman who understands the psychology of the mind and uses it to play each family member. For example, she recognizes that Gerald is accustomed to being the center of attention and purposely ignores him (99). Moreover, she continuously describes her "tasks" not as her duties as a governess, but her counter-work in seducing the family members and manipulating Sir John into marrying her before Edward can reveal her true character. The letters can also be seen as instructions for Hortense in her own endeavors. We see Jean Muir teaching her friend; and on a larger scale, teaching society that being a wife is a role. Understanding marriage as a social construct and performing the role of wife on one's own terms can give you access to social power.

After Edward has reveals all, Sir John announces their marriage and will not hear of any negative talk about Miss Muir who is now Lady Coventry. As Sir John addresses the group, Lady Coventry slyly slips the letters from his hand and tosses them in the fire (103). This is her most cunning and important job of all as those letters are the only true evidence of her long-con in the Coventry household. Burning the letters solidifies her position as Lady Coventry. When it comes to teaching, her letters reveal her performance and provide explicit insight on how to successfully manipulate people. Jean Muir details her motives and thought process behind everything she does from innocent morning walks to hiding her identity. In one letter Jean reassures Hortense that when she succeeds in marrying Sir John she will make sure that Hortense benefits as well (100). Jean Muir shares information with Hortense as a mentor does with a student or someone new in a career. She shares acting tips, psychological insight, and tips for gaining information. As an illustration, Muir teaches Hortense how to open a sealed letter with a hot knife so as not to disturb the wax and risk getting caught. In sum, Jean Muir performs well as the deadly governess who innocently seduces her way into the position of Lady Coventry.

The Octoroon; or, The Lily of Louisiana

Mary Braddon's *The Octoroon; or, The Lily of Louisiana* is a novel that has complicated interracial family relationships, secret lovers, murder, questions of inheritance, issues of slavery, and an often overlooked (by critics) mysterious French governess, Pauline Corsi. The scholarship regarding this novel focusses on the protagonist, Cora Leslie who represents the trope of the helpless "tragic mulatto." It is

Cora's governess, the "enigma" Pauline Corsi who proves to be a force to reckon with (99,155). She drives the plot forward, possesses more power, and acts with more agency than any other woman in the novel. I analyze Pauline Corsi because she has the qualities of the dangerous governess and her work leads to great success. If it were not for Pauline's plotting the book would be over as soon as Cora returns to Louisiana, discovers she is a slave, and is sold with her father's estate. Like other deadly governesses Pauline is able to move easily between upper and lower classes. In fact, she was raised as a lady (in England) but is disowned by her father when he finds out Pauline's deceased mother secretly adopted Pauline from a poor family in order to hide a fake pregnancy (155). Left on her own with only the education she received growing up, she becomes a governess for the Moraquitos at the age of seventeen (67). Her upper-class education gives her the background to be a governess. However, she still has to hide her biological roots and aristocratic father's rejection. Additionally, Pauline Corsi is a serious threat as she challenges the institution of marriage and upends racist social structures of the slave-owning South.

Pauline is a sexual threat not only because she is beautiful, but because she takes marriage into her own hands. She knows that one of the few avenues towards financial stability is an upper-class marriage. Pauline disregards social conventions and uses secret knowledge about two murders in order to negotiate two marriages for herself. She realizes marriage is a social contract and comes with access to power. She has lived both life of leisure and that of a working woman; and now aspires to live how she was raised:

as an upper-class, wealthy woman. The fact that Pauline dares to blackmail two men into marriages she refers to as “business arrangements” demonstrates her rebellion against patriarchal domestic constructs (89). First, she offers to use her knowledge to free Paul Lisimon from jail (he is being framed) if he will marry her and share (what will be) his new-found wealth (89-90). Surprisingly, he turns her down because he wants to marry his true love Camillia Moraquitos and so she leaves him in jail. After her first plan to expose the murderer Don Juan fails, she uses her knowledge to blackmail him into marriage. She offers Don Juan silence in exchange for marriage. She explains to Don Juan that she “is tired of dependence, even on *your* goodness [in reference to being a governess in his household]. Make me your wife and let me share the wealth acquired by the guilt of whose secrets I know” (106). Here we see the unscrupulous side to Miss Corsi: she is willing to keep the murderer’s secrets, let an innocent man be put to death, and allow a woman who was raised free become a slave—as long as she can secure her future financial freedom.

Despite two failed schemes, Pauline does not give up; she continues her counter-work because (like our other dangerous governesses) she doesn’t mind playing dirty if it means freedom from a life of thankless drudgery. Through a series of subplots concerning miscegenation and complicated inheritance matters two mixed race children of slaves, Cora Leslie and Paul Lisimon, are respectively denied their rights to two plantations worth a fortune. However, Pauline Corsi possesses the will of Don Juan’s brother. A will that leaves the plantation to Paul Lisimon, Don Juan’s “octoroon”

nephew. With the help of a couple of new arrivals (returns really) to town Pauline orchestrates an elaborate plot to expose Don Juan's and his partner Silas' crimes (murder, blackmail, hidden documents, etc.) and change the ownership of wealth and land from corrupt slave owners to the children of slaves. When Pauline reveals the "suppressed document" she tells Paul, "When a woman has a powerful will, there is scarcely anything she cannot accomplish. ... I no longer address you as Paul Lisimon; that name is in itself a lie; Paul Crivelli, read this document; it is the genuine will of your father" (182). The double entendre of the word "will" is not only Shakespearean it also plays with the idea of female agency. It is Shakespearean because he was known to use double-entendre to imply political commentary rather than state it overtly. Here we see a similar situation. Pauline possesses the will (or drive) to gain agency and the legal document (the brother's last will and testament) that leaves the plantation to Paul.

Pauline teaches us that a governess must never give up when it comes to achieving class mobility and to always consider every angle. In the end Pauline constructs a new identity for Paul. He was raised as Lisimon because his mother was a slave and denied his rightful inheritance. Pauline reveals Paul's true identity and as a result, Cora is also saved from being sold as a slave. Not only that, Pauline's actions also free the slaves Tristan and Zara and they are given passage home to Africa (204). Even Pauline Corsi is reunited with her long-lost love who also happened to help her acquire Don Tomaso's will. And we should not forget that Don Juan Moraquitos commits suicide rather than face the inevitable hangman's noose (196). Here, I acknowledge that while

Pauline upends the horrific constructs of slavery with her radical ending. Nonetheless, Pauline Corsi exists in a liminal space as the dangerous governess, constructs her own identity, and facilitates the construction of identity for two mixed-race characters Paul and Cora. Pauline's counter-work results in success for herself as she returns to France having achieved financial freedom with the man she loves. As a woman of "will," her actions make the children of slaves the owners of the plantations they were born on and align her with the abolition and first-wave feminist movements.

Together, characters like Lady Audley, Jane Eyre, Jean Muir, Pauline Corsi, and others create a sub-genre of the Victorian *femme fatale* who is a working woman, specifically a governess. This governess poses a sexual and social threat in a myriad of ways and paves the way for women to lead a life of independence. By hiding her sexual past and challenging patriarchal ideas of marriage, the deadly governess gains access to social power. Her secret manipulations and counter-work often lead her to success. As we will see, film noir's sensational schoolmistress does not find such success in her endeavors. While film noir's working *femme fatale* does not always achieve her goals, she has more freedom to express her sexuality and overtly seduce men for power rather than masquerading as someone she is not. Sensation fiction's ground-down governess tirelessly works (on and off the clock) as she makes moves toward achieving autonomy. She is a sign that class boundaries are breaking down, that class mobility is possible, and that the *femme fatale* plays a crucial role in creating social change. My examination of sensation fiction's governess as a *femme fatale* is an effort to contribute to the larger body

of work that examines the Victorian *femme fatale* as a working woman who disrupts the status quo.

Teachings of the Sensational Schoolmistress in Film Noir (1954-1965)

“A painting is always quite moral when it is tragic and it gives the horror of the thing it depicts.”

— Barbey d’Aurevilly

Nineteenth-century sensation fiction author Barbey d’Aurevilly proposed the idea that art is quite moral when it is tragic and horrific in his short story collection *Les Diaboliques*.¹⁷ Over half a century later, the renowned French film noir director Henri-Georges Clouzot used this quote (and his title) as the opening epigraph to his cinematic masterpiece *Les Diaboliques*. Such intertextuality points to ways in which twentieth-century film noir shares concerns with sensation fiction.¹⁸ We might return to Julie Grossman’s term “Victorinoir” as the encapsulation of the close relationships and parallels between the two genres.¹⁹ Grossman argues that “late Victorian novels offered...a ‘pre-history’ for film noir” and the *femme fatale* (94). Furthermore, French nineteenth-century literature scholar Karen Humphries observes that Barbey d’Aurevilly

¹⁷ See Karen Humphreys’ article “‘Dandyism, Gems, and Epigrams: Lapidary Style and Genre Transformation in Barbey’s *Les Diaboliques*’” for her in depth examination of epigraphs in d’Aurevilly’s *Les Diaboliques*.

¹⁸ Barbey d’Aurevilly (1808-1889) wrote the short story collection, *Les Diaboliques*, which is borderline sadistic pornography featuring evil women hell bent on destruction—brutal even by today’s standards and in comparison to the characters in Clouzot’s film. But, Clouzot’s film is not an adaptation of these short stories. His film is an adaptation of Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac’s *Celle qui n’était Plus*. Refer to Susan Hayward’s book *Les Diaboliques (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955)*, Part 1 (pp.13-15) as well as the article “Une Pienture morale: Intertextuality in Clouzot’s *Les Diaboliques*” by Perry Moon. Moon’s article dives deeper into the intertextual relationship between these two works by d’Aurevilly and Clouzot.

¹⁹ See chapter 4 “Looking Back—Victorinoir: Modern Women and the Fatal(e) Progeny of Victorian Representation” from Grossman’s book *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for her Close-up*.

was concerned with exposing the “mundane hypocrisy of bourgeois culture” (267). Likewise, film noir has a preoccupation with exposing the hypocrisy of bourgeois ideals. As James Naremore points out in his essay “A Season in Hell or the Snows of Yesteryear?” from the 2002 edition of Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton’s seminal book *A Panorama of American Film Noir (1941-1953)*, film noir was (in part) influenced by early Surrealists and later theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida because they viewed film noir as subversive and as a “‘superior revolt of the mind’ against bourgeois sentimentality” (x-xi). One way in which we see this revolt is in how film noir depicts an urge to rebel against socially prescribed gender roles, specifically in *Les Diaboliques* and *The Nanny*. The characters I examine rebel against patriarchal society and expose injustices that have led them to commit tragically horrific crimes. The schoolmistress teaches us about the severe conditions working women challenged. In this way, film noir can be seen as a moral mirror (if disturbed) for twentieth-century viewers just as sensation fiction was for nineteenth-century readers. Film noir’s gruesome revelations allow viewers to contemplate the morality of their own society.

One can view sensation fiction’s deadly governess as a foundational figure for film noir’s sensational school mistress. Mary Ann Doane further explains how the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* becomes a “central figure” during the *série noire* literature movement. *Série Noir* refers to the crime series published by Gallimand (starting in 1945 and originally led by Marcel Duhamel). These novels are known for

their focus on the fantastic criminal underworld and preoccupation with violence and death (Naremore viii-ix). *Série Noir* is a foundational literature movement to film noir because directors (such as Alfred Hitchcock and Henri-Georges Clouzot) often fought over the rights to remake these books into films.²⁰ Additionally, Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe’s critical anthology *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* identifies the *fin-de-siècle femme* as a character who slips from the nineteenth-century onward as she “operates as a figure uniting concerns about social class and economic mobility in a modern world” (4). So, we can see a clear transition of the *femme fatale* from sensation fiction to the twentieth-century *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* to film noir’s deadly dame.²¹ Like sensation fiction, film noir creates space that allows the fatal school mistress and/or nanny to challenge patriarchal gender roles and actively work towards agency through her role as member of the upwardly mobile working class, even if she is often demonized. In the process she teaches women that although there might be consequences actively working to achieve independence is better than not trying.

Film noir scholar Elizabeth Cowie’s chapter “Film Noir and Women” from Joan Copjec’s anthology *Shades of Noir* defines film noir, in part, as a fantasy world with the

²⁰ See introduction to Susan Hayward’s book *Les Diaboliques (Henri-Georges Clouzot 1955)*.

²¹ See Julie Grossman’s book *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*. Additionally, John Irwin’s book *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them* provides a detailed history of the relationship between the Gothic *série noire* and film noir in section two of chapter seven, “Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir.”

femme fatale at its center (121). However, the world of noir is not your typical fantasy; this nightmarish world is typically a grotesque mirror wherein death, violence, treachery, and illicit relationships rule the night—as does the *femme fatale*.²² Film noir is set in an unstable world where gender roles are being challenged and men are adapting to civilian life after World War II.²³ One way male fears about changing social roles are depicted is in the patriarchal bourgeois fear that the nuclear-family lifestyle is being threatened by the female working class. My examination focusses on the way changing gender roles within the work force create the existential dread that is a vital characteristic of film noir. As *femme fatale* scholar E. Ann Kaplan puts it, “film noir creates space for the playing out of various gender fantasies” in part, through representations of the *femme fatale* (10). The deadly teachers I analyze reveal the anxieties surrounding independent working women and provide an opportunity to challenge viewers’ moral codes.

Fruitful re-readings of the working woman as a *femme fatale* who exposes social injustices reveal a nuanced and empowered modern woman. Noir is an unstable nightmarish world and it is in this hostile environment that the working *femme fatale* thrives. In fact, Elisabeth Bronfen’s chapter “The Female Side of Crime: Film Noir’s

²² See “A Season in Hell or the Snows of Yesteryear?” by James Naremore from *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1943-1953*.

²³ See *Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood* by Dennis Broe for a detailed examination of the history of American workers and their relationship with the production and representations of film noir.

Femme Fatale and the Dark Side of Modernity” examines the *femme fatale* as a “complex character, with a subjectivity of her own” who beguiles, but is never deluded (78).²⁴ She understands the dark side of modernity. In film noir’s unstable fantasy world, the working woman has a new opportunity to achieve the American dream for herself and death is better than not trying for it (80). Unfortunately, the way to achieve that dream often involves unavoidable “immoral” activity of some kind. I argue that film noir’s corrupt teacher or nanny is a deep, psychologically-complex personality whose impossible choices expose an unjust power structure that actively works against her personal success and hard-earned independence. Film noir’s fatal teacher is not just a teacher within the narrative, but also a figure who teaches viewers at large about the injustices working women faced every day.

This chapter provides close readings of the dangerous teachers from the films *Les Diaboliques* directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot (1954) and *The Nanny* directed by Seth Holt (1965). Noir as a genre seeks to subvert bourgeois culture and one way it does this is through the use of morally “ambiguous figures whose psychology can be enigmatic” (Naremore xv). The deadly teachers in these films are prime examples of the working-class woman who resists patriarchal expectations. Despite being rendered Other, she actively strives for agency in a world designed to deny her. For example, the unnamed nanny played by Bette Davis appears to be the ideal devoted and loving nanny. At the

²⁴ From the anthology *Crime Culture: Figuring Criminality in Fiction and Film*.

same time, she is guilty of killing, manipulating, and drugging multiple family members. In *Les Diaboliques* the teachers Nicole Horner (played by Simone Signoret) and Christina Delassalle (portrayed by Véra Clouzot) don't appear to be dangerous. Yet, they deviously conspire to murder Christina's husband and leave his body to be discovered by the pupils (and that is just the first layer of deception).

In part one I identified three main characteristics of sensation fiction's deadly governess. First, she is a threat to sexual and social patriarchal expectations. Secondly, she actively works to achieve social independence. Finally, she teaches other that women can find sexual and social autonomy outside the restrictive social construct of marriage. Here I will identify three main traits of the film noir's *femme fatale* as they apply to the working women in this analysis. While both iterations of the archetype share the fundamental purpose to resist and rebel, there remain differences in their representation. The first difference is the way they challenge sexuality. Sensation fiction's deadly governess had to hide her sexuality and masquerade as a virginal girl. She achieves independence within the framework of hetero-normative marriage. In comparison, film noir's corrupt teacher no longer works within the framework of marriage or perform as demure. In fact, she explicitly uses her sexuality to gain access to domestic and social power. The governess explored possibilities of sexuality and power within the institution of marriage. Her actions paved the way for film noir's deadly teacher to explore sexuality more openly and outside the framework of marriage. For example, Nicole Horner has a public affair with her boss Michel. His wife co-owns and teaches at the school they all

work at and knows that Nicole is her husband's mistress. Additionally, the nanny had a child at a young age and raised her as a single mother. The possibility that women can have both sexual agency (outside of marriage) and social agency poses such a threat that these women often meet tragic endings.

According to "Women in Film" from E. Ann Kaplan's critical anthology of the same name, Janey Place examines ways in which film noir is a distinctly male fantasy and how that male gaze affects the *femme fatale's* characterization. Place explains how this "phallogentric cultural viewpoint" puts the spider woman's sexuality at the center of her characterization (47). This view is misogynistic in nature and associated with attaining pleasure through voyeuristic means. The sexually free fatal woman is fetishized due to the pleasure and guilt associated with objectifying her. This alluring sexual liberation elicits fear and anxiety and is deemed a crime for which she must be punished. Her inevitable punishment can also be seen as the male's desire to remain in control which inevitably leads to her demise (Place 48; Wager 119). But, Janey Place has a different take on the patriarchal sexual myth that damns all sexual women and those connected to her. She details a depiction of a woman with sexual strength that instills fear in men (54).

Indeed, the fatal woman's sexual strength is so impactful that even though she often fails or dies at the end of the film that is hardly what critics and viewers take away from the character. The *femme fatale's* failure is for the most part forgotten. You take away an image of an "erotic, strong, unrepressed (if destructive) woman" (48). In part

due to the collective-patriarchal objectifying gaze (a view held by men or women) characteristic of film noir, the dangerous dame's goal of independence is rooted in her sexuality and must be controlled to ease the male's fear. It is the ultimate act of dominance for the woman to be punished (Place 57). This working woman, despite her failure, provides an alternative to the over-played typical damsel in distress character. Viewers are not left with the vision of a sad defeated woman, but a woman who actively works towards independence and uses her sexuality when she wants., towards independence. Even if her efforts were futile, she went down fighting. Not only that, she left behind a legacy. The deadly teacher exposes social injustices and instructs us to question society's ideals in the face of injustice.

Film noir's working women access social power because they challenge patriarchal gender roles. The working woman is no longer tied to a domestic life as a means of survival. In asserting herself in the workforce, she also gains sexual autonomy. Naturally, women were not willing to give that up and leave the workforce for men returning home from World War II (Bronfen 72). Women now had new avenues to gain independence and live their own life. The women I analyze are independent to some degree because they are gainfully employed, single women attempting to support themselves. Even so, we see there are times when they make morally ambiguous choices and unscrupulously turn to crime as a means to end. Elizabeth Bronfen explains how the *femme fatale* (as represented by the working woman) represents the American dream within the nightmare that is film noir (75). The doomed working woman of the fifties

does not necessarily want to return to a strictly domestic life of cooking, cleaning, and caring for kids; she tasted independence and seeks to liberate herself by achieving economic and domestic freedom. She wants to live her own single life as a working woman; she does not need marriage. However, too often, she turns to a life of crime in her efforts to find financial and sexual agency. In this case, her criminal activity becomes a form of labor for the struggling teacher or nanny who cannot achieve autonomy despite honest hard work. The *femme fatale* understands that her sexual agency combined with her social ambitions make her a dangerous threat and would rather die, than not at least try to break free of restrictive gender roles.

This new “sexually uninhibited, unabashedly independent, and ruthlessly ambitious” dangerous teacher’s constant, active work towards independence (despite almost inevitable failure) raises consciousness about women’s issues (Bronfen 80). Mary Ann Doane explains how cinema can be seen as a psychological critique of the culture and likens the function of cinema to Lacan’s mirror stage in the cycle of human development (44).²⁵ Cinema provides a reflection of the social conditions that forces viewers to think about their own life and circumstances. Therefore, the *femme fatale* serves as a lesson although a different lesson than that of sensation fiction’s fatal governess. The governess taught a lesson about women who successfully find power

²⁵ For more on this see chapter 3 “Veiling Over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman” and chapter 4 “Remembering the Woman: Psychical and Historical Constructions in Film Theory” from Doane’s book *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*.

within marriage. In stark contrast to that, film noir's deadly teachers provide more of a warning than a lesson—a warning to women that those who attempt to break the mold and challenge social structures will meet with a tragic end somehow or another (Wager 119). It is important to note that despite her fatalistic collision course, the deadly working woman transcends death and instills feelings of hope. In this sense, the teacher figure is more than a character; she is a teacher for society. She is proof that agency can be found. Her story serves as a tragic moral mirror for society.

Similarly, Elizabeth Bronfen claims that the working woman represents “a dream of America that is achievable, but not yet achieved” (75). For example, Nanny (a single mother) tries her best to provide a decent home and life for her daughter working as a nanny for the Fane family. Nanny's desire for financial independence leads to the death of her daughter and then multiple members of the Fane family. Despite this, it is easy to see the injustices in Nanny's life. From that point of view, she emerges as a psychologically complex character who exposes social issues. In “Voices from the Deep: Film Noir as Psychodrama,” J.P. Telotte explores the ways noir explores “cultural chasms” and plumbs the depths of the individual's troubled mind (146).²⁶ Telotte details the way in which film noir is a type of psychodrama because it provides a useful metaphor that links the cultural experience with individual character's experience. In this

²⁶ From the anthology *Film Noir Reader 4: The Crucial Films and Themes* edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini.

way film noir and the *femme fatale* “locate culturally or individually marginalized subjects” who help draw out from society “some deeply buried knowledge” (152). We can see this buried knowledge as the marginalized character’s narrative; or, the circumstances out of her control that contribute to her corrupt actions. The circumstances expose social injustices and help provide a psychological understanding of the deadly working women. In other words, she is not a two-dimensional evil character set on destroying men, but a nuanced woman who raises social awareness about women’s issues and encourages women to fight for change and their own independence.

Les Diaboliques

The first deadly teachers I examine are from the French film noir *Les Diaboliques* (released in France in 1954 and America in 1955) by the genre-defining, French director Henri-Georges Clouzot.²⁷ Although this is a French film noir, like American noir, it too expresses similar social concerns through its almost obsessive psychological analysis of morally ambiguous characters. Clouzot’s ground-breaking portrayal of the *femme fatale* fragments portions of her identity onto three members of a deadly love triangle: husband and wife Michel and Christina Delassalle, and Michel’s mistress Nicole Horner. The fragmentation allows for a close-up, psychologically rich investigation of the nineteen-

²⁷ See Susan Hayward’s chapter “Diabolically Clever — Clouzot’s French Noir *Les Diaboliques* (1954)” in Hanson and O’Rawe’s anthology *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*.

fifties *femme fatale*.²⁸ Christina is a frail woman with a heart condition married to the abusive and philandering Michel Delassalle. She inherited the boarding school they run together and is a well-loved teacher; without her dowry Michel would have nothing. Nicole Horner is also a teacher at the Delassalle's boarding school and Michel's mistress. Christina Delassalle and Nicole Horner portray working women with complex relationships. Their positions reveal male social anxieties and insecurities in post-World War II France.

At this time, I would like to briefly address a few points about French film noir. French noir was born from similar historical contexts as its sister American noir. Film noir scholars Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton consider Henri Clouzot's work in film noir a defining influence on the genre in France and the United States (23, 124). They identify two distinct traits unique to French noir.²⁹ First, there is the tradition of a social study that highlights the "Fatefulness of Destiny, the Impossibility of Redemption, and the Brevity of Great Passions" (124). Clouzot stretches these ideas, specifically the brevity of great passions, to their limit. The women are driven by anger, resentment, pain,

²⁸ Refer to Hayward's book *Les Diaboliques (Henri-Georges Clouzot 1955)*, chapter 3 "Texts and intertexts: what kind of film is this — noir, queer, political?"

²⁹ Borde and Chaumeton's chapter "French Film Noir" identifies the above basic traits of French film noir, but also dismisses it as a parody of American film noir (138). French film scholar Ginette Vincendeau criticizes their dismissive attitude toward French film noir and provides a thorough historical account of the sub-genre in her chapter "French Film Noir" from Andrew Spicer's anthology *European Film Noir*. Vincendeau makes the case that French film noir was not simply a second-rate recreation of film noirs from America and Europe, but a rich and unique sub-genre born from French experiences after their liberation from the Nazis.

and desperation to calculatingly plot and carry through with the murder of Christina's husband, Michel. The second trait is the stark and sordid realism of life as it is portrayed. As teachers at a boarding school, Christina and Nicole are working women the community typically trusts without question. And, they are good educators. However, in the noir nightmare they become insidious, or "strange or oneiric" (Borde and Chaumeton 124). Ultimately, French film noir emerges from the ravages of World War II with the aesthetics of poetic realism (as opposed to the German expressionism found in American film noir) married to the moral concerns of social noir. Together the two may lack the "aesthetic glamour and emotional excitement of American film noirs," but instead offer "a dystopian, sometimes 'hellish' vision of French society" (Vincendeau 46). This is the environment of the *femme fatale*; the world that Nicole Horner and Christina Delassalle coldly manipulate their way through.

Henri-Georges Clouzot's 1954 cinematic adaptation of Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac's *Celle qui n'était plus* (*She who was no more*, 1952) is a mystery within a mystery with one of the first shock endings and is still considered one of the greatest thrillers in cinematic history (Hayward *Les Diaboliques* 13). Within the first thirty minutes of the film we see Christina and Nicole team up to murder the abusive Michel. In actuality, Michel fakes his death (with Nicole's help), his body mysteriously disappears, and strange things start happening. Christina's panic grows by the day as Nicole plays right along, encouraging Christina's fears, until she finally she suffers a fatal heart attack. It seems Nicole and Michel may have committed the perfect crime;

however, the retired detective conducting an unofficial investigation catches Nicole and Michel as they celebrate Christina's death and their perfect murder. Michel believes he is set to inherit his wife's money and property. Nicole believes she will marry Michel and together they will live a life of luxury. Instead, they will be turned into police and spend the rest of their lives in jail.

Susan Hayward claims that the *femme fatale* is difficult to locate in this film because Clouzot fragments the functions of the *femme fatale* onto the three characters of the love triangle throughout the film creating an uneasy sense of "shifting uncertainty" ("Diabolically Clever" 93). Rather than having one female character who is recognizably and without a doubt the *femme fatale*, there are two women at the center of this film. They are an unusual pair of killers and an even more unlikely partnership. Both women disrupt the social fabric. For example, Christina brings the wealth and property to her marriage. Nicole is a property owner and a teacher at the school. Although we discover that the true *femme fatale* of the movie is Nicole Horner (Christina Delassalle is the victim all along) they both bring different characteristics of the *femme fatale* to life. She is a member of the bourgeois who breeds contempt from her male co-workers and husband. She is the site of male anxiety and the super-ego of the *femme fatale*. Nicole represents unbridled freedom to do what she wants (even if destructive) with no conscience what-so-ever; she truly is the id of the *femme fatale*. We can also compare their level of agency with their relationship with marriage. Nicole is single, having an

affair, and yields the most power at the school after Michel “dies.” The married woman is the patsy all along. Christine has no agency at the school she owns or in her marriage.

Christina quite literally becomes the physical manifestation of anxiety and dread as she is manipulated, abused, and murdered. Christina’s turn toward crime combined with her status as a working-class woman, gives an appearance that she may be a classic *femme fatale*. However, in order to be a *femme fatale*, one must pose a threat and wield power in such a way that she disrupts the fabric of society. In this way Christina Delassalle can be seen as the embodiment of the deadly teacher’s ego and the site of fear. Sigmund Freud defines the ego as a regulatory function that evolves through constantly trying to find balance between the id and the super-ego while negotiating the experiences of the outside world (48-49).³⁰ The ego works to reconcile the id’s unreasonable (at times destructive) passions with the super-ego’s moralizing aspect of self. We can think of it as that cognitive aspect that navigates circumstances and works to understand the exterior world as opposed to the interior world of the mind. For example, Christina is a devout Catholic whose religious beliefs conflict with her choices to help kill her husband.³¹ Christina’s steadfast desire and effort to live as a virtuous Catholic can be seen as the restraint the ego exerts on the id. Ironically, her religious beliefs become the impetus

³⁰ See chapter two, part V “The Dependent Relationships of the Ego” from Freud’s book *The Ego and the Id*.

³¹ For a detailed analysis of the role Catholicism plays on a moral and social level refer to Perry Moon’s article “*Une Peinture Morale: Intertextuality in Clouzot’s Les Diaboliques.*”

behind the murder. She knows the Catholic church does not allow divorce so she



In this image, Nicole Horner faces the camera. The candlelight casts shadows across her face in typical noir fashion. She is surrounded by Catholic figures and Christina fervently prays at her feet. Christina is struggling with guilt and fear, having just had a near-fatal attack upon discovering Michel's body is missing. Image from chapter 13 "Close Call" (1:08:53).

concludes murder is the only way out of her abusive marriage.³² Her religious beliefs may not have prevented her from committing murder (as far as she knows), but they do cause her to feel intense feelings of regret, shame, fear (of being caught), and guilt— feelings Nicole Horner (as id) does not struggle with.

Simone Signoret as Nicole Horner disrupts the typical portrayal of the *femme fatale* in the same way American actresses like Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, Bette

³² Michel verbally and physically abuses Christina throughout the film (as does Nicole). He repeatedly tells her he wants her to die and threatens her with violence, scandal, and guilt (ch.3, ch. 8, ch. 23).

Davis, and Katherine Hepburn were challenging the portrayal of the *femme fatale* in American film noir: they masculinized their character as a way of “fetishizing the female body to contain her as safe” (Hayward “Diabolically” 94). She is a take-charge, all-business woman making it in a man’s world whose sexuality is centered on the idea that she is her own woman. Nicole Horner is a perfect example of that. She is not the traditional idea of beautiful; she has a short pixie style haircut— more similar in style with a man’s haircut than a woman’s. Despite Nicole’s boxy dresses and masculinized appearance, she maintains a sexy and mysterious allure about her. She can be seen as the id when it comes to her sexual relationships as well. She is brazenly known as Michel’s mistress and still maintains a friendship of sorts with his wife.³³ It was not common for a woman to flaunt any type of out-of-wedlock sexual relationship at that time, let alone an extra-marital affair. However, Nicole has no problem with this ethical dilemma. Not only does Nicole challenge ideas of feminine sexuality, she also poses a threat to the nuclear family and domestic ideals.

Furthermore, Nicole Horner brings attention to the “disillusioned climate of the post-Liberation period marked by economic harshness, social unrest, and political disillusionment” (Vincendeau 33). Nicole’s thirst for money and sexual freedom exposes

³³ The original novel pairs Nicole and Christina as lovers who scare the husband to death. Although Clouzot changes that aspect of the story, there are several critics who have established queer readings with Nicole and Christina representing a butch/femme lesbian couple. Please refer to Susan Hayward’s book and article as well as chapter 3 “Inversion and Lesbian Plots in Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *Les Diaboliques*” from Judith Mayne’s book *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture*, “The Closet is a Deathtrap: Bisexuality, Duplicity, and the Dangers of the Closet in the Postmodern Thriller” by Jordan Schildcrout.

the corrupt, wealthy bourgeois as a group of people who only care about their own climb up the social ladder (33). For example, Nicole is disdained by almost everyone because she has power, not just any power though, power obtained (in part) through a widely known affair. Her tenants (poor, public school teachers who are late on rent) resent her for having a property and an income from a private school. They comment on the fact that she is not yet married (ch. 12, :47:00-48:20). The two male teachers also resent her. After Nicole has Christina order the groundskeeper to empty the pool, Michel's body is discovered "missing." Christina faints, falls to the concrete and hits her head on the tiles. Nicole immediately takes control of the situation: she takes care of Christina, calls the doctor, and directs the other teachers. After observing the situation, one of the male teachers says to the others "Do you notice? She gives orders now" (ch. 14, 1:07:00-1:08:30). The men give each other knowing glances indicating that it is Nicole's illicit relationship with Michel that allows her to access that power.³⁴ The resentment the men feel towards Nicole echoes the post-World War II resentment towards women in the work force.

Nicole Horner presents a psychologically-complex diabolical woman in a multitude of ways. It is easy to write Nicole off as strictly evil, but we must remember that her first moments on screen depict her as a battered woman wearing sunglasses to

³⁴ See "Women in Film Noir" by Janey Place for an analysis of how the *femme fatale* accesses power through her sexual agency.

hide her black eye (ch.2, 4:33). Her fellow teacher M. Raymond unsympathetically points out he heard her screams during the night and calls her unchaste. She responds as a battered woman and simply says that she “hurt herself getting up” (ch.2, 4:34). Not only is she abused, but her co-workers know and do not care or attempt to help stop the abuse in any way. In fact, M. Bridoux and M. Drain are aware that Michel abuses Nicole and Christina and cannot stop him as they are victims of Michel’s abusive, tyrannical rule as well. So, Nicole leans on Christina for emotional support about the abuse. This establishes the women’s bond and links them as victims of domestic abuse and each other’s care taker. One could say that it is possible that Nicole is being coerced and forced to carry out the elaborate murder plot against Christina. The abuse adds dimension and ambiguity to Nicole’s character. Here is a potential psychological explanation for why she commits crimes. At the same time, Nicole could be faking the black eye and be working Christina from the moment she steps on screen: gaining her trust and confidence in order to manipulate her into “killing” her husband before he kills one or both of them. This is a perfect example of one way her psychological complexity creates ambiguity and anxiety.

Nicole Horner as played by Simone Signoret truly embodies the diabolical teacher. More than that, she proves that women can have romantic relationships outside of marriage and still maintain social power. In film noir, the effort to control the woman’s sexuality can be seen as her death or demise at the end of the film. For instance, Christina dies at the end of the film and Nicole is caught in the act of celebrating her crime with

Michel by a private investigator who plans on turning them in to police. However, no one remembers Nicole as a woman about to go to jail for the rest of her life. As Janey Place explains, Nicole transcends the “social action of myth which damns the sexual woman” because when we think about Nicole Horner we remember the strong, unrepressed, powerful (albeit criminal) woman (48). She helps mastermind and carry out a complex and potentially perfect murder. She fakes Michel’s murder while actively attempting to kill Christina. At the same time, she acts like Christina’s best friend and care taker. One must applaud the acting skills involved for Simone Signoret—an actress Ginette Vincendeau claims, she is the one true French *femmes fatales*. Signoret was known for her portrayals of the young, sexy seductress *femme fatale*. *Les Diaboliques* marked a turning point for her as it was the first time she portrayed the more butch working-class *femme fatale* who exudes powerful sexuality in her performances (34-5).

The Nanny

The Nanny (1965) directed by Seth Holt and starring Bette Davis is part of a noir sub-genre of mid-twentieth century thrillers featuring an old, psychopathic criminal hag of some sorts; films like *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford),³⁵ *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, Bette Davis), *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtis, Joan Crawford) and *Dead Ringer* (Paul Henreid, Bette

³⁵ I have listed the director, followed by the actress in the role of *femme fatale*. In some cases, there are two co-stars listed together. All these actresses were known for their portrayal of the *femme fatale*.

Davis). As are so many film noirs, *The Nanny* is adapted from the 1965 novel of the same title by Evelyn Piper. Oscar award-winning actress Bette Davis and quintessential *femme fatale* stars as the unnamed nanny who serves two generations of the Fane family. Nanny (the only name she is ever called) represents a rapidly growing portion of the population that went largely unnoticed during the fifties and found representation in the sixties: the working women and (often times single) mothers (Schneir 48). Nanny is unique because she is a single mother who has been working for decades in an effort to support her daughter, despite poverty-level work conditions and a demanding position. As the story unfolds, we watch in horror as Nanny transforms from a sweet, old, potentially negligent care-taker, to a manipulative employee, and then into a deranged serial killer. Even so, her personal tragedy evokes sympathy in the viewer. The deadly nanny embodies the role of *femme fatale* and functions to expose marginalized voices and cast reflections of moral challenges back to the audience. She teaches us about the sacrifices single, working mothers have to make and the dangers of limited access to safe abortion.

The plot of the film and main source of psychologic trauma centers around the bathtub drowning of Suzy Fane, the youngest child of Virginia and Bill Fane. Joey Fane, Suzy's ten-year old brother, is blamed and sent to an institution for two years. Much of the psychological tension in the film stems from the strained relationship between Joey and Nanny because they share a secret about the day Suzy died. Until the truth of what happened that afternoon is revealed, it appears that Joey is a paranoid sociopath who won't even eat food that has passed through Nanny's hands for fear of being poisoned

(ch.6 :25; ch.8 :36, :38; ch.10 :46). Joey is described as “disturbed” by his teachers. His dad worries that he is still “bad” and not “cured” as he drives him home from school



A close-up of Bette Davis as the nanny as she stands over Aunt Penn as she slowly dies that showcases characteristic noir lighting (ch. 18 1:25).

(ch.4: 21).³⁶ Joey also claims Nanny killed Suzy. No matter who is responsible for Suzy’s death, we come to two equally ambiguous and equally disturbing sets of circumstances. While this pairing creates psychological tension for the first half of the film, Nanny emerges as the true killer and *femme fatale*.

As the deadly working woman, Nanny challenges ideas about sexuality, not through youth and beauty, but via her role as a single mother (she did not get pregnant by immaculate conception). Like sensation fiction’s deadly governess, Nanny’s sexual agency is the key to understanding the psychology that drives her destructive actions. We learn this when

³⁶ The examination of Joey Fane as an evil child is worthy of its own full analysis. For more on the psychology of the evil child in mid-twentieth century films Karen J. Renner’s article “Evil Children in Film and Literature: Notes Towards a Genealogy” provides a brief, but comprehensive overview of the topic.

Aunt Penn finds Nanny on her way to suffocate Joey with a pillow and (Aunt Penn) suffers a heart attack (ch.12 :56; ch. 16:1:14). Rather than save Aunt Penn again, Nanny confesses to everything that happened the afternoon Suzy drowned. Nanny is in an almost trance-like (psychotic) state, oblivious to the dying woman in front of her, and at times smiling as she recounts her “dreadful situation” (ch.17 :1:18). She explains that she left the house because she got a phone call from a doctor that her daughter died due to an infection from a botched back-alley abortion. Nanny is in shock and overwhelmed with grief. The doctor compounds her psychological trauma by berating her over her daughter’s dead body telling her “You were too busy looking after other people’s children, weren’t you? Not enough time to spare for your own. ... She was pregnant ... much chance of looking after the child. She couldn’t bear the thought of bringing up an illegitimate baby... the way she was brought up. Better to get rid of it” (ch. 17 1:20). In this traumatized state, Nanny returned to find little Suzy drown in the bathtub. In this sense, we see Nanny in a new sympathetic light. The audience understands Nanny seemingly had no choice but to leave the Fane children. She ends up losing her daughter, Suzy, Penn, and her future.

Historically and politically, this scene makes an important point about women’s rights. Roe v. Wade was not passed until 1973. All the while, women (like Nanny’s daughter) were dying due to unsanitary, dangerous, and illegal abortions. The right to safe abortion was a major feminist issue in 1965 and remains politically controversial to this day, despite the Supreme Court ruling. The loss of Nanny’s daughter teaches

audiences the dangers surrounding unregulated abortions. Learning these dangers from the doctor is what seems to send Nanny over the edge. He tells her about cheap back-alley abortions, the dangers of infection, the lack of hygiene, and high death rates (ch. 18 1:21-1:22). The guilt and shame the doctor inflicts on Nanny sends her further into shock. The deaths of Nanny's daughter, Suzy, Aunt Penn, and Nanny's sentence to an institution serve as a warning to women not to live a sexually active life outside of the nuclear family. In Nanny's demented state, as she reveals all to Aunt Penn (as she lay there dying), she sees her crimes as a necessary evil. She sees her crimes as necessary evil because she has to protect the reputation of nannies for "all those other children." As Nanny puts it "I've never been one for self. It's all those others like me. All those other nannies who devoted their lives to taking care of other people's children" (ch.18 1:25:30-1:26:40). Her logic is twisted because killing to keep an accident a secret only compounds the situation, breaking the trustworthy reputation of Mary Poppins the world 'round that Nanny so desperately clings to.

Seth Holt and Bette Davis help make a feminist issue more visible. Like sensation fiction's fatal governess, the deadly nanny reappears in film noir to disrupt and bring attention to social inequalities. Like the antithesis of Mary Poppins, the sensational schoolmistresses I analyze in *Les Diaboliques* and *The Nanny* do not enrich the lives of the children and people around them. Instead, they leave behind a trail of death and deception. As we have seen with each *femme fatale*, her horrific crimes are mitigated by unjust social circumstances. This brings us back to Janey Place's premise that the

working woman's active efforts to liberate herself (even if, or maybe even, especially when abhorrent) transcend the patriarchy's efforts to punish and constrain her in the end. She may not triumph this time, but she is a rare representation of a woman who is not a "static symbol" (47). The deadly dame is "intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derives power, not weakness, from her sexuality" (47). We remember Nicole Horner for her cunning and daring murder plot and open sexual affair, not for getting caught by a retired cop, not for her tragic death, but for what can be learned from it. We remember Nanny for her dedication to the work of being a nanny. Her crimes are driven by psychological trauma and in doing so, expose a horrific, global second-wave feminist issue of unsafe access to abortion.

Bringing these characters together in such an analysis only proves that each working woman is unique and complex. We can see that the deadly governess does not fade away after sensation fiction. She is resurrected and adapted to new decades with iterations found in *série noire*, *fin de siècle*, and film noir. Sensation fiction's deadly governess and film noir's sensational school mistresses exist in different socio-historical time periods, but they still perform the same function: they actively work to liberate themselves from said structures. Their experiences teach us about social issues and force people to question their own ideas about single working women. In doing so, the *femme fatale* disrupts sexual and social patriarchal ideals. The *femmes fatales* I look at in this thesis find power through sexual agency, albeit in different ways. On one hand, sensation fiction's governess performs the role of wife on her own terms in order to access social

power. Whereas film noir's schoolmistress refuses to participate in the social construct of marriage and is punished in the end. We can see this as a step in the evolution into greater exhibitions of sexuality and equal opportunities for social independence. As Barbey D'Aurevilly explains: in every tragic and horrific story there is a moral lesson. The *femme fatale* may have a tragic ending, but we still learn that social change has happened and will continue.

Conclusion; or, When the Innocent are Guilty?

For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.
— “Remember” by Christina Rossetti (10-14)

The last four lines of Christina Rossetti’s sonnet “Remember” encapsulates the way the *femme fatale* wishes to transcend death. Indeed, this is the poem the character Christina (from the classic film noir *Kiss Me Deadly*) gives Mike Hammer as a clue before she is murdered. In the film, this poem leads Hammer and his partner Velda into a near death investigation. Putting Rossetti’s ideas in context of film noir and sensation fiction, we can think of the *femme fatale* as the speaker of the poem to help us understand the lasting impression or lesson put forth in this thesis. Considering the “darkness and corruption” as a metaphor for the injustices the *femme fatale* seeks to expose, then we can see that she wants to be remembered in a positive light. Maybe her experience has taught others to change their ways, and in the breakdown of social structures we can find the traces of her thoughts. One can also consider the “darkness and corruption” as a metaphor for the deadly teacher’s own plots, schemes, and crimes. In this sense, she wants us to “forget and smile” rather than “remember and be sad” (13-14). This reflects the way Victorian readers were quick to forgive the fatal woman’s crimes because she often had no other choice or because the ends justify the means. Similarly, in sensation fiction the

fact that the fatal woman commits crimes or dies is not as valuable as the fact that she was actively able to take steps toward sexual and social agency.

My discussion of the dangerous teacher figure in sensation fiction and film noir addresses the broader conversation about how the working woman is a representation of the *femme fatale*. Throughout this thesis I have isolated three key characteristics of the fatal woman regardless of genre or time period: she rebels against conventions and reflects a dark image of society that reveals ugly truths and tragic or horrific stories. She uses sexuality outside of marriage to access power. Whether her life ends in success or failure, the dangerous working woman is a “solemn sign” of social change (Rossetti “Amor” 12). As a final analysis, I turn to *The Children’s Hour* directed by William Wyler featuring Audrey Hepburn as Karen Wright and Shirley MacLaine as Martha Dobie. This cinematic adaptation of Lillian Hellman’s 1934 play is shot in characteristic film noir style.³⁷ The protagonists Karen and Martha are perceived as dangerous teachers and treated as such by the community although they are honest, law-abiding citizens. They challenge the typical representation of the *femme fatale* because they are perceived to be lesbians. The queer element of their representation challenges patriarchal sexual identities in a whole new way. While both women are rendered Other, Martha (who

³⁷ Jenny S. Spencer’s article “Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*” claims Wyler was most true to the 1952 play adaptation.

Hellman describes as an “unconscious lesbian”) kills herself once the alienation and scandal have made her believe she is romantically in love with Karen (Spencer 47).³⁸

The Children's Hour may seem to be an odd choice for this conclusion as it is not typically considered film noir, however I argue that this film possesses that *je ne sais quoi*, that perfect balance of fatalistic noir tension prominent in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. But, I would like to bring attention to the unique literary history this film shares with both sensation fiction and film noir. According to Lillian Hellman's journals, Dashiell Hammett was an influence on her work during the time when she was writing *The Children's Hour* and even gave her writing advice (Titus 217). And like many noir films (and sensation fictions), Lillian Hellman's play is based on a true crime story from the compilation *Bad Companions* by William Roughead.³⁹ *The Children's Hour* brings us full circle as a film noir based on a nineteenth century Scottish court case that centers on two governesses turned boarding school teachers (and owners).

Both Karen Wright and Martha Dobie are successful teachers and business women ostracized from society, but only Martha emerges as the true social and sexual threat. With Martha we see a reversal from guilty of criminal activity to innocent and we

³⁸ Critics Judith Mayne, Mary Titus, Jenny Spencer, and Mikko Tuhkanen all contribute to the conversation surrounding Hellman's use of the term “unconscious lesbian” to describe Martha Dobie's character throughout her multiple revisions and adaptations from its first publication in the 1930s through the 1970s.

³⁹ See Spencer's article and “Breeding (and) Reading: Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and *The Children's Hour*” by Mikko Tuhkanen for more on the Scottish court case and how it was incorporated in different adaptations of Hellman's play.

see honest work (that challenges patriarchal social structures) criminalized by society. We also see that innocence or guilt is irrelevant because the only thing that matters is how society perceives one to be. In comparison, Nicole Horner and the Nanny are master manipulators and murderers. The time and energy they put into committing their crimes is



Martha Dobie (Shirley Maclaine) as shot in the opening sequence, note the dark lighting indicating she is doomed from the very start (ch. 2, :11).

considered their valuable (if dirty) work. These deadly women use their sexuality and commit crimes in order to access social power and gain agency. In contrast to that, Martha Dobie works endlessly to make her boarding school a success. Her success in the business world poses such a threat to the social fabric that accusations about her sexuality are enough to result in her social and personal demise. It does not matter if Martha is a lesbian or not, because just the idea that she could possibly have a sexual relationship

with Karen is enough to ostracize both women, close their school, and drive Karen's fiancé (Dr. Joe Cardin) out of town. As criminal acts can be considered counter-work, Martha's work to legally clear her name via a libel lawsuit is also considered scandalous and criminal in *The Children's Hour* (ch.5, 55:30).

Martha Dobie challenges ideas about sexuality because she disrupts the patriarchal ideal of the nuclear family as a lesbian and working woman. Scholar Mary Titus examines the ways private lesbian desire leads to public disorder in *The Children's Hour*. She points out that sexual difference cannot be separated from social disruption and like many modern texts the lesbian "represents an outcast whose difference threatens all social order, not just that constructed by gender" (222). For example, Martha's Aunt Lily (a semi-retired actress who helps at the school) comments on Martha's behavior towards Karen "You've always had a possessive jealous nature, even as a child. It's unnatural. It's just as unnatural as can be" (ch. 3, :25). These words are overheard by the meddling Mary Tilford and passed along which create the rumor that leads to Martha's tragic self-discovery.⁴⁰ Martha is not viewed as a sexual threat until that rumor goes around town. And it is that rumor (the mere idea) of sexual difference that shuts down her school and future career.

⁴⁰ This is not to imply that it is a tragedy to be gay, but that one reading of this play and film is that Martha's sexuality and suicide reveal 1930s (and possibly Hellman's own) attitudes towards lesbianism which is that these "abnormal" women are not criminal, but should be pitied. For more on this see articles by Jenny S. Spencer, Mary Titus, and Mikko Tuhkanen.

From a socio-historic background Martha, Karen, and Joe's career failures can be seen as commentary on the targeting of the queer community during McCarthyism. Within twenty-four hours of the rumor spreading around town that Martha may be romantically involved with Karen all three are ostracized from the community: all the students are taken from their school, prospects for a new job are out of the question, and Dr. Joe Cardin is fired. Even when Mary confesses that she lied about everything, the damage is done, and we see that the court of public opinion is much harsher than the court of law (Spencer 46). Martha's unconscious sexual desires pose such a threat that it is not enough for society to make her Other and ruin her financially. Karen and Joe end their relationship and Joe loses his job because he is engaged to Karen Wright (ch.6, 1:11).

Their collective career failures can be seen as a direct reference to the Hollywood blacklist created by the House Un-American Activities Committee (who investigated Hellman in the 1950s) and a signal that they will be ostracized from society. The fact that two college-educated women valued their relationship (whether sexual, romantic, business, or platonic) above bourgeois ideas of marriage makes them the site of social anxiety (Spencer 52, 58). For example, we see men slowly driving in front of their house leering and waiting to catch a glimpse of the freaks. And then there is the grocery delivery man who refuses to talk, but menacingly stares at them as he backs out the door. Refusing to turn his back on the women he drives Martha to pull at her face and shout in desperation, "See! I'm a freak!" (ch. 6, 1:09). With this kind of treatment, there is no way

the women can ever operate a successful business again. On top of that they don't know where they will go because their libel case against the Tilfords became national news.

Martha Dobie functions as the *femme fatale* because she disrupts the social order, in large part due to her lesbian desires. She does not participate in criminal activity. She does not actively pursue a romantic relationship with Karen, yet the idea that she could possess a sexual difference condemns them both. Martha's suicide is an example of how once again, even in death, Martha's character is a reversal of the Nanny and Nicole Horner. What I mean to say is that Nanny and Nicole are both taken into police custody at the end of the film, yet their active work (if amoral) towards independence transcends their ruin. However, Martha's suicide is what stays with the audience. It is how her suicide is interpreted by audiences that resonates and that is because while Nanny and Nicole are driven by (perceived or actual) social injustices; Martha is the victim of one. She has made an honest living for herself, working for years to get the boarding school solvent. In this sense, we can see her suicide as the moment the moral lesson is exposed. There are two main readings for Martha's suicide (Spencer 50).⁴¹ Considering this a social film noir, we can view Martha's suicide as a tragic event brought on by the unjust treatment from her community. Her death brings awareness to the dangers psychic trauma can cause individuals when they are rendered Other, for real or alleged sexual and/or social differences.

⁴¹ The other reading Jenny Spencer outlines takes into Hellman's autobiographical and historical facts.

Judith Mayne's book *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture* makes the point that while there have been decades of feminist film theory, much of it has been focused on cis-gendered straight feminist theory. However, that completely leaves the lesbian and queer theory out of the discussion. Mayne's work brings attention to the "significant ways lesbian culture, lesbian communities, and lesbian identities have been shaped by the ways in which films are watched, imagined, and understood" (xvii). In this context, the relationship between Martha and Karen can be read within a lesbian context. We have looked at the way Martha's unconscious desire for Karen alienated the women from society. But, we can also examine the relationship between Nicole Horner and Christina Delassalle as a lesbian relationship. In the original novel, the two women were lovers who conspired to kill the husband standing between them. Examining queer aspects to the films I have analyzed is a significant avenue of analysis that can be examined further.

Additionally, we can re-examine sensation novels through the lens of queer theory as Richard Nemesvari describes in his chapter "Queering the Sensation Novel." Nemesvari reminds us that sub-texts regarding sexual identity in sensation fiction are not limited to women who masquerade to hide a sexual difference. He demonstrates that sensation fiction authors "play with the mysterious fluidity of sexuality while at the same time ensuring that the potentialities that are on display dare not speak their name" (71). This idea expands the analysis of sexual identity beyond the fatal governess and into a variety of other characters and pairings. For example, returning to Braddon's classic *Lady*

Audley's Secret, we can examine how Lady Audley represents lesbian relationships by looking at her relationship with her maid, Phoebe Marks (Nemesvari 79-80). Expanding the analysis in this way shows yet another facet of the *femme fatale*'s complex character. It also shows that queer readings of texts are not limited to film noir but can also be seen in sensation fiction as well.

This thesis has looked at the corrupt instructor figure in late nineteenth-century sensation fiction and mid-twentieth century film noir. Understanding the ways in which the fatal teacher functions as a type of reiteration of the classic *femme fatale* has shown to be a fruitful analysis. I have analyzed the deadly teacher as she serves as a portentous sign that times are changing. Now, this thesis is not meant to be taken as a literal warning about evil, corrupt teachers that might be lurking somewhere in society. This analysis aims to look at the symbolic role of the teacher and her value to society as she is represented in the literary and cinematic texts within the parameters of this analysis. In fact, all the teachers I analyze are good at the job of teaching within the narrative; as well as in their symbolic role as a teacher for society. I have focused my analysis on two main lessons we can learn from the dangerous teacher. From a socio-historic perspective, she teaches us about inequalities working women faced. She is associated with the first and second waves of feminism. She helps preserve moments in history from the working woman's perspective. She also teaches women the power that comes with finding agency in body and mind.

I have also traced the ways in which the deadly instructor character's sexuality is tied to her social power. Harnessing her own sexual power is key for the *femme fatale* when it comes to finding social power. The two are intertwined because one cannot become their whole self if one does not have agency of body, mind, spirit. Sensation fiction's overworked governess finds social power because she also finds sexual power. Pauline Corsi, Jean Muir, and Jane Eyre understand that marriage is a social contract which gives the financial and social power to the husband. Each of these women rebel against the standard idea of marriage by rebelling against the status quo and marrying on their own terms. Their bravery and blatant disregard for patriarchal ideas paved the way for later generations. Because nineteenth-century suffragettes won the right for women to divorce, own property, and vote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries we see a shift in the fatal teachers of noir. These schoolmistresses have known a life where women have the freedoms fought for during the first-wave of feminism. Film noir gives us characters like Nicole Horner who has an open affair with her boss's husband. She is a property owner who holds power outside the confines of a marriage. Nanny also has a sexual past; as a single mother she has sacrificed her relationship with her daughter in order to make the money they need to survive. While these women find a measure of success, they have their own bad endings. Nicole is caught after murdering Christine. Nanny ends up with the blood of four people she cared about on her hands. And Martha Dobie pays the ultimate price for attempting to live completely outside of heteronormative relationships as a lesbian.

Looking at the progression towards women's agency we can see that the more progress that is made; the greater threat the *femme fatale* poses. This idea explains why many of the Victorian governesses find relative success. They challenge the patriarchal social structures in shocking ways (for their time period) but they always perform so as to appear that they conform with the social structures. They find power within marriage and most of them survive; but not all. Decades later women have found ways to hold social power outside of marriage; however, they are severely punished. Sexual agency and social power outside of male control is so frightening for directors (and a large part of the population) that when the *femme fatale* does find success she is quickly put back under male control (jailed or killed). With great change comes great backlash. As first-wave feminists won the right to divorce and vote; and second wave feminists won the right to safe abortion and more rights in the work place, the current feminists will continue to work for equal rights. It is this constant progress towards equality that instills hope in a corrupt schoolmistress like Nicole Horner. Because Nicole may have been caught but she still teaches women that they can always do something regardless of how bleak the circumstances may seem.

Overall, I see the dangerous teacher figure as a working woman who actively seeks a holistic sense of self. A sense of self where her body is not the property of her husband and her labor is fairly compensated. We have seen sensation fiction's governess find agency within marriage in order to escape the drudgery of being a governess. We have looked at film noir's teachers who have agency outside of marriage and even some

social power but are punished for it. As women continue to gain equality I hope that we see more stories that support the most marginalized. That is to say, this conclusion raised the issue of queer theory. Within the feminist movement (including literature theory) the queer community and African-American (and other racially marginalized communities such as the Mexican or Indian) voices are often the last to be heard. It is important that moving forward these stories are illuminated. If the teacher in subversive genres such as film noir and sensation fiction is also a teacher for society, we must also teach people about their experiences and the injustices they work through. For example, Pauline Corsi is a mixed-race governess and there is more valuable analysis that can be done with her character in that regard. Another example that could expand on that idea would be an analysis of the governess-like character Palmyre la Philosophe from *The Grandissimes* by George Washington Cable. She is not technically a governess, despite performing all the duties of one, because she was a slave. Similar to Pauline Corsi, she also finds freedom and is the center of power in the novel.

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