

Film Noir and the Evolution of the Femme Fatale Archetype

Double Indemnity (1944) and *Bound* (1996)

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the evolution of the femme fatale archetype within the film noir genre, focusing on how female sexuality, desire, and manipulation are represented. Traditionally, the femme fatale is characterized by beauty, charm, and sexual allure, using deception and coercion to manipulate male protagonists for personal gain. Although the archetype has changed over time, recurring patterns continue to frame female sexuality as a deceptive force that produces moral and emotional ambiguity. Through a comparative analysis of *Double Indemnity* (1944), directed by Billy Wilder, and the neo-noir film *Bound* (1996), directed by Lily and Lana Wachowski, this essay explores how contrasting portrayals of the femme fatale reflect shifting attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and female agency. Ultimately, the modernized femme fatale challenges traditional assumptions about female sexuality by rewarding female agency and transforming women from symbols of male desire into figures of autonomy, empowerment, and resistance.

In the world of film noir, female characters are often confined to a specific archetype: the femme fatale. To achieve her goals, this character typically employs beauty, charm, and sexual allure—alongside deception, embellishment, and coercion—to seduce and manipulate the male character. The portrayal of femme fatale characteristics has evolved over time within the noir genre, although a recurring pattern of behaviour persists that frames female sexuality as a tool used to ensnare men in a web of deceit and betrayal, with the false promise of intimacy and sex. The temptress is mesmerizing and complicated and her interactions with the protagonist generate moral and emotional turbulence and ambiguity. Thus, the themes of love, lust, and desire are central to understanding the motivations and manipulation behind the femme fatale character.

By examining the femme fatales in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Bound* (1996), viewers can appraise the evolution of this archetype. In Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, the femme fatale, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), manipulates the protagonist, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), and convinces him to assist her in killing her husband for financial gain and her freedom from the confines of marriage. Notably, this film's point of

view comes directly from the protagonist, influencing and limiting our perception and understanding of the femme fatale's motives and actions. Similarly, the 1996 neo-noir thriller *Bound*, directed by Lily and Lana Wachowski, presents the story through the eyes of Corky (Gina Gershon), the lesbian female protagonist who is seduced and befriended by the femme fatale, Violet (Jennifer Tilly). Less arrogant and thus more cautious than Walter, Corky initially questions Violet's motives and trustworthiness, but eventually agrees to support Violet in her quest to leave her mob boyfriend, Caesar (Joe Pantoliano). Phyllis and Violet are femme fatales who exhibit sexual allure, manipulative tendencies, and moral ambiguity; comparing them provides an opportunity to dissect the typical femme fatale character and appreciate the intricacy of female characters in film noir and how they have evolved over time.

In classic film noir, the femme fatale often uses her sexual provocation to deceive and exploit the male protagonist, and Phyllis does this masterfully (Grossmann 20). Right from the start, Phyllis's appearance emphasizes her sexual appeal; her revealing outfit and suggestive dialogue draw Walter—and the audience—into her web. When they first meet, Phyllis is standing



Fig. 1 | Phyllis begins her seduction in *Double Indemnity*, 00:08:20. Paramount Pictures, 1944.

at the top of the stairs, hastily covered in a towel (Fig. 1), and her whole being exudes a magnetic and dangerous sexuality that Neff cannot resist. This scene positions Phyllis as both an object of desire and a figure of control, and her sexual appeal initiates the power dynamic that ultimately leads to Walter Neff's demise. When the camera pans in on Phyllis at the top of the stairs, she is bathed in light, which emphasizes the power her sexual allure has over Neff. The audience and Walter, in retrospect, question if Phyllis made a calculated decision to hastily cover herself in a towel or if this was an innocent act of convenience, which adds to the ambiguity of her femme fatale characterization.

During their initial conversation, Phyllis seduces Neff by presenting herself as a vulnerable woman who is often left alone, as her husband is perpetually away: "I guess he has been too busy down at Long Beach in the oil fields" (00:10:20-00:10:22). Phyllis' combination of vulnerability and sexual allure cause Neff to feel protective and powerful, which blinds him to her true intentions. Phyllis uses her beauty and charm to distract Neff from the purpose of his visit and persuade him into believing that she needs saving. In their second conversation on Thursday afternoon, after some back-and-forth flirting, Phyllis asks Walter, "Could I get an accident policy for [my husband] without bothering him at all?" and he proposes that she could "pay for it [herself] and he wouldn't need to know anything about it" (00:20:26-00:20:38). In this scene, Phyllis seats herself extremely close to Walter, deliberately placing her arm across the back of the couch while facing him directly. She is using her beauty and sexual desirability as a weapon to manipulate him, and she appeals to his ego and male longing, convincing him that he is in control of the situation, when it is evident that she holds the strings.



Fig. 2 | Phyllis in Jerry's Market. Behind that calm face, what is she really thinking?, 00:42:25. Paramount Pictures, 1944.

Phyllis uses emotional manipulation to play on Neff's desires, making him a pawn in her scheme to kill her husband. Common to classic film noir, Phyllis is presented as "an evil woman whose *raison d'être* is to murder and deceive ..." (Grossman 19). Thus, her sexual allure, intelligence, and ruthlessness enable her to convince Neff to disregard his moral code, in exchange for the false pretence of love and intimacy. During a meeting in Jerry's Market, Phyllis challenges Walter's commitment to the scheme when she states "It's not our heads. It's our nerve we are losing" (00:41:55). She demonstrates a firm understanding of his weakness for love and intimacy by saying, "It's so tough without you. It's like there is a wall between us" (00:42:13). As Walter leaves, the camera pans in on Phyllis's face (Fig. 2),



Fig. 3 | Violet's coy facial expression, 00:02:47. Paramount Pictures, 1996.



Fig. 4 | Violet exiting the elevator, 00:02:56. Paramount Pictures, 1996.

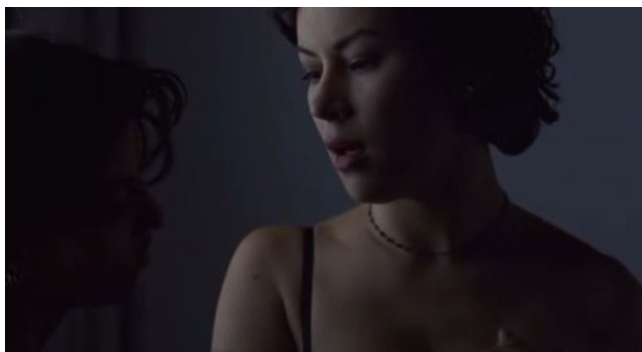


Fig. 5 | Violet tells Corky, "I'm trying to seduce you," 00:13:34. Paramount Pictures, 1996.

and she appears to calmly consider the situation. However, the shadow across the left side of her face suggests that she is calculating her next move.

It is difficult to determine Phyllis' morality and thoughts, as the film is narrated from Walter's perspective. This point of view forces her into a zone of subjectivity, which reinforces the patriarchal ideal of male heroism. While the characterization of Neff is firmly positioned within the realm of sympathy, Phyllis is portrayed as an enticing, sexually empowered woman who is dangerous and conniving in nature. Phyllis' utilization of poise and sexual allure are made apparent by the male voice-over narration from Walter Neff, and thus "his point of view defines the particular tone of his desire and disillusionment" (Boozer 21). Walter's narration shapes the viewer's perception of Phyllis, which essentially objectifies her as a symbol of male desire, further accentuating the ambivalence of her character.

Alston argues that "the femme fatale is a shifting character who wields a certain amount of her own power" (26). Seen through his eyes, Phyllis manipulates Walter by weaponizing his desire, and then ruthlessly turns on him, the final defining trait of the femme fatale archetype.

Over time, the classic femme fatale has evolved, which is most evident in the 1996 film *Bound*, as the character Violet is presented as a more complicated interpretation of this archetype. This film encapsulates the traditional film noir essence combined with a unique crime thriller plot that emphasizes lesbian sexuality, challenging the conventional noir genre. Katherine Farrimond states that over the past two decades of Western cinema, there has been "a large proportion of recent films featuring bisexually active women" whose characters are represented as "sexy, deadly, femme fatale types" (138). As a femme fatale, Violet manipulates and schemes to achieve her goal, but her motivations and relationships are clearly presented to the audience as more complex than Phyllis Dietrichson's. Violet's sexuality highlights a modern femme fatale, who "uses her charms on men and women alike, making everyone a potential victim" (142). The characterization of Violet as a bisexual femme fatale challenges the heteronormative bias of this archetype. By using a less ridged gender stereotype for the two main characters, Violet and Corky, the audience is introduced to a contemporary understanding of female empowerment where the confines of patriarchal ideals are dismantled.

When Violet is introduced at the beginning of the film, in the elevator scene, she is evidently beautiful, and like Phyllis in her towel at the top of the stairs, Violet utilizes her sexuality as a form of power. This is visible in the way that she drops her sunglasses to make eye contact with the female protagonist, Corky, and following this, the camera pans in on Violet's coy facial expression (Fig. 3). Her sexual allure is highlighted by the camera's focus on her body as she exits the elevator and walks down the hall with an enticing female strut (00:02:55-00:03:01; Fig. 4). The low camera angle and close-up on Violet's legs focuses attention on her fishnet stockings, short skirt and high heels, providing the audience with Corky's viewpoint and a sense that she is intrigued, but not destabilized by desire. Although Violet's legs are highlighted, the film promptly returns to her face, showing there is a shared erotic awareness, and Violet is conscious of Corky's gaze upon her body.

As demonstrated by camera angles, tone of voice, and her physical proximity to others, Violet uses her sexy nature to manipulate the characters she interacts with. Violet cleverly orchestrates two meetings with Corky, wherein she exudes sexual desirability shown by her body positioning and topic of conversation. In a more obvious way than Phyllis, Violet's physical and sexual enchantment is a central aspect of her character. During the second meeting, when Corky asks, "What are you doing?" Violet candidly shares her intentions: "Isn't it obvious? I'm trying to seduce you [...]. I've wanted to ever since I saw you that day in the elevator" (00:13:45-00:14:00; Fig. 5). In this scene, the tempter has begun to set her trap, and the further Corky falls into the web of desire, the more power Violet has over future situations. Like *Double Indemnity*, the storyline of *Bound* centers



Fig. 6 | Violet confides in Corky, 00:33:57. Paramount Pictures, 1996.

on a woman—here involved with a gangster—who has ambitions of escaping her relationship, which becomes accessible through an alliance with Corky. The main difference between Phyllis and Violet is that Violet is perpetually in danger, and she openly uses her sexuality as a tool to evade detection, while she works to gain power, control, and autonomy. Violet's sexual allure serves as both a weapon and a means of survival, which makes it harder to define the morality of her actions.

Unlike Walter, Corky is suspicious of Violet, as after their first flirtatious meeting, she hears Violet having sex with Caesar through the thin apartment wall (00:03:32–00:03:58). Following this, Violet shows up with an offer of coffee, and the two women have a conversation filled with sexual innuendo, which ultimately leads them on a path of secret intimacy (00:04:17–00:06:33). As Violet and Corky begin their sexual relationship, the ambiguity of Violet's sexuality becomes a prominent question that impacts the level of trust Corky has towards Violet. Corky does not exude Walter Neff's level of arrogance, and due to her sexual identification as a lesbian, she is more hesitant to respond to Violet's sexual appeal. Unlike Walter, Corky immediately sees these femme fatale attributes as a warning sign of potential danger. Corky's distrust is amplified when she sees a different man enter Violet's apartment and hears them in the throes of passion, which increases her suspicions of Violet (00:23:30). After Corky hears Violet having sex with different men, she questions whether Violet is a lesbian, or if her provocative behaviour is just a tactic to seduce and manipulate her. Corky challenges Violet's sexual orientation when she states, "So what are you saying? You don't have sex with men" (00:25:09–00:25:15). True to femme fatale personae, Violet replies "What you heard wasn't sex ... [it was] work,"

highlighting her character's ambiguity (00:25:19–00:25:23). Farrimond suggests that "Corky's doubt over these [work] claims is intrinsically connected to the validity of Violet's other claims," such as promising that "she won't double-cross Corky" when they rob Caesar (146). Thus, Violet's variable sexuality becomes an obstacle in the budding relationship between these two women, as Corky—and the audience—remain unsure of Violet's trustworthiness.

Given that this film is presented from Corky's perspective, trust must be established before the plot can progress. Like the male protagonist in classic noir, Corky functions as the central consciousness of the story, though in contrast to *Double Indemnity*'s male point of view—which obscures the female experience—the storyline of *Bound* gives significant access to Violet's perspective. In this way, the film showcases a dual female viewpoint, which challenges the predominant male narration of the traditional film noir genre by shifting the focus away from heterosexual masculinity towards queer female experience. Like Phyllis, Violet utilizes beauty and charm to achieve her goals, although she deviates from the classic femme fatale archetype by employing an honest approach to communication with the protagonist, which has a positive impact on her connection with Corky. A turning point in their relationship happens when Violet confides in Corky, telling her that previously she "used to be able to block it all out, but [she] can't do it anymore" (00:32:44–00:33:37). In this scene, Violet relies on her sexual allure and the intimacy they have shared to promote a partnership, as she reaches for Corky's hand across the table (Fig. 6). In contrast to Phyllis and her manipulation of Walter, Violet confides in Corky and shares pertinent information about her involvement with the Mob, which could be used against her. In this manner, Violet

is redefining the femme fatale archetype as she expresses vulnerability and requests a female's help, rather than relying on the traditional male saviour.

Departing from the classic film noir representation of the femme fatale archetype, exemplified by Phyllis Dietrichson's selfish and calculating nature, Violet's actions are primarily motivated by her desire for freedom from what Corky and the audience see as a toxic and dangerous life. Lipiner and Maurer state that "the classic femme fatale character" has been revolutionized and "the new femme fatale 'gets away with murder,' thus posing a monstrous threat to the capitalist and patriarchal economy in which she operates" (424). Support for this theory can be seen in the way that Violet constructs a plan to steal the Mob's money and frame her boyfriend, Caesar, which enables her to escape the tumultuous relationship she has as a mobster's girlfriend and build a new life with Corky. Furthermore, Violet's portrayal of the femme fatale character flips the classic archetype as she enlists a female's help, rather than relying on the traditional "knight in shining armour" to save her. Even though Violet uses her beauty, charm, and sexual appeal to seduce Corky, she attempts to protect her saviour from becoming a victim within her scheme for a better life. Ultimately, Violet places herself in harm's way to protect Corky as she actively fights off Caesar and kills him. This act of violence

showcases her immense loyalty towards Corky and her commitment to steal from the Mob and build a life together. In contrast to Phyllis, Violet does not fit neatly into the role of a heartless manipulator who uses the pretence of love and desire as tools for personal gain. Violet challenges the traditional femme fatale archetype by jeopardizing her own well being to ensure her lover, Corky, survives.

In this manner, *Bound* displays a modernized femme fatale character who overtly uses sexual allure and manipulation to gain autonomy, while still maintaining a sense of morality. As opposed to Phyllis, who ends up being killed by her co-conspirer, Walter, after she shoots him, Violet escapes from her situation without harm to herself or Corky. Comparing how each femme fatale executes her plan, Phyllis displays a blatant disregard for anyone but herself, using her mix of vulnerability and sexual appeal to seduce Walter and manipulate him, wherein he becomes a pawn in her game of deceit and betrayal. Throughout their relationship, Phyllis dangles the chance of intimacy under his nose, which provides her an opportunity to control him to reach her goal of personal and financial freedom. Even though both Phyllis and Violet utilize their sexual allure as a tool to seduce and entice others, in the end, Violet proves to Corky that her feelings were sincere, and both women are rewarded with a relationship based on desire, love, and trust. ■

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