ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
47.1 (June 2025): 37-54
e-ISSN 1989-6840
DOI: http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2025-47.1.3

Women as Black Angels in Cornell Woolrich's Noir Fiction

Maysaa Husam Jaber
Scientific Research Commission
maysajaber@gmail.com

This article examines Cornell Woolrich's representations of his female protagonists as black angels, that is, self-sacrificing but vengeful and dangerous women. As black angels, female characters in Woolrich's novels, such as Julie Killeen in *The Bride Wore Black* (1940) and Alberta Murray in *The Black Angel* (1943), are seemingly defending their homes and standing up for justice but ultimately, they get caught up in a violent world and face the inescapability of failure. It is argued here that Woolrich's trope of the black angel subverts the stereotype of the femme fatale by mirroring and simultaneously challenging the depiction of the roles of women during the turbulent sociopolitical period around the Second World War in the US, as well as the shift in gender dynamics at that time. Woolrich's narratives become a vehicle to express this very sense of insecurity and anxiety and the need to both articulate and subvert the pressing need for order and control, particularly in relation to women. This article also illustrates that Woolrich's black angels are complex creations that are part and parcel of the recipe of sex, paranoia and violence that fill the pages of Woolrich's noir novels, and it is this recipe that destabilizes both gender norms and legal codes as far as the portrayal of female criminality is concerned.

Keywords: Cornell Woolrich; black angels; the femme fatale; noir fiction; female criminality; gender and crime

. . .

La representación de la mujer como ángel negro en la ficción noir de Cornell Woolrich

Este artículo examina las representaciones que hace Cornell Woolrich de sus protagonistas femeninas como "ángeles negros", es decir, mujeres abnegadas pero vengativas y peligrosas. Como ángeles negros, los personajes femeninos en las novelas de Woolrich, como Julie Killeen en *The Bride Wore Black* (1940) y Alberta Murray en *The Black Angel* (1943), aparentemente defienden sus hogares y luchan por la justicia, pero finalmente se ven atrapadas en un mundo violento y enfrentan la inevitabilidad del fracaso. Se argumenta que el tropo del ángel negro de Woolrich subvierte el estereotipo de la femme fatale al reflejar y, al mismo tiempo, desafiar la representación de los roles femeninos durante el turbulento periodo sociopolítico en torno a la Segunda Guerra Mundial en Estados Unidos, así como el cambio en las dinámicas de género de esa época. Las narrativas de Woolrich se convierten en un vehículo para expresar ese sentimiento de inseguridad y ansiedad, y la necesidad tanto de articular como de subvertir la apremiante demanda de orden y control, especialmente en relación con las mujeres. Este artículo también ilustra que los ángeles negros de Woolrich son creaciones complejas que forman parte esencial de la receta de sexo, paranoia y violencia que llena las páginas de sus novelas negras, y es precisamente esta receta la que desestabiliza tanto las normas de género como los códigos legales en lo que respecta a la representación de la criminalidad femenina.

Palabras clave: Cornell Woolrich; ángeles negros; femme fatale; ficción noir; criminalidad femenina; género y crimen.

1. Introduction

> Then, with the 1940s, comes the Great Fear. The light is shadowed over; for ten years the key words will be "night" and "dark." The hardboiled wry grimace will be replaced by abject terror, by a sense of ultimate impotence in a world suddenly full of danger, of nothing but danger. (O'Brien 1997, 94)

Cornell Woolrich's fictional world perfectly fits Geoffrey O'Brien's description of 1940s noir fiction. It is full of violence, paranoia, and dangerous women. Woolrich combines suspense with crime mysteries and adds an element of horror to the noir formula of his fiction. A classic scenario in Woolrich's work involves protagonists accused of crimes they have not committed, criminals walking free with no punishment while revenge is often exacted on the innocent. Woolrich's work fits under the heading "paranoid noir," where characters live in a deterministic world in which they are "doomed" and "targeted [...] for destruction" (Simpson 2010, 192). Isolation and an overwhelming

sense of helplessness and terror are the defining factors not only for Woolrich's unique style, which strongly influenced (early) film noir, but also the gender dynamics in his stories. Woolrich's female characterization encompasses the conflicting aspects that mirror the atmosphere and setting of the narratives; Woolrich's women are entrapped and sometimes victimized by the darkness and the despair of his world, yet at the same time they are dangerous criminals.

Raymond Chandler describes Woolrich as a "curious" case—an "idea writer" and "not much of a character man". He adds that Woolrich's writing is "very readable, but leaves no warmth behind it" (quoted in Hiney and MacShane 2000, 33). Chandler is correct to point to the originality and imagination that embodies Woolrich's work, but one might take issue with his assessment of Woolrich's treatment of characters. Woolrich produces a dark psychological and geographical landscape for his characters. Put in impossible situations, they are forced to lose control and resort to violence as their only option. In what Lee Horsley calls "victim noir," which Woolrich's fiction certainly meets the criteria for—the protagonists are victims of circumstances and often encounter situations that are beyond their control (Horsley 2001, 67). These protagonists, both males and females, do not have the mastery or the toughness of the hardboiled detectives of crime writers such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Instead, Woolrich's characters fall into despair that turns to violence, which is key to gender representation in his novels. That is, in narratives that are less about socioeconomic and political critique than about "individual struggles or sexual triangles" (Horsley 2001, 69), Woolrich's male protagonists include alcoholics, fallen men, and gangsters, while his female characters are often victims who turn into victimizers.

This article will examine Woolrich's representations of his female protagonists as black angels, that is, self-sacrificing but vengeful and duplicitous women who are also ruthless killers. It will be argued here that these representations mirror and simultaneously challenge the turbulent politics of the period around the Second World War in the US as well as the shift in the gender dynamics at that time. Through the depiction of women as black angels, Woolrich's narratives become a vehicle to express the very sense of insecurity and anxiety associated with the war and post-war era, and the need to both articulate and subvert the pressing need for order and control, particularly in relation to women. This article will also illustrate that Woolrich's black angels are complex creations that are part and parcel of the recipe of sex, paranoia, and violence that fill the pages of his noir novels, and it is this recipe that destabilizes both gender norms and legal codes as far as the portrayal of female criminality at the time is concerned.

The Depression in 1930s America shaped Woolrich's creation of his struggling protagonists. Woolrich's stories dissect the inner workings of how people react and behave when they are made to face their and others' worse demons. The result is stories highlighted with "masochistic hysteria coupled with a pervasive sense of futility

and doom" (Mayer and McDonnell 2007, 40). However, Woolrich wrote his most powerful novels during and after the Second World War. In fact, many of his best sellers were written between 1940 to 1948. So, while the Depression influenced his writing, Woolrich's characters clearly reflect the paranoia and the despair of the war and the post-war period era (Haut 2002, 107). With narratives that encapsulate the consciousness of war and the post-war psyche, the focus is on the shift in the fabric of American society at the time, highlighting the anxieties and questions around gender roles, agency, and law and order. For example, in *The Black Angel,* Woolrich writes about the "new darkness" that enfolds the secrets and mysteries around characters and is also woven into his noir world: "This blur, this new darkness against the old darkness, stood motionless for a while, then gradually started to shift over toward the bed [...] Motion could only be detected in this shadowy mass by the contrasting motion it seemed to give the things around it that were not moving" (1943, 48). This darkness is expressed through Woolrich's unique style. His writing is poetic with "excesses and melodrama", and it is colored with a "bloated purple prose that thuds like overemphatic movie music" (O'Brien 1997, 99). It stands in contrast to the way his protagonists live and process the fear and paranoia that riddle their lives. There is a realness in his stories that somewhat stands in disparity with the florid language and the musicality of his words. Indeed, Woolrich has what Lee Server calls a "propensity for narrative hysteria" which is more in tune with horror fiction (2002, 279), and his stories evoke Gothic tropes through his setting of dark streets and the "the underworld of modern civilization, the noir labyrinth" (Renzi 2006, 10).

It is this style, atmosphere as well as the portrayal of women, that made Woolrich's stories a good fit for film noir of that era. His cinematic influence is often part of the critical commentary on his oeuvre (Renzi 2006, 3). Woolrich's pessimistic vision combined with his anxious characters provided the right ingredients for films in this genre. Many successful films from the 1940s are based on his novels, such as *Rear Window* (1954), *Phantom Lady* (1944), *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948), and *Black Angel* (1946).[1] There is a psychological dimension and an intensity in Woolrich's narratives that fit the dark setting of film noir. In addition, the representation of women is another important element in the adaptation of Woolrich's stories into films, particularly the depiction of the iconic image of the cinematic femme fatale and how it stands against the black angel in Woolrich's novels, as the next section will illustrate.

2. Black Angels: Women as avengers, seductresses or faithful wives?

The black angel is a female image specific to Cornell Woolrich's noir fiction. Woolrich distinguishes himself from his contemporaries such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James Cain by painting a female image that is different from the iconic

[1] Between 1942 and 1949, eleven Woolrich books were made into films. His work is the most adapted to the cinema among writers of that era. For more on the Woolrich role and his adaptations in cinema see Mayer and McDonnell (2007).

heroine of hardboiled crime fiction of the 1940s and 1950s, namely the femme fatale. Woolrich's black angels are female protagonists devoted to the men they love, but they are also dangerous and do not hesitate to commit murder to fulfil their agenda. Although women in books such as *The Bride Wore Black, The Phantom Lady* and *The Black Angel* are lethal and ruthless, they are "believable and affecting" (Haut 2002, 106), and there is a complexity to their characterization that invites the question of how the black angel stands against the dominant figure of the femme fatale. Woolrich's black angels are relentless in seeking justice and/or revenge, often blurring the lines between the two, but ironically the motive behind their criminal behavior, unlike the femme fatale's, is love and devotion. The femme fatale, on the other hand, is a seductress who leads men to their doom; she is an archetype that can be traced back to Eve and exists across literatures and cultures, but most notably she made her presence felt in film noir in mid-twentieth century America. Perceived as the "bad" woman, the motives of the femme fatale often revolve around power, greed, and money. There are some studies on the archetype of the femme fatale and her historical position in various epochs especially in fin-de-siècle literature and art. For example, Bram Dijkstra's study (1986) examines turn-of-the-century misogyny in the work of several authors and artists. Also, Rebecca Stott's study (1992) analyzes the femme fatale as a construction of the Victorian Age influenced by the conceptualizations of class and sexuality during that time.

However, most of the scholarship on the femme fatale covers this figure in cinema. Focusing on misogyny and the objectification of women, cinematic scholarship found the femme fatale in film noir ripe for analysis. Feminist scholarship on the femme fatale falls into two positions. The first sees the femme fatale as a projection of male anxieties especially in the post-war era. This attitude informs the majority of studies, such as Mary Ann Doane (1991), Frank Krutnik (1991), and James Maxfield (1996), but more importantly E. Ann Kaplan's collection of essays *Women in Film Noir* (1978/1998) which includes many interesting perspectives on women in noir. The second position considers the femme fatale as a symbol of power. For instance, Julie Grossman sees the femme fatale as an "agent" against "patriarchal regulation" (2009, 4), and Helen Hanson (2007) also speaks about the generic limitations of Hollywood and proposes that the femme fatale is more than a sexual symbol. More recent studies on the femme fatale include Katherine Farrimond's book (2017) on the contemporary femme fatale, gender, and American cinema, and Agnieszka Piotrowska's study on the "neo femme fatale" in cinema (2018).

Despite the insights these studies offer, there are limitations to the way women in general and the femme fatale in particular are analyzed and represented. The canonization of the femme fatale limits the study of this figure to her cinematic representations and mainly stresses the static images/stereotypes in film, while the examination of women in noir fiction remains a poorly explored area. Hence, there is a need to find an alternative perspective from which to study women in

noir fiction, and this Woolrich provides. Despite the similarities between the femme fatale and the black angel on the surface, a closer examination of the image of the black angel in Woolrich's fiction shows that there is a uniqueness and roundness to her characterization that transcends the quintessential image of the evil seductress by inspiring sympathy towards the black angel and encourages a reading that goes beyond the containment and punishment that the femme fatale often faces in noir narratives, particularly in film noir. Indeed, a significant argument about the role of the femme fatale is related to her containment; when she is punished at the end, she ultimately reasserts male power. Some critics including Jack Boozer, describe femmes fatales as "criminally depraved and castrating in their desires" considering that society "encouraged the blame heaped on women's sexuality" and stressed "her sexual repression and restriction to the household" (1999, 21). Woolrich's black angels, however, are not punished in the same way that we see in Hammett or Cain's novels, for example. That is, Woolrich's black angels are saved from the fate of death or imprisonment that femmes fatales often face in noir, especially in film noir.

Therefore, what is intriguing about Woolrich's fiction is the positioning of the black angel amongst an array of femmes fatales in both fiction and film at the time, and while it is not an understatement to talk about the dominance of the femme fatale in noir fiction and more clearly in film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, Woolrich's black angels add to and challenge the staple presence of the image of the femme fatale by envisioning female protagonists with depth and complexity and showing the juxtaposition between domesticity and crime, revenge, and devotion—a combination that can present a reading that goes against the grain of women in noir, as this article aims to achieve. As black angels, female characters—such as Julie Killeen in *The Bride Wore Black*, who seeks revenge for her husband's murder only to discover that she has murdered the wrong men, and Alberta Murray in *The Black Angel* who wants to save her husband from the electric chair but finds herself falling in love with the real murderer—are seemingly defending their homes, standing up for justice, but they are caught up in violence and ultimately face the futility and inescapability of failure. Woolrich's narratives, with an overall sense of fatalism that verges on absurdity, set these female protagonists in challenging situations that blur the distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, love and selfishness.

Within the parameters of Woolrich's fictional world, women function not only as heroines but as relentless campaigners pursuing their goals. However, there is a core contradiction within their construction as black angels, a contradiction between the domestic ideal of the woman/wife and the edgy seductress whose capabilities know no bounds. The black angel, often a wife, in opposition to the femme fatale who thrives in urban and male-dominated environments and who is part and parcel of the noir underworld (for example, Bridget in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and Phyllis Dietrichson in Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1943)), only goes to these urban dangerous spaces out of necessity to carry out her plan as a savior/avenger. The two faces of Woolrich's

black angels demonstrate how his texts problematize the stereotypical portrayal of the femme fatale as the quintessential seductive evil woman, and at the same time render an even more noir picture of his fiction. The conflict between domesticity and crime is key to a nuanced reading of the stories; there is tension between the desire of the women protagonists to be devoted wives and the way they turn to murder and seek revenge when they are wronged. The transformation of these women is dramatic and compelling. As Leonard Cassuto argues, post-war crime fiction attacks the "domestic ideal" showcased in sentimental fiction, and women as the "designated domestic mainstays" become "both the means and the target of many such attacks" (2009, 118). They "enact a fear of destroying romance [...] and the social institutions upon which it depends" (2009, 118). These anxieties are reflected and portrayed through the many faces of Woolrich's women, who are on a spectrum that oscillates between victimhood and vengeful criminality. These black angels are part of the danger and edge that define the characters' lives, but they also embody this danger. Although many of them are wives and are positioned in a domestic environment, they turn to violence, often to defend their homes when they are caught up in cruel games that they eventually lose at.

Part of Woolrich's construction of female characters is identity play. Woolrich's women have the ability to "create different selves", for example in *The Bride Wore Black* (1940) and I *Married a Dead Man* (1948). Woolrich demonstrates how the woman's "apparent nature" is constructed rather than being the "product of inherent traits" (Horsley 2001, 137). By so doing, both sides in women—the "good woman" versus the "bad woman"—are fleshed out and the role of the seductress stands in contrast to, and sometimes merges with, that of the faithful innocent domestic wife. Additionally, women in Woolrich's fiction often disappear or change their identity. In *Waltz into Darkness* (1947), Bonny marries Louis Durand under a false name in order to trap and use him for his money before she poisons him. In *I Married a Dead Man*, the female character assumes the identity of Patrice Hazzard and exploits the family of a husband she never married. Moreover, Woolrich's female characters prove their ability to be on a par with the male criminals who populate this genre, they are "hard, [and] money and love betrayals [are] violent" (Dickos 2002, 100). One can read Woolrich's stories in light of the landscape he creates for characters, the sheer terror, and the nightmares of experiencing twisted games, false accusations, and the absurdity of fate. Women in Woolrich's books are set against forces larger than they are able to control, and they strive to pursue goals by working against a system or a timeframe that is precarious and challenging. John Irwin explains that Woolrich's work is about "deadlines in the literal sense of the word" (2006,124). It depicts a "race against time" with a clock that, as Woolrich in *Black Angel* writes "went tick, tick, tick" (1943, 47), this indeed being the main mechanism of suspense in the stories.

That the "psychological vein" of Woolrich's narratives is pursued with "obsessive and consummate skill" is shown in the effect of the "race against time" on his characters' psychology and their "emotional and moral life" (Irwin 2006, 124). Woolrich's

fictional world is also more romantic than his contemporaries' (Bassett 1991, vii), and this romantic streak in his books colors the characterization of women, particularly his black angels. Woolrich's women are "fired with devotion and maternal passion" (Haut 2002, 106), but their faithfulness masks a dark side. All these facets are portrayed in *The Bride Wore Black*, a novel that makes the case for the unique representation of the avenging black angel in Woolrich's work.

3. The Vengeful Widow in The Bride Wore Black

The Bride Wore Black is Woolrich's first novel and it inaugurated the first of his Black series—thrillers with suspenseful plots about crime and punishment, love, despair, and the inescapability of defeat.[2] It is a story that features Julie, a young woman who tragically loses her husband, Nick Killeen, on their wedding day, and how she pursues those whom she believes killed him only to discover at the end that the men she has murdered are innocent, and in fact another man is responsible for her husband's death. In *The Bride Wore Black* Woolrich establishes the alluring combination of a vengeful murderess and a devoted widow, thereby demonstrating the "idealization and fear of women" (Mayer and McDonnell 2007, 40)—an amalgamation that is key to his characterization of the black angel, who reflects male anxieties and fears about women's roles during the Second World War.[3]

The story—"a brilliant, dream-like tale of a woman's methodical revenge" (Server 2002, 280)—has five sections, named after the men Julie suspects of the murder of her husband: Bliss, Mitchell, Moran, Ferguson, and Holmes, and each section is divided into subsections. For each of the first four sections of the book, there are three identical subsections. The first subsection is entitled "The Woman" which is about Julie; the second is about the man that she kills; and the third subsection is named "Post-Mortem on Bliss" which involves the outcome of the crime and the detective work that follows it. The last and fifth section of the book is differently formatted with two more additional subsections, and it includes the conclusion and the resolution of the murder of Nick. This format is rigid and repetitive with each of the sections devoted to the story around one of the five men. These sections are like having five separate stories within the overall one, with Julie being the common thread as she works her way through her complicated agenda. This format also offers the predictability and expectation of murder while it establishes Julie as a ruthless murderess and maintains the reader's fascination to understand her motives and her endgame.

The novel does not, however, begin with murder. It starts with Julie bidding her family and friends goodbye in New York when she buys a train ticket, supposedly heading to Chicago, she "didn't look back at the house, at the street they were leaving" (2015, 13). But she does not reach her destination; instead, she gets

[2] The novels in this series are *The Bride Wore Black* (1940), *The Black Curtain* (1941), *Black Alibi* (1942), *The Black Angel* (1943), *The Black Path of Fear* (1944) and *Rendezvous in Black* (1948).

[3] For more on the roles of women during the Second World War, see Weatherford (1990).

off at the next station and fabricates a new identity in order to start her revenge crusade. Despite the way the novel is structured, Woolrich establishes suspense and anticipation throughout the book by making Julie the focal point of all the action. It is not clear at the start of the book what she intends to do and why, and it is not until the end that Julie's elaborate plan that she exacted over a period of two years is revealed. Woolrich, who has "a knack for incorporating his own paranoia, neuroses, and psychoses into his stories, amplifying them to excessive proportions" (Renzi 2006, 14), employs suspense not merely as a device to create a mystery and lure his readers into turning the page, but also uses the suspense around Julie's murders as a dynamic that opens a window onto her psyche.

In this early book, Woolrich concocts his first black angel. Julie is completely self-absorbed with revenge and her agenda of fulfilling her own brand of justice brings a twist at the end of the story—a caring loving wife is transformed into a murderess. The question that poses itself here is: how does Julie as a black angel stand against the quintessential image of the femme fatale? As far as the construction of the femme fatale and its impact on the genre, Julie, according to Thomas Renzi, is seen as a "prototype of the *noir* Spider Woman" (2015, 80). According to this view, not only is Julie a precursor to the femmes fatales who dominated this fictional genre but she is also a predecessor to the lethal women of film noir. However, I would argue that part of the intrigue of Julie's character is the way she subverts the stereotypical image of the femme fatale. Julie does lead men to their doom, but there is a tragedy behind her criminal behavior, a drive for revenge that is twinned with her devotion to her dead husband. It is not money or power that she seeks like many of the classical femmes fatales such as many of Chandler's or Cain's dangerous women (for example, Bridget in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) or Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice (*1934)). Julie uses her sexual wiles to lure the men on her list before she kills them, but she feels guilt and regret when she learns the truth about Nick's killer. At the end, she realizes that not only did she murder innocent men, but she also missed the opportunity to avenge Nick. Julie thus demonstrates the ruthlessness and manipulation typical of the femme fatale, yet her representation as one is not complete, hence Woolrich with his convoluted story creates room for sympathy for Julie as a devoted widow—a black angel.

The Bride Wore Black is a story of revenge and loyalty. There are two faces to Julie, the loving wife and the cold-blood killer. She is calculating, choosing her methods of killing and escape carefully whilst making sure no one can identify her. She uses a variety of disguises such as wigs and various demeanors to keep her identity hidden. For example, she kills Bliss at his engagement party by pushing him off the balcony and leaving before anyone notices. She poisons Mitchell after seducing him, and finally she kills Ferguson with an arrow. Julie perplexes the police to the point that they think there are multiple killers and are not able to solve the crimes, while she ensures that no one is wrongfully blamed for the murders she commits.

The book focuses on Julie's recreating of her identity in each of the five sections. The play on identity is realized in her use of each persona as a disguise and a mask to protect herself and perfect her murder plans. Julie's performative identities blur the line between guilt and innocence and complicate the depiction of justice versus revenge in the book. The creative ways Julie reinvents herself with every man she pursues point to her scheming and resourceful character. For example, with Moran she poses as a kindergarten teacher to his son in order to infiltrate his life. She demonstrates absolute mercilessness and cold-bloodedness when she traps him in a closet, seals all the cracks and leaves him there to suffocate and die. She poses as the goddess Diana for Ferguson, a painter, before killing him. In a story that leans heavily on identifying the murderers, the ending brings a shocking twist. When it turns out that the killers are not who Julie thought they were, Woolrich achieves an irony that speaks to the way we read his characters and the pessimistic, perhaps fatalistic, narrative. More importantly, the novel ends with limiting the power of Julie, although it does not completely eradicate her agency as she assumes the role the avenger. Julie does not face death or prison like most of the femmes fatales, such as Cora in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, she is simply left to live with the horror of the discovery of what she has done. In Woolrich's fictional world, Julie's failure is inevitable, and this is a component of the pessimism and darkness that define his stories.

Another aspect to Julie's characterization is the fact that her point of view is missing in the story. Woolrich does not reveal much about Julie's perspective and feelings. For example, the book starts with a description of Julie when we first see her—a voice saying "Julie, my Julie" follows her down the stairs with "the softest whisper, the strongest claim, that human lips can utter"—and one that does not make her "falter, lose a step" as she says goodbye to her former life and embarks on her revenge journey (2015, 12). The story uses the omniscient point of view and Julie's thoughts and motivations remain hidden until the end. She "appears detached, aloof, insensitive" mainly because the reader does not understand the motives behind her killings and only sees her "as objectified alienated from our empathy and sympathy" (Renzi 2006, 80). In fact, the story highlights the victims and their stories and generates sympathy for the men Julie kills, which adds to the ambiguity that clouds our understanding of her. The lack of any explanation for Julie's murders paints her as a villainous killer and exposes the corruption and lawlessness of a city where criminals have the upper hand. However, the ending, when Julie's motives are revealed, changes the way we look at her and unravels new facets of her characterization. The explanation of her tragic loss and for her revenge sheds light on her as a grief-stricken bride who faced the worst nightmare imaginable on her wedding day, rather than the monstrous killer established earlier in the story.

Guilt and innocence are blurred in this story and throughout Woolrich's fiction. With Julie, there are layers to her characterization, she is not a victim nor is she a monstrous murderer. Through Julie, Woolrich's narrative destabilizes the construction of female criminality by creating a space within which to reconsider gender and crime

and how the discourse on female criminality shifted during and after the war.[4] Julie fits the label of a black angel as she embraces the contrasting and appealing viewpoints and attributes of the female protagonist of Woolrich's noir fiction. Additionally, Woolrich stresses that no one in his fictional world is totally innocent; Julie's victims are flawed characters who have engaged in dangerous behavior. As it turns out, Nick had been shot dead and not run down by the car carrying the men Julie thought were behind his death. While the men of the Friday Night Fiends (a card club where members met to play cards and then drove drunkenly across the city) are not guilty of killing Nick, we learn through Julie's interactions with them that they have been involved in reckless behavior that indeed could have killed him. Detective Wanger, who has been investigating the series of murders, also reveals that Nick was involved in racketeering and illegal business. We also learn that he was murdered by his business associate, Corey, who was afraid that Nick was going to betray him, so he shot him on his wedding day, and the speeding car with the five men played no part other than to muffle the noise of the shot. It is only a coincidence that the car was there at the very moment the shot was fired, a coincidence that led Julie to exact her revenge upon innocent men. The somewhat hard-to-believe twist of fate and the convoluted plot in this book are key to the positioning of Julie as a black angel. The noir world in this novel is completed by creating and continuously reinforcing a sense of defeat and futility that haunts Woolrich's female protagonist as well as the reader towards the end of the book. In *The Bride Wore Black,* Woolrich pushes fatalism to "almost metaphysical proportions", and while fear is intertwined with "voodoo curses and mysterious powers of prophecy" the notion of "destiny" rules the characters and the narrative (Glover 2003, 146), and ultimately the female protagonist is faced with a defeat that seems to be both daunting and unavoidable.

4. The Savior Wife in The Black Angel

The Black Angel is about the relentless and desperate attempts of Alberta Murray to prove her husband's innocence and save him from a death penalty. Alberta is devoted to her husband, Kirk, who has been convicted of the murder of Mia Mercer, a woman he had an affair with, and he is consequently condemned to death. The story follows Alberta chasing clues and investigating suspects and doing all she can to find the real killer, and it ends with her succeeding in proving Kirk's innocence. *The Black Angel* is an episodic novel detailing Alberta's investigation of the four suspects on a list she compiled from an address book she found at Mia's house. Each section serves as a story on its own, with Alberta trying to verify the guilt of each suspect, and she comes up with a conclusion at the end of each section. She uncovers the motives and the whereabouts of the men by infiltrating herself into their lives and finding creative

[4] For more on the discourse of criminality and the historical trends of crime in the US, see Gurr (1981) and Zahn (1980). For more on crime by women in the US, see Simon (1976), and Ward, Jackson, and Ward (1969).

ways to conduct her detection. Like in *The Bride Wore Black*, the episodic nature of the book is significant as it demonstrates the detective work to find the murderer that Alberta does in every section. The story-within-a-story format also serves to disclose the disguises and identity shifts that Alberta takes on and how these shifts reveal the conflicting facets of her characterization in the novel.

Known for reworking and rewriting his stories, Woolrich continues this trend in *The Black Angel*. This novel partly originated from the short story "Murder in Wax", which was published in *Dime Detective* in 1935 and features a wife searching for the real killer when her husband has been sentenced to death for the murder of his mistress, but it turns out that the wife herself is the killer. Woolrich also used "Face Work", another story published in 1937, which later appeared as "Angel Face" in *Black Mask.* Additionally, *The Black Angel* incorporated elements from the 1942 novel *Phantom Lady* about an innocent man convicted of murdering his wife and whose alibi is a woman who has disappeared, and no one seems able to find her. All these stories focus on a female protagonist and share the main plotline of a woman and her efforts to prove the innocence of a man close to her who is facing the death sentence.

Alberta is the black angel of the title. She is devoted to a husband who has been unfaithful to her, and it is only towards the end of the novel that she betrays him and falls in love with the murderer she was determined to find. The novel concludes with Alberta romantically thinking and dreaming of Ladd Mason—the man who killed Mia— while lying next to her husband who is now a free man thanks to her. Woolrich paints a flawed female character; although she proves Kirk's innocence, she is no longer the loving wife of the beginning of the story. The transformation in Alberta points to the intricate creation of Woolrich's black angels and how he situates the roles of women at the forefront in noir fiction. On the subject of female roles, Renzi contends that there are two kinds of women in Woolrich's *The Black Angel*: "the seductive power of the *femme noir* is countered by the conspicuous beauty of the *femme blanche*" (2006, 218). The femme noir, as Renzi describes, is a "vamp" who lures the husband into infidelity (Mia), while the wife (Alberta), the femme blanche, stands by her husband and tries to save him. In accordance with this view, Woolrich highlights the power that women possess, since both the "evil siren" (Mia) and the "faithful female" (Alberta) have the "identical trait that enables them to get men to do their bidding" (2006, 218). However, I would like to argue that the characterization of Alberta deviates from the constructs of the extreme representations of women in noir where the dichotomy of the "good" versus the "bad" woman is recurrent.[5] Alberta shows ruthlessness and persistence in pursuing her goal, but she is not an evil seductress—a femme fatale—nor is she merely a good domestic wife. Through Alberta, Woolrich problematizes the ideals of loyalty, marriage, and even love in a story that challenges the dominant

[5] Janey Place argues that women in noir are regarded by their sexuality. Her reading of noir as a "hardly 'progressive'" genre relies on women's position as defined "*in relation* to men"; the women in noir are not able to resist their fate and ultimately are destroyed by men (1987, 35; italics in the original).

gender norms around domesticity and docility. Woolrich does this by illustrating the similarities between Alberta and Mia despite the contrasts between them. Mia uses her charm to seduce men like Kirk, while Alberta does the same with the men she pursues, although this is for the purpose of proving her husband's innocence. The dynamics of Alberta's relation with Mason is an example of her capabilities and agency as she manipulates him to get information about his role in the murder. First, she studies him "as carefully as though life and death depended on it" (1943, 90) and analyzing his features: "Not brutish [...] yet good and strong [...] Now came his face, the crux of the whole matter. It was a broad face [...] His eyes were very dark brown, very alert, very intelligent" (1943, 90-91). Then they flirt, and Mason calls her "Angel Face" (1943, 96) and confesses his secrets about his sister, Leila, to her and how Mia Mercer blackmailed them. The section with Alberta and her relationship with Mason shows her change and complicates her image as the perfect wife.

Alberta also serves as a detective in the story, which is in fact a departure from the tradition of the tough detective in the hardboiled crime fiction of the 1940s. Unlike the detectives of Woolrich's contemporaries such as Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Hammett's Sam Spade, Woolrich's female protagonist is a beautiful twenty-two-year-old woman who knows nothing about detection and is only motivated by her blind dedication to her husband. It all starts with Alberta finding out about her husband's affair and visiting Mia only to find her murdered in her luxurious apartment. So, when she finds two monogrammed matchbooks in Mia's house, she starts her detective investigation. She concludes that the one with an 'M' was Mia's, while the second one with a double 'M' that was lodged into the door was the killer's. Using Mia's address book that she takes from the apartment, Alberta starts looking for the murderer by tracing the four men in the book whose names start with M—Marty, Mason, Mordaunt, McKee. Alberta acts as an immature and somewhat reckless detective and Woolrich's plot has "its customary sting, a 'serial' that as she eliminates each likely suspect taunts both heroine and reader with its own defiance of formula" (Lee 2008, 330). In a story starring a female character, Woolrich creates a narrative that relies on the heroine questioning and subverting the representations of the hardboiled male detective and at the same time transgressing the boundaries of female roles.

The first name on Alberta's list is Mia's estranged husband, Marty. He is consumed by his love for Mia, who repeatedly rejected him, and he ends up as a Skid Row drunk who has been desperate in his pursuit of Mia. Alberta tries to lure Marty into confessing to the murder and she takes a big risk by staying in a hotel room with him while trying to bait him. But eventually it turns out that he is innocent. The section with Marty constitutes a big part of the book and it goes into extensive detail in what feels like a long and unconventional interview where Alberta plays the interviewer/detective. Alberta studies Marty and says to herself "[h]e could have done it. It could have been he very easily" (1943, 34). This section also establishes the despondent tone of the narrative, for it shows the consequences of hopeless love and the failure of the

institution of marriage. When Alberta sees the pain of Marty's love for Mia, considering that his "[p]ain, [had] festered [a] love that no longer knows what it's doing" (1943, 34). She concludes that it was such a hapless relationship that Mia had "gutted" Marty and comments on this fatalistic love: "Out of all the thousands and thousands of fine constructive women in this world, what evil star made him pick her out? What got him about her? Couldn't he see, couldn't he tell--?" (1943, 37).

Despite the fact that Alberta appears sympathetic towards Marty, she does not show any regret about using him or the other men in her plan for saving her husband. So, she moves to investigate another man, Dr. Mordaunt, who runs an illegal drug operation and gets her involved in distributing drugs. Again, Alberta takes risks at the meeting places, dealing with dangerous people. She justifies her "unsavory expedition" with the need to interview Mordaunt again to gain more information: "I had obtained nothing the first time, and yet I had obtained the promise of everything" (1943, 65). She thought she needed to find the "motive lurking" (1943, 65) behind Mia's murder, but in the end she is caught by the police and discovers that it turns out Mordaunt had an alibi for the day of the murder.

Alberta does not give up on her pursuit, but she changes in the process. Her transformation is from devoted wife into a ruthless woman who uses and manipulates men like Mason even when she has feelings for him. When Mason falsely assures her that he did not kill Mia, her "heart was like a cork bobbing around in champagne, it was so light. The silly thing, it was trying to fly up through my throat with a pop" (1943, 106). But like many of Woolrich's stories, lies, deception, and false information are the key to how his characters survive. The ending sees an altercation between Alberta and Mason when he confesses that he did kill Mia when she betrayed him, and with this confession Alberta and Mason start to fight as he tries to strangle her, but he falls to his death after hanging to the window frame when the police enter the room. His recorded confession, however, is what saves Kirk. Throughout the story, Alberta is set against gangsters, dangerous men, and the police but mostly she is in a race against time. The race against the clock is a theme throughout the book that dramatizes the tension and intensity the narrative relies on to emphasize the terrifying premise of the death penalty for an innocent man. This also increases the air of desperation that the events deliver. Alberta explains it thus: "I studied him [Mordaunt] as carefully as though life and death depended on it. They did. Kirk's life and death" (1943, 90). By making the conflict in the book and the intensity of the action revolve around a woman and her race against time, the text highlights the female character's strangely heroic, if sometimes desperate, journey. Woolrich employs the "critical deadline" to constantly remind the reader of the "impending catastrophe for the characters" (Renzi 2006, 213).

Alberta's campaign, however, comes at a cost. Through her investigation, she dives into the underworld and her moral compass is compromised at times. Alberta describes her feelings as she is in the middle of the mayhem she found herself involved in: "I was frightened, for I knew violence was at hand, was coming in here with me" (1943,

47). Woolrich unravels Alberta's transformation into a woman who ventures into the underworld of corrupt gangsters and businessmen and how she is tainted by her shady connections. There is a loss of innocence that tells of the change she has undergone. When Alberta is frightened because she is taking risks in her investigations, she admits:

> Yes, it was childish, I know. It was the last lingering childishness in me giving up the ghost [...] This was Alberta Murray, growing up as she stood before this house waiting to go in. Making her debut into an adult world such as she had never dreamed she would enter [...] a world of jungle violence and of darkness, of strange hidden deeds in strange hidden places (1943, 59).

This image of Alberta venturing into the "adult world" is also linked to the trope of the black angel. Both the child and angel represent innocence, and Woolrich uses both to depict his female protagonist. The references above to "childishness" and Alberta's admission that "it was childish" are reminders of her young age and inexperience, yet her growing up is an indication of her loss of innocence—she is now not merely an angel, but a black one. On the one hand, there is a righteousness to a character like Alberta, who has well-intentioned actions—the angel of the title has implications of pureness, perhaps a naiveté that parallels that of a child. On the other, though, these child references stand in contrast to the image of the woman who is now more capable and cunning and has connections to criminals and gangsters. The tension between Alberta's innocence and her presence as a woman who is able to manipulate and seduce men as well as conduct detective work constitutes the main components of her characterization as a black angel.

Eventually Woolrich suggests that there is no escape from that noir world, even for his female protagonist. She is tainted by the corruption around her, as she confesses: "I turned aside and stepped down into the abyss of the areaway with the feeling of treading a quicksand whose action was delayed, was withheld" (1943, 78). Once she had ingratiated herself into the underworld, there was no way back for her. Alberta's loyalty shifts, she calls after Mason in her dream: "Ladd, wait!" [...] Don't go! Come back a minute! [...] I kept calling after him, more loudly, more heartbrokenly with every breath" (1943, 134). The novel ends when she wakes up from the dream next to Kirk who calls her "Angel Face" (1943, 134) and begs her not to leave him, an echo from the first lines of the novel as Woolrich introduces his characters, but the sincerity is lost now, and it feels more like a trap where both Alberta and Kirk are ensnared in what feels like another impossible situation. The ending illustrates the irony around the relationship between Kirk and Alberta; at the start the loving wife started to suspect the faithfulness of her husband when he stopped calling her "Angel Face" (1943, 1), while the ending echoes him saying the same words but with a different weight. *The Black Angel* exemplifies one of these extraordinary situations where the female protagonist makes a herculean effort to save her husband but then at the end is left with a sense of futility and defeat.

5. Conclusion

Cornell Woolrich, "the Poe of the twentieth century and the poet of its shadows, the Hitchcock of the written word" (Nevins 1988, 10), created the perfect world for his black angels. He wrote about one of the "most consistently ontologically pathological worlds of any crime novelist, specialists in paranoid perception as they are" (Hilfer 1990, 35). However, Woolrich does not depict "naked sociopathy" (Cassuto 2009, 118). That is, Woolrich does not feature ruthless serial killers or psychopaths, nor does he detail the conventional crime investigations or detective work. Instead, he highlights a criminal underworld and the position of women in it by amplifying a "fatalistic inevitability" (Simpson 2010, 192). Characters are shown to be "consumed by vast webs of events far beyond their control" (Simpson 2010, 192), and with the focus on the psychological making of characters rather than action or resolution of the crime, there is no closure, only a domineering sense of futility. In this dark vision of Woolrich narratives, the black angels are female protagonists who represent the paradox of this world; they are loving caring women, but they are capable of committing acts of violence. They are driven by a blind devotion to the men they love, yet they often fail to fulfil the image of the good wife. These women have power as they, not the men, assume the role of the avenger/savior in the narratives, although their power is limited and challenged in the end. By situating the black angel as an indomitable force who saves and/or avenges the helpless men, Woolrich subverts gender roles in a genre known for the celebration of the male hero. Woolrich's black angels are both domestic and criminal, a contradiction in itself, and one that stands against the iconic image of the femme fatale. Indeed, at the crux of Woolrich's work is the reevaluation of female representation in noir fiction through bringing more nuance to the portrayal of sympathetic women despite the fact that they are criminal.

Moreover, there is a meeting point that Woolrich's black angels offer; a conjuncture between a universe of violence, loss of control, and paranoia, and a smaller, more intimate one of men and women who fall in love but are eventually defeated. The black angels represent both worlds and show the impossibility of love, peace, and livability. Both *The Bride Wore Black* and *The Black Angel* show that women in noir are part and parcel of a violent hopeless world where they effectively compete with dangerous men, but everyone seems to lose in the end. This also feeds the mistrust and the anxieties that Woolrich's stories are riddled with and adds to the futility that colors his fictional world.

Works Cited

Bassett, Mark T., ed. 1991. *Blues of a Lifetime: The Autobiography of Cornell Woolrich*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press.

Boozer, Jack. 1999. "The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition." *Journal of Film and Video* 51 (3-4): 20-35.

CASSUTO, Leonard. 2009. *Hard-boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories*. New York: Columbia University Press.

DICKOS, Andrew. 2002. *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

DIJKSTRA, Bram. 1986. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de Siècle Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DOANE, Mary Ann. 1991. *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.

FARRIMOND, Katherine. 2017. *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

GLOVER, David. 2003. "The Thriller." In PRIESTMAN 2003, 135-155.

GROSSMAN, Julie. 2009. *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-up.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

GURR, Ted Robert. 1981. "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence." *Crime and Justice* 3: 295-354.

HAUT, Woody. 2002. *Heartbreak and Vine: The Fate of Hardboiled Writers in Hollywood*. London: Serpents Tail.

HANSON, Helen. 2007. *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film*. London: I.B. Tauris.

HAYCRAFT, Howard. 2019. *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*. New York: Dover Publications.

HILFER, Anthony Channell. 1990. *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

HINEY, Tom, and Frank MACSHANE, eds. 2000. *The Raymond Chandler Papers: Selected Letters and Nonfiction*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

HORSLEY, Lee. 2001. *The Noir Thriller*. Basingstoke: Springer.

INCIARDI, James A. and Charles E. FAUPEL, eds. *History and Crime: Implications for Criminal Justice Policy.* Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

IRWIN, John T. 2006. *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them: Hard-boiled Fiction and Film Noir*. Baltimore: JHU Press.

KAPLAN, E. Ann, ed. 1978. *Women in Film Noir*. Rev. and expanded edition. London: British Film Institute.

KRUTNIK, Frank. 1991. *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity.* London: Routledge.

LEE, A. Robert. 2008. *Gothic to Multicultural: Idioms of Imagining in American Literary Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

MAYER, Geoff, and Brian MCDONNELL. 2007. *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.

MAXFIELD, James. 1996. *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991.* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Mulvihill, Donald and Melvin Marvin Tumin, eds. 1969. *Crimes of Violence: A Staff Report Submitted to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*. Washington DC, US Government Printing Office.

Nevins, Francis M., Jr. 1988. *Cornell Woolrich: First You Dream, Then You Die.* New York: The Mysterious Press.

O'Brien, Geoffrey. 1997. *Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir*. New York: Da Capo Press.

Piotrowska, Agnieszka. 2018. *The Nasty Woman and the Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema*. London: Routledge.

Place, Janey. 1978. "Women in Film Noir." In Kaplan 1978, 35-67.

Priestman, Martin, ed. 2003. *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Renzi, Thomas. 2006. *Cornell Woolrich from Pulp Noir to Film Noir*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Rzepka, Charles and Lee Horsley, eds. 2010. *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Stott, Rebecca. 1992. *The Fabrication of the Late Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death.* London: Macmillan.

Server, Lee. 2002. *Encyclopedia of Pulp Fiction Writers*. New York: Facts on File, Inc.

Simon, Rita J. 1976. "American women and crime." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 423(1): 31-46.

Simpson, Philip. 2010. "Noir and the Psycho Thriller." In Rzepka and Horsley 2010, 187-197.

Ward, David A., Maurice Jackson, and Renee E. Ward. 1969. "Crimes of Violence by Women." In Donald Mulvihill and Tumin. 1969, 843-909.

Weatherford, Doris. 1990 *American Women and World War II*. New York: Facts on File.

Woolrich, Cornell. 1943. *The Black Angel*. New York: Ace Books.

—. 1940/ 2015. *The Bride Wore Black: A Novel*. Renaissance Literary & Talent.

Zahn, M. 1980. "Homicide in the Twentieth Century United States." In James A. Inciardi and Charles E. Faupel 1980, 111-132.

Received 16 January 2023 Revised version accepted 26 June 2023

Maysaa Jaber is Professor at the Psychological Research Center in Iraq. She completed her PhD in English and American Studies at the University of Manchester, UK in 2011. She teaches different modules to undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Baghdad. She was a fellow in The University of Massachusetts Boston in 2013 and the recipient of a fellowship in the International Visitor Leadership Program in the US in 2017. She has published with Palgrave, Cambridge Scholars, *The Arab World English Journal*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Miscelánea*: *A Journal of English and American Studies* and *The Journal of Modern Literature*. Her first book *The Criminal Femmes Fatales in American Hardboiled Crime Fiction* came out in 2016 with Palgrave Macmillan, Springer.