

Amy Dunne altercates  
the dynamics of a  
classical detective  
film love story



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Out of the Past (1947), directed by Jacques Tourneur, contributes to the classical detective film genre that flourished throughout the 40s and 50s. Kathie Moffat encompasses the elements of the genre's femme fatale, who falls in love with a man originally set to return her to an antagonistic ex-boyfriend. To protect the fate of her own life and her new relationship, Kathy uses her erotic appeal to manipulate her male love interest, Jeff Bailey. She corresponds smoothly with Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* (2014), directed by David Fincher, an underestimated housewife who has opposed her gender role in her marriage and finesses her way back into her husband's arms with careful calculation. From a glance, Kathie and Amy respect the classic femme fatale role as they both act on their own self-centered agendas, getting tangled up in murders along the way to save their relationships. Out of the Past and *Gone Girl* both feature a female lead who uses their sex appeal as manipulation and eventually contributes to the male hero's demise. Although, the latter distinguishes itself from the classical detective genre by enhancing the femme fatale's power in their relationship, influenced by the change in social climate. In this paper, I will argue that the post-classical femme fatale enhances the manipulative tendencies of its prototype to possess control over their relationship and therefore alter the romantic dynamics of the detective film genre.

This post-classical revision involves the victory of the femme fatale, but still utilizes her prototype's traits for her benefit. Amy uses sex appeal to her advantage, similarly to classic femme fatale archetypes, but in a more intensified fashion. To fully convince her ex, Desi Collings, that she intends to stay with him she gets sexually physical and lies about her love for him. With

passionate facial expressions and “teasing,” Amy is able to squash any doubts that Desi may have about her. She is aware that she must perform a convincing act to solidify her plan and uses sex appeal as a strategy to accomplish her goals. She follows elements of Kathie’s character, who works with soft gazes and witty banter to win men over. After revealing she had signed an affidavit to Jeff and anticipating his hatred, she immediately explains how much she loves him and that they could plot together. During their conversation there are no cuts to Jeff’s face, just a continuous shot of Kathie’s upward gaze, emphasizing the beauty and passion he is encountering from her. She never brings her gaze away from Jeff’s eyes as she makes desperate facial expressions, ensuring her body language makes her appear sincere. Both femme fatales are calculating and can shift into actors when persuading men to do what they want.

However, post-classical Amy conflicts with the conventions seen in *Out of the Past* when she is seen using sex against Desi. Not much skin or adult content are featured in these classical detective films, in contrast to *Gone Girl*, but the director can convey Kathie’s sex appeal with blocking. Her costuming incorporates clothing that accentuates the silhouette, polished hairstyles and makeup. The Motion Picture Production Code applied to the time period of *Out of the Past*, therefore blocking could be utilized to uphold Kathie’s allure. Amy’s sexual image is therefore more vivid than that of a classical femme fatale, but her use of sex appeal as a tool for persuading complies with Kathie’s intentions with Jeff. Although this theme is shared, Amy and Nick’s relationship complicates the conventions of the detective genre prototype by putting her in a position of full control. Amy and Kathy’s relationships with

their male spouses contrast greatly, especially when conflict is presented. During the scene that precedes Amy and Nick's interview together, she reveals to him a positive pregnancy test. As they argue the viewer sees both characters on the same playing field, as they are framed together in low-key light. Neither one is highlighted or put in focus over the other. Even as Nick slams Amy into the wall, she keeps her composure and defends herself, claiming he could not be with anyone else because she had murdered to save their relationship.

A close-up of Amy draws attention to her stern expression and switches to Nick, where he stares at her with awe and confusion, then questions her sanity. This establishes a dynamic in their marriage, where Amy stands her ground and refuses to step down even when her husband challenges her both physically and verbally. Thus, the audience and Nick are aware of her strength, and even more so when the argument ends with Nick's slumping shoulders in the darkness, indicating this defeat. Whereas classical femme fatale, Kathie, is presented in weaker manner when Jeff confronts her about Eels' death. Kathie is shoved by Jeff onto a couch, which exposes her as her coat falls off of the shoulders. This movement creates a vulnerability for Kathie, and the audience can sense that she is being targeted by Jeff. His action of grabbing her by the chin and forcing her to look at him, creates a hyper-masculine power and is enhanced by her enlarged, fearful eyes. His facial expressions remain mild, alluding to the noir hero whose emotions are in control. The screenplay and high camera angle work together to frame Jeff as the dominant half and avoid the disruption of his masculinity. This satisfies the coordination of characteristics with the two sexes and while

Kathie's femme fatale persona represented rebellion at the time, their places in the relationship also reflect the deep rooted gender roles. One could argue that Kathie reclaims power when murdering Whit and pressuring Jeff to go to Mexico with her. However, when Jeff is the victim with Kathy, he is not perceived as weak, just stuck. His body language and emotions are calm, remains untouched by Kathie and is framed at a level angle.

The dynamic of Amy and Nick's relationship strays away from that of a crime film, where the femme fatale opposes the roles of a mother, but still endures the patriarchy associated with the era. Furthermore, the classic femme fatale defies the compliant roles of domestic housewives by using their sexuality and disregarding marriage. This is a reflection of the shifting gender roles taken place during World War II, where women entered the labor force and left their place in the home to support war efforts. This patriarchal stir bleeds into the female leads of classic detective films and is a major contributing factor to modern ones such as *Gone Girl*. The film builds on this convention by highlighting the neglect in the marriage and the expectations that ultimately push Amy to frame her husband. Gender roles in place for women have evolved away from the home since the 1940s, but Amy Dunne defies cultural norms by bringing attention to the "cool girl". This façade is what a woman might create to keep her male interest happy, involving an easygoing and pleasant attitude towards their significant other. This post-classical relationship expands on the conventions of the classical detective genre by including the opposition of gender norms. Not all female leads in classic detective films are the same but they are all able to rivet the audience and break expectations. *Out of the Past*, which also falls into the

film noir genre, is a visually stimulating film that uses low-key lighting, smoke, and especially beautiful women to contribute to the aesthetic.

Sexually charged women in film can come off as just another part of *mise en scène*; something for the male gaze to look at. However, the *femme fatale* opposes the expectations of a viewer and become a more interesting aspect of the plot when they commit a crime and stray from being a simple victim, present for a male audience. *Gone Girl* compliments this notion over fifty years later, where the thrill is heightened once a seemingly helpless victim is revealed to be devious and deceitful. The common theme supports the entertaining plot twists through both films, as it carries impact while still contributing to the aesthetics of the *mise en scène*.

In conclusion, some aspects of *Gone Girl* agree with the classical detective film genre, including the manipulative and clever character traits that both Amy and Kathie possess. The prototype represents a rebellion of female gender roles but executes her intentions in a fashion that still respects the patriarchy of the 40s; weaker than her male love interest and sexually charged enough to challenge the image of a housewife while still satisfying the male gaze. Amy uses the foundations of the classical genre to win back her husband and simultaneously gain back her power in the relationship. By utilizing her sex appeal, she is able to frame herself as a victim and win the hearts of an audience that could destroy her husband if he ever left her. Amy's control over Nick does not accurately represent the dynamics of Kathie's relationship, as Jeff secretly plotted against her consistently towards their end, but the change in the patriarchy allowed Amy to build off of the conventions of the *femme fatale* prototype to lead to her own victory.

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