

Movie review on winter's bone as midwestern neo-noir

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



The genre of film noir is an expansion of the classic Hollywood genre of film known as the crime film. The crime film persists as one of the most popular and enduring of all types of Hollywood films - ever since the sound era, it has remained a particularly potent and popular genre (Leitch 1). As the years have progressed, the noir film has been replaced with the neo-noir - a modern film genre which takes the trappings of noir and places them outside of its typical comfort zone. In the case of 2010's *Winter's Bone*, the typical film noir detective story is transplanted to the impoverished Ozarks, with a determined young detective, a varied cast of destitute and shifty characters, and the same kind of emphasis on sex and violence that is the hallmark of noir as a genre. The tale of Ree Dolly (Jennifer Lawrence, in an Academy Award-nominated performance), a seventeen-year-old girl looking for her missing father, navigates the seedy underbelly of the Ozarks in a way befitting the best examples of film noir.

Noir films typically depict scenes of criminal activity and violence, whether it be through the drug trade, murder, or other kinds of wrongdoing from which some characters have to step outside the law. Serial killers, mob bosses, crimes of passion and more are all the subject of these types of films, which present a genre unto themselves (though the various ways in which they are presented have changed over the years) (Leitch 2). While the styles, cinematography, acting and editing over the years of crime films has changed, the overall subject matter remains the same.

In the case of *Winter's Bone*, these same plot elements are alive and well. The world of the Ozarks is shown to be just as outside the law as the coastal-centric noir stories of *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity* and others;

families and other groups vie for dominance, engage in hazardous drug business, and find ways to get rid of people who disagree with them. Everyone in the world of the film has something to lose, leading to a lawless and isolated community in which people can go missing at the drop of a hat, normally in response to crossing the pervading criminal authorities (namely Thump Milton's crew, in this case). The central conflict, that of a missing murder (and the subsequent threat of eviction by the authorities), is well in line with noir sensibilities, as those stories typically involve hard-boiled detectives set out to solve a murder. Ree Dolly must navigate her way around the investigation of her father's disappearance, as a large number of dangerous people with shifty motivations attempt to influence, threaten or help her, in varying degrees.

Film noir began in the 1940s as a response to the German Expressionism that was rising in popularity in the previous decades. In Germany, many artists fled the country, given the rise of World War II, and settled in America, which is largely responsible for the influx of this type of art form into the United States (Naremore 4). Film noir, as a genre, is a particularly stylish type of crime film, which again shows criminal activity or its investigation through particular stylistic and cinematographic leanings. Film noir often evades direct definition, but there are unique attributes to the genre that must be considered. Stories typically involve strong, stoic male protagonists wrestling with issues related to crime on either side of the law; some leads of noir films are detectives, others are criminals. Often, crimes involve murder of some kind, are tied in closely with the pursuit of money whether legal or illegal, and on occasion the mob or the drug trade is part of the story (Leitch

5). Due to the meth-related death of Jessup, Ree's father, and his related involvement in the widespread meth trade that Thump Milton's group is responsible for, the film noir fascination with gangsters is transplanted to the poverty-line Ozarks, wherein these drug bosses are not kingpins, but merely trying to get by.

The femme fatale is one particular hallmark of film noir that is particularly defining to its structure. This character archetype is a cold, strong and calculating female, often a love interest for the protagonists while having her own agenda. Instead of being a damsel in distress, she has a cool control over her demeanor and is often manipulating either the protagonist or other characters for her own ends. These characters are presented as dangerous, alluring and stunningly beautiful - they were an indicator in American culture of changing attitudes about women as more assertive and independent, a product of post-suffrage America (Naremore 20). In essence, the stories and character types of film noir evoke a certain "noir sensibility" that came out of the end of World War II; the decline of realism and naturalism in cinema erupted as a result of the desire to understand violence, romantic isolation and modernism - noir and its abstractions paved the way for this to occur (Naremore 13, 14).

In *Winter's Bone*, there is no femme fatale per se, though it can be said that Lawrence's Ree Dolly is hard-boiled detective and femme fatale all in one.

Unlike noir films, in which these detectives are hired by the woman to solve the murder in question, Ree takes it upon herself to solve the murder (because her family depends on their father being found to keep the house).

This status colors her interactions with the rest of the community; she is both

resisted because of her intrusive nature, being the detective, while also dealing with the undercurrent of sexual desire and threat that comes from her status as a young woman. These subversions of typical noir components helps to transplant these conventions into a more destitute, modernized era.

Some of the most clearly defining traits of film noir lie in their dramatic and evocative cinematography. Much of the lighting is low-key, which means that there is not much diffusion to the light in the frame, creating stark shadows and clear-cut contrasts between light and dark. (This thematic and subtextual obsession with the difference between light and darkness in noir will come into play later in the paper.) One noted example is the use of Venetian blinds to create a nickelodeon-like effect of strips of light across an actor's face or body, demonstrating the troubled nature of their actions or attitudes (Naremore 189). Compositions of shots are usually unbalanced, where a character or object in focus will be heavily on one side of the frame or the other, creating an uneasiness within the audience that befits the depicted situation. The Dutch angle (in which the camera is tilted to create a disorienting effect in the shot) is another hallmark of film noir (Naremore 80).

The same kind of emphasis on visual mood to carry the atmosphere of the picture is found in *Winter's Bone*; instead of the stark black-and-white, however, highly saturated blues and grays are found. This has the effect of making the Ozarks look drained, desperate; the area itself looks hopeless and cold, which plays into the feel of the world that *Winter's Bone* looks to establish. The characters found here have next to nothing to hope for due to

their immense poverty; the cinematography points out this desperation and despair due to its accompanying coldness. With the color drained from everyone's faces, the audience sees these characters as malnourished, and almost inhuman; in this way, we can see them commit acts of murder and treachery that seem in line with their desperate situations.

In conclusion, *Winter's Bone* seems to have the perfect means of updating existing film noir conventions to both different times and different locations. The seedy underbelly of the coasts is replaced with murky, muddy, and nakedly desperate locales of the Midwest. The hard-boiled detective and femme fatale are combined into one plucky, self-motivated young girl who deals with sexual threats while being proactive in her own investigations. Furthermore, the stark and nearly monochromatic cinematography hearkens back to the black-and-white chiaroscuro oppressiveness of film noir, updating it to give the world of the Ozarks a uniquely cold and hopeless feel. Because of all of these updates and changes, *Winter's Bone* acts as a fascinating, intense Midwestern neo-noir which shows that these formulas can also apply to depictions of the Midwestern welfare-level poor.

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