

Jayden Grant

Professor Kozlowski

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Gender and Power in Early Twentieth Century Fiction and Film

Gender ideals in early twentieth century America created strict expectations for how men and women should behave, love, and exercise power. These archetypes shaped relationships by granting men social dominion and authority while forcing women into roles defined by purity, obedience, and controlled sexuality. In Raymond Chandler, *The big sleep* (1939), James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), and Ida Lupino's *Outrage* (1950), these standards become deeply embedded in the characters' lives. As Marlowe and Carmen, Nick and Cora, and Ann and Bruce navigate their relationship, each text exposes how gender roles act as a subtle yet powerful form of pressure. Women who attempt to claim personal autonomy face punishment or public ignominy while men who uphold the era ideal of emotional restraint are rewarded with authority and moral credibility. Together these works reveal how deeply these immutable gender codes shaped relationships and how easily they could destroy the people trapped inside them.

In *The Big Sleep*, Philip Marlowe stands as the embodiment of traditional masculine ideals controlled, principled, and emotionally guarded. His behavior is shaped by an internal moral code that refuses to acquiesce to manipulation or female deduction. Carmen Sternwood,

by contrast, represents the opposite: she disrupts expectations of female modesty, behaves unpredictably, and treats her sexuality as a tool rather than a secret. Chandler underscores her chaotic energy early on when Marlow observes “ She giggled. It was the giggle of a half wit” (Chandler 39). This description intentionally reduces Carmen to something childish and feeble, implying that a woman who refuses to perform proper femininity must be dismissed rather than understood. Marlow's sense of independence reinforces this power structure. After Carmen tries to seduce him he responds with detached self awareness “ I don't mind if you don't like my manners. I don't like them myself (Chandler 40) His refusal is not only a rejection of Carmen, it is reinforcement of his masculine identity. To accept Carmen's advances would be to participate in her rule breaking, and the novel positions Marlowe as too morally centered to fall. This academic research clarifies the stake. Film Noir scholar Nancy Place argues that femme fatale inspires cultural anxiety because she represents “ a woman who has power over her own sexuality” (Place 47). Carmen fits this description perfectly. Her flirtation, her unpredictability, and her refusal to be silent all mark as dangerous not simply to individual men but to the social order itself. Chandler's narrative seems determined to vindicate traditional gender roles by exposing Carmen's instability as a threat to be controlled comes attempts to assert agency ultimately prove futile. Every time she reaches for power through seductions, manipulation, or rebellion the narrative pushes her back into positions where men must manage or contain her. Marlowe survives with dignity because he embodies the masculine ideal; Carmen spirals into danger because she violates the feminine one.

In The Postman Always Rings Twice, gender expectations trap Cora in a suffocating marriage to Nick, a husband who sees her less as a partner and more as property. Frank describes

this dynamic bluntly. “ He treated her like she was something he owned (Cain 45). Nick love functions as coercion, confining her to domestic labor as emotional silence. Cora's social role is clear: she is meant to cook, clean, smile, and acquiesce nothing more but Cora refuses to live a life of domestic subjection. She tells Frank, “ I want to make something of myself” (Cain 65), a simple sentence containing a desire for autonomy. To want a life beyond marriage is, for her time, a rebellious act. Even Frank senses the danger in her ambition, admitting. “ That woman was every trouble I ever had rolled into one” (Cain 89) . His fear reveals how deeply the era distrusted women with power or determination. Jancey places analysis of femme fatales fits cora just as well as carmen. Place writes that the sexually and socially assertive woman represents “ a threat to the established social order” (Place 47). Cora threatens not through murder, but by rejecting the idea that she was born to be a wife and nothing else; her desire for independence is enough to destabilize the world around her.

I couldn't go on living the way I was. Everyday was the same dust on the shelves, the same faces, the same worlds, the same boredom. “ I'm not going to die in this kitchen,” I said to myself and I meant it. I had to find some way out, some way to be more than just a wife or a maid or a shadow behind a man. I wanted a life that belonged to me, not a life that had been written for me by a diner and a husband who thought he owned me but no matter what I tried to imagine, it all felt impossible. Every door I opened seemed to lead to another wall. I knew that the world outside was not waiting to reward me, it was waiting to punish me for thinking I could be more than I was supposed to be. (Cain 70)

This moment captures Cora's desperate refusal to surrender her life to domestic oppression . Yet the novel ultimately works to defend gender biased expectations by destroying both her and

Frank. Cora rebellion is met with catastrophe, as if the universe itself rises up to defend the gender order Nick relied on. Her fight for selfhood becomes a futile struggle against a system designed to contain women like her.

In Ida Lupino's *Outrage*, Ann begins as the ideal postwar woman, modest, gentle, and engaged to a respectable man. But after she is assaulted, her community imposes crushing expectations on her instead of supporting her, society surrounds her with whisper and public ignominy treating her as though she violated a moral code rather than surviving violence. Ann reveals the emotional impact of these expectations when she tells Bruce. “I can't go back. I'm not the same anymore” (Lupino 1hr). Her pain is dismissed not out of cruelty but because Bruce is trapped in the masculine ideal of emotional steadiness. He begs her, “we can forget this Ann. We can go on” (Lupino 1hr), not understanding that forgetting would require Ann to subjugate her trauma and perform the quiet femininity society demands of her. The film makes it clear that gender ideals are not just oppressive, they are destructive. Ann is not ruined by the assault itself, but by the expectations that she must remain calm, pure, and untroubled for the comfort of others. The reverend insistence that “You did nothing wrong” (Lupino 1hr 15 seconds) tries to vindicate her humanity, but even he cannot erase the social forces surrounding her. Lupino exposes the harsh truth: when a woman's worth is tied to purity, any violation no matter how involuntary destroys her social identity. Ann's Trauma reveals that these standards are not merely old vanished; they are emotionally destructive, physiologically suffocating, and morally unjust.

Across these three works, gender expectations function as a powerful, often invisible structure that shapes every relationship. Carmen and Cora are punished for their attempts at

autonomy, their desires seen as threats to the social order. Ann's suffering is deepened by the demand that she hide her trauma to maintain an image of feminine purity. Meanwhile, men like Marlow and Bruce succeed because they embody the expected masculine qualities of composure and authority. These stories show that the ideal man and women are not natural truths but socially constructed roles maintained through shame, control and emotional coercion. By revealing the emotional wreckage caused by these ideals, Chandler, Cain, and Lupino force modern readers to question how much of this gender system still lingers in relationships and whose voices continue to be silenced by it. In my pulp fiction class lecture we discussed how gender roles back then affect how we think and act in modern society but seeing how much women have changed and become more outspoken shows how we evolved drastically from the 1940s.

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