An Analysis of the Influence of Post-war Culture on The Maltese Falcon Through the Femme Fatale Character of Bridget

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Abstract: Culture is a product of social groups, and art as a medium presents people's ideas. It has become particularly important and necessary to study the integration of culture into art, that is, how art presents a certain culture to understand society. This paper selects the post-World War II society and the resulting post-war culture. The paper discusses existentialism and feminism in post-war culture by examining the portrayal of the female character Bridget in the film noir The Maltese Falcon based on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic personality theory. Summarizing the film and examining the existential femme fatale character Bridgette, the paper explores how the culture of postwar society influenced and reflected each other. The paper concludes that Bridgette, as a typical classic female character in a film noir, has an existential femme fatale personality that reflects the postwar culture that existed in society at that time. At the same time, cinema as an artistic medium interacts with and integrates with society.

Keywords: post-war culture, The Maltese Falcon, film noir, existentialism, femme fatale

1. Introduction

The World War II greatly impacted the whole world. The depressed and sluggish society gave rise to a post-war culture. The vivid blending of lost innocence, doomed romanticism, hard-edged cynicism, desperate desire, and shadowy sexuality that was unleashed in those immediate post-war years had a significant impact on both the original generation of industry peers and the subsequent generation of writers and filmmakers [1]. The film noir genre emerged in the film industry as a result of World War II and postwar culture. From the 1940s to the late 1950s, Hollywood detective films, also known as the "film noir genre," tried to convey new ideas and revive society with their typical style and character types. The Maltese Falcon, a 1941 Hollywood detective film, featured classic film noir elements, iconic character images, and standard filming and editing. The film's style and character type attempted to convey new ideas and revive society. Previous psychoanalytic studies have focused on detective fiction. Research has shown how the story itself contains unconscious fantasies. People have been curious about the enduring appeal of detective fiction, its ups and downs, and, particularly, the emergence of the private detective as an archetypal American hero. They have looked at the stereotype of this hero, particularly as it is portrayed in the movie, which is our most well-liked cultural art form. A mythic figure, the private detective offers us a chance to investigate how cultures

react to a common unconscious ideal and to deepen our knowledge of the rising narcissistic preoccupations in Western culture [2]. Therefore, this thesis chooses to study the film The Maltese Falcon and analyze how the post-war culture influenced the film and how the film carried the post-war culture. Bridgette is a female character in The Maltese Falcon, and she is representative. She shows the thoughts and reflections of the post-war female group and represents the post-war society's attitude toward and view on women. Existentialism is women's thoughts about themselves and their quest for meaning because of their post-war confusion. Femme fatale is a term reflected in literary characters as society develops discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes toward women. By studying this film noir and the characterization of Bridgette, a female character, the thesis examines the influence of post-war culture on the film The Maltese Falcon.

2.   Time Background and Film Noir

World War II brought significant changes and blows to society. For the three parts of the human personality: the id, ego, and superego, the war gave an essential place to the id of each individual. Survival is the most important and most desired thing. At the same time, artistic and cultural development in the superego stagnated. Therefore, in the Post-war period, when society began redeveloping art and culture, everything began to be reinvented and reshuffled. Film noir is one of the post-war film art forms that have emerged in depressed society, preserving the elements and culture of the war period and inspiring people to look forward to a better society. French film critics began referring to some American gangster movies starting in the 1940s as "film noir." The visual imagery and themes in these films are communicated in a dismal and figuratively black atmosphere with very low-key lighting. These movies typically emphasize a fatalistic, depressing perspective on life, where fear and paranoia shape the characters' behavior. Film noir has a social element since it explores the characters' dark aspects of the mind, particularly as they react to social norms [3].

3.   The Maltese Falcon

Since World War II ended, the United States has been in better economic condition than any other country. American cinema began to develop and entered the film noir period. One of the most famous noir films, The Maltese Falcon, incorporates post-war culture and iconic film noir characters. The Maltese Falcon is about a detective agency that opened in San Francisco. The main characters Sam Spade and Miles Archer run it. One day a lady called Brigid comes to her house and commissions them to find her missing sister, who has been abducted by a man called Thursby. They immediately launch an investigation. Unfortunately, Archer is murdered while investigating the case, and Thursby is killed after that. The police identify Sam as the prime suspect in the case because of his affair with Archer's wife. Therefore, Sam must speed up his investigation. A man named Cairo arrives and asks Sam to look for a statue — a priceless treasure known as the Maltese Falcon. Moreover, Sam learns that these people used to sell antiques. After Sam knows about the statue's historical background, he meets Gutman, who asks Sam to find the mysterious statue. Three people get together as the mystery of the murder and the statue is slowly solved. Then, the statue of the Maltese Falcon is delivered by the dying captain. Furthermore, it turns out to be a fake. They were disappointed. Finally, Bridge, the murderer in the case, ended up in jail.

4.   Analysis of the Influence of Post-war Culture on The Maltese Falcon

In the film The Maltese Falcon, Bridgette was trying to get the Maltese Falcon which makes her a femme fatale and existentialist hero. She made up a story about Thursby and her sister, using her beauty to disguise her true motives, and seduced Sam Spade to avoid the charge.

"For existentialists, however, an individual must define his or her own reality. Because the universe does not provide meaning, only existence, the existential task of a human being is to create his or her own meaning, and the central requirement for living a meaningful life is a continual process of self-definition. A person is not defined by what he or she claims to be, but rather by his or her actions." [4]

Create own meaning and continuing the process of self-defined is the existential task of a human being. To get the Maltese Falcon, Bridgette finds the detective and makes up a story about Thursby and her sister, while her motive is to get rid of Thursby who is against herself. In the film, Bridgette lets Spade think that she is Miss Wonderly and her sister runs away from New York with a fellow named Floyd Thursby. She has seen Thursby and has a date with him tonight. Maybe he'll bring his sister with him. The chances are he won't. Miss Wonderly wants us to find the sister and get her away from him and back home. Bridgette made up her name "Wonderly" and described Thursby as a horrible, murderous man. With the purpose to get rid of Thursby and getting Archer and Thursby into a shootout, whoever dies makes Bridgette can get rid of Thursby. However, Archer and Thursby didn't kill each other. Therefore, she uses her beauty to bring Archer into the darkness and kill him, in order to help her get the Maltese Falcon. To achieve her own goals and purchase her own meaning, Bridgette made up stories and killed an innocent person. As an existentialist character, Bridgette proved her existence by not only lying about stories and killing a man but also by using her beauty to lead everyone into deadly traps and mazes.

Bridgette uses her beauty with sexual attraction to lie about her identity and purpose which can gain more information and trust. The only trait the Femme Fatale with her story's antagonist is possibly an appearance of passivity. This is one of the primary ways the Femme Fatale initially deceives the male lead. She seems to be in need of help and merely in the middle of uncontrollable occurrences. But towards the end of the movie, the male hero realizes that she was never the withering flower he had been led to believe she was. He is rendered powerless [5]. In the film, there is a conversation that follows Sam Spade's unannounced visit to Bridget's house. Bridgette is beautifully dressed, and her first words are to ask for new information about the situation and her own safety. She breathes a sigh of relief when she learns from Sam Spade that the police do not have to know anything about her. The whole person goes from anxious and anxious to relax and relieved, and she starts to show Sam Spade with flirtatious gestures after she gets the favorable news. Bridgette plays on her own rules and moral codes. Prioritizing how things are going and how exposed she is, Bridget even wore a blue satin dress called Artoise during the cold months. Not only does Bridgette get information by dressing up, but she also even seduces Sam Spade with love. As the case progresses, Bridgette wants to make Sam violate his detective ethics for her own safety.

At the end of the film, Bridgette constantly seduces Sam Spade, trying to use his crush and love for her to avoid committing her own crimes. The film shows Bridgette's constant attempts to seduce Sam Spade with beauty and the character's facial expressions. When Sam Spade steps in to take the dominant position and tell the truth, Bridgette holds him and submissively explains, hoping that Sam Spade will be deceived and cover her. She cries out to Sam Spade and tries to brainwash him. In Bridget's mind, beauty is a means to help her achieve her goals. She kills Archer but does not want to go to jail, so Bridget tries to get others to forget their moral codes and follow her ideas.

5. Discussion

Existentialism is the characterization that the war brings to the film and embodies post-war culture. Bridgette, in conclusion, is an existentialist hero whose goal is to obtain the Maltese Falcon. She made up stories, disguised herself through beauty, and induced people to follow her ideas. The actions that Bridgette has taken reflect her self-defined process and create her own meaning in the world of darkness, crime, and corruption. Furthermore, when female characters began to achieve self-worth

and meaning by any means necessary, society defined them not only as existential characters but also as femme fatales. The war's chaos shattered many of society's original boundaries and shackles. Millions of men and women entered military service. The participation of women in the war broke the perception of the original gender and created a stark contrast. As a result, the character of the femme fatale in film noir became popular. Women were no longer safely positioned in the subordinate roles of their subsidiary predecessors since they were now integral to the framework of the film noir. Additionally, noir was successful in showing the vulnerability of the men in its world through the strength and sexuality of the femme fatale [6]. This is the archetype of a mysterious and beautiful woman whose charms ensnare her lovers, often leading them into deadly traps. That reflects American anxiety about women's increasingly precarious but powerful societal position.

The repetition of the same structures, which demonstrates the tenacious hold of patriarchy, is one of the dismal aspects of the study of women in artworks [7]. In noir films, both men and women look for fulfillment outside of marriage. This enjoyment isn't just sexual; it's also an effort to feel secure and find their place in this perplexing and dangerous environment, a break from the monotonous monotony of an alienated life. In addition, the leading lady in a noir film is a fierce, dark femme fatale. These ladies are given ambitions in addition to sexual abilities. They yearn for or are searching for freedom, economic independence, and sometimes both. Males are at risk from these women who are masters and possessors of their own sexuality. Because of her independence and aspirations, she poses a threat to patriarchal society. She causes the guys to feel cut off from their surroundings as a result, and she needs to be punished to get the patriarchal balance back in place [8].

Brigid O'Shaughnessy, as a femme fatale archetype, is mysterious and beautiful, ensnares and lies, and uses her beauty with sexual attraction to lure Sam Spade into her deadly traps. She always wears nice clothes, and the film close-up shows her facial expressions. Her sex appeal was determined not by her appearance but rather by her strength, her independent spirit, her self-assurance, and her adult sexuality. Women in noir films are strong female mysteries that explore what it means to be a woman [9]. Furthermore, the filming technique with the male gaze makes the protagonist and the audience think about Bridgette. Bridgette seeks Sam Spade's attention and obtains additional useful information. However, when she saw that Sam Spade was not going to look up at her, she stopped smiling and felt uneasy. Brigid O'Shaughnessy knew that only her beauty could help her. The only reason she felt uneasy was that Sam Spade would not look up at her. Although Sam Spade's eyes are always "sultry" for her, without looking at Brigid O'Shaughnessy, she can't charm him and make him lose his mind. Apparently, Sam Spade's sanity didn't allow the femme fatale archetype Brigid O'Shaughnessy to get her way. Only by using beauty to change and control men, femme fatale can feel easiness. The femme fatale is not a typical female character, so a noir film featuring her will be an unusual mystery because the mystery to be solved is connected to a prior crime or crimes as well as an enigmatic demeanor. She starts with a different, more self-reflexive understanding of who she is. The femme fatale, in particular, understands that culture, not nature, determines identity and that acts, rather than essences, determine identity. She is aware that the biological gender system separates sociality into masculine or feminine realms and establishes the types of behavior that belong in each.

Based on such knowledge, femmes fatales display a subjective fluidity that enables them to act in the most feminine ways while holding what society would consider the most masculine of desires. On the other hand, Wonderly begins to "act" femininity as soon as she adjusts her clothing and looks in the mirror. In Laura Mulvey's now-famous words, her appearance is planned to both suggest that she is someone who should be looked at and to influence Spade to be the one to give the gaze. By playing on her attractiveness, she portrays herself as more hesitant, dependent, and unsure than she actually is [9]. At the end of the film, Brigid says, "Maybe you love me, and maybe I love you" She wants Sam Spade to forgive her, which is what makes Brigid O'Shaughnessy such a fascinating femme fatale [10]. This ambitious woman represents a danger to men. Brigid O'Shaughnessy is a

dangerous woman who threatens the male's own sexuality and patriarchy. Therefore, the only way to control her is to destroy her, which happens in most dark humor. By the film's end, despite her destruction, we remember her vital, deadly power.

6. Conclusion

The post-war culture generated by World War II was fully integrated into the film, and the noir film genre and film elements emerged. Maltese Falcon incorporates post-war culture through the plot, dialogue, characterization, filming techniques, and other film technology. It creates an essential femme fatale character Bridgette, who uses her beauty and intelligence to achieve her own goals and realize the meaning of her existence by any means necessary. This femme fatale character reflects post-war society's anxiety about the advancement of women and the fear of beautiful women using their beauty. Furthermore, post-war women have a new perception and pursuit of themselves. They realize they can use their means to achieve their goals instead of being dependent on men. The depressed society leaves everyone confused, and the characters' exploration and pursuit of existentialism are the film's guidance and encouragement to society after integrating into the post-war culture. Through the characters' expressions and behaviors, the film inspires people to find the meaning of their existence and realize their values, trying to make society develop positively again. For limitations and future goals, the study is limited to the post-war culture reflected in the film The Maltese Falcon. Only one character, Bridgette, is explored in the film. In the future, the author can seek out additional films from the film noir era to investigate how postwar culture was incorporated into the film. Furthermore, the researcher could conduct a film analysis and study on The Maltese Falcon. The plot, shooting style and portrayal of each character are typical of the social characteristics and culture at that time.

Acknowledgment

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