

Hardboiled Feminism: Vera Caspary's *Laura* as a Revision of the Detective Genre

BRIAN MATZKE

IN VERA CASPARY'S *LAURA* (1942), THE TITLE CHARACTER LAURA Hunt has the following exchange with detective Mark McPherson:

She said, "You don't seem at all like a detective." "Have you ever known any detectives?" "In detective stories there are two kinds, the hardboiled ones who are always drunk and talk out of the corners of their mouths and do it all by instinct; and the cold, dry, scientific ones who split hairs under a microscope."

(77)

From her reply to Mark's question, it is clear that Laura does not know any detectives, but rather has only accessed them through fiction. The skepticism that Laura expresses in this passage is thus not so much a critique of real-world detectives as it is of genre conventions. The exchange constitutes one of the novel's many moments of coy self-reflexivity, while also representing an important moment of characterization. The dialogue flags Mark as a character who resists categorization within the hardboiled/scientific binary construction of the detective genre that Laura articulates. In her essay on Mark McPherson in Otto Penzler's *The Great Detectives* (1978), Caspary explains that this is the scene in which Mark's character "came alive" for her (144). This is noteworthy because it is Laura who characterizes Mark; he gives his back-story prior to the exchange, but she provides the backstory with a literary context, and only through her words does he become a multidimensional character. By locating the genesis of Mark's characterization in Laura's words,

Caspary makes a claim for the ability of her heroine (and by extension, Caspary herself) to employ and revise the conventions of detective fiction.

Laura holds a privileged place in the history of detective fiction, primarily through its 1944 screen adaptation, directed by Otto Preminger. Preminger's film is one of four cited by Nino Frank in his 1946 article, "Un nouveau genre 'policier': L'aventure criminelle," in which the French critic coined the term "film noir." Despite the film's popularity, Caspary's novel has received little critical attention, besides passing mentions in studies by Alan Wald and Paula Rabinowitz. A. B. Emrys has attempted to rectify this neglect with several articles on Caspary and a book, *Wilkie Collins, Vera Caspary, and the Evolution of the Casebook Novel*, published in 2011. Emrys's book focuses on Caspary's engagement with Wilkie Collins, a Victorian writer whose detectives in novels such as *The Moonstone* more closely resemble the scientific type popularized by Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. Of interest here is Caspary's relationship with her contemporaries in the field of detective fiction who had developed the hardboiled detective in response to the scientific type. The other three films noirs that Nino Frank cites—Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet* (1944)—all emanate from the hardboiled tradition that Caspary explicitly spurns. Because of one genre's heavy influence on the other, many people use "hardboiled" and "noir" interchangeably. For example, The Library of America's collection of crime novels from the period is subtitled "American Noir of the 1930s and 40s" despite the fact that most of the novels in the collection were published before "noir" was available as a generic category. But this collapsing of genre categories has problematic implications for how we understand the gendering of noir; as Andrew Spicer notes, "Accounts of film noir have overprivileged its debt to the hard-boiled tradition, and therefore its male-centeredness" (10). By examining how *Laura* the novel expresses Caspary's ambivalent affiliation with hardboiled fiction and with the genre's hypermasculine mainstays of the 1930s, such as Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, we can see how her feminist critique creates a space for noir, not simply as a continuation of hardboiled fiction, but as a distinct genre with its own complex gender politics.

Hardboiled Masculinity

Caspary's novel begins with Detective McPherson investigating the supposed murder of Laura Hunt, an advertising director who is believed to have been shot in the face with a shotgun in her apartment. The story is initially narrated by Waldo Lydecker, a writer and one of Laura's closest friends. Mark questions Waldo, as well as Laura's fiancé, Shelby Carpenter, and her aunt, Susan Treadwell. The narration shifts to Mark's perspective when he discovers that Laura is alive and that it was in fact Diane Redfern, a model for Laura's company staying in Laura's apartment, who had been shot. It is revealed that Diane was in love with Shelby and that Shelby had also been in the apartment on the night of the murder. With suspicion falling increasingly on Laura, who has a motive and lacks an alibi for the time of the killing, the narration shifts again to her perspective. Laura's narration fills in details about her career and relationships with Shelby and Waldo, and offers insights into her growing attraction to Mark. The narration transitions back to Mark's perspective as he puts the pieces together to reveal that Waldo, motivated by jealousy and possessiveness, had killed Diane, thinking that she was Laura. Mark discovers this just in time to save Laura from a second attempt on her life, but Waldo accidentally shoots himself and dies in the struggle.

In her autobiography, *The Secrets of Grown-Ups* (1979), Caspary credits "the Wilkie Collins method" of multiple narrators as key to making Laura and the other characters into "more than detective-story stereotypes" (195). A. B. Emrys has examined Caspary's debt to Collins and sensation fiction, writing:

What Caspary found in Collins—as had Hume, Stoker, and Sayers—was his highly adaptable structure of witnessing documents by biased characters, some of whom deliberately lie or give partial information and whose testimonies are arranged for solution by the editorial detective to solve the case. This narrative strategy allows Caspary's richly nuanced villain to be a principle narrator, while the multiple viewpoints develop suspense by filtering clues through character mediation, just as they did for Collins.

(*Wilkie Collins* 113)

In *The Secrets of Grown-Ups*, Caspary writes that this device resolved the problem of depicting Laura as a suspect while still making her thoughts clear (194). To exclude her from the list of suspects would implicitly deny agency to her character, making her a damsel in need of saving, while leaving her thoughts unclear would risk characterizing her as a more traditional *femme fatale*. The “detective-story stereotypes” that Caspary is eschewing are thus unavoidably gendered, and multiple narrators prevent the story from taking on what Waldo Lydecker calls “a voice of masculine omnipotence” (*Laura* 62).

The masculine gendering of hardboiled detective fiction has been so often noted as to have become a critical commonplace. As Jopi Nyman writes, hardboiled fiction may be defined as fiction that “promotes a masculinized view of the autonomous individual and locates him in a tough and competitive world” (9–10). The pulp magazine *Black Mask* was responsible for nurturing this hypermasculine worldview as it promoted the first generation of hardboiled crime writers, known as “The *Black Mask* Boys” in the 1920s and 30s. The December 1927 cover even declared *Black Mask* “The He-Man’s Magazine.” A working-class mistrust of intellectuals was central to this notion of being a he-man. Dashiell Hammett, the most successful of the *Black Mask* boys, explicitly criticized methods of scientific detection, writing in a letter to the magazine, “Many of them are excellent when kept to their places, but when pushed forward as infallible methods, they become forms of quackery, and nothing else” (Hammett, “Finger-Prints” 128). Hammett’s Continental Op stories depict this quackery in action through the forensic scientist Phels, a recurring character whose ineptitude impedes the Op’s investigation in several stories. Joseph Shaw, *Black Mask*’s editor at the time, frequently mocked scientific detective characters, declaring in a 1929 editorial, “The day of the Sherlock Holmes type of story is practically ended.” His criticism stems from an emerging sense that cultivating a scientific mind ran contrary to the masculine ideal, a notion embodied by S. S. Van Dine’s scientific detective, Philo Vance, an aristocratic intellectual whom Van Dine implies is a homosexual (Van Dine 21). Vance is a frequent object of scorn for the *Black Mask* boys; in *The Simple Art of Murder*, Raymond Chandler called him “probably the most asinine character in detective fiction” (985). Hypermasculine hardboiled crime fiction thus emerged in direct opposition to the effete intellectualism of scientific detectives.

While scientific detectives endeavor to control the world through rational inquiry, hardboiled detectives see the world as irrational and uncontrollable, striving only to survive the chaos through brute force and emotional disengagement. As Christopher Breu notes:

The suppression of affect central to this conception of masculinity was structured by the dynamic of projection, in which the forms of affective and libidinal investment foreclosed from representation within the subjectivity of the hard-boiled male returned and were punished in various gendered, sexual, and racial others.

(1)

The agency of the hardboiled male protagonist is thus maintained through misrepresentation of and violence against women, racial minorities, and those regarded as sexually aberrant. Sometimes the violence takes the form of actual beatings, as in Carroll John Daly's "Three Gun Terry," often credited as the first hardboiled detective story, where the protagonist describes interrogating the Italian gangster "Dago Joe": "I beat and choked the truth out of him" (59). However, hardboiled protagonists' interactions with women are often infused with violent impulses that either are suppressed, as in *Red Harvest*, when the Continental Op interrogates Helen Albury and admits, "I thought I would like to spank her" (185), or are redirected, as in *The Big Sleep*, when Marlow, upon seeing the lingering imprint of Carmen Sternwood's body on his bed, "tore the bed to pieces savagely" (157). The perception of women and especially female sexuality as threats that can expose the male protagonist's vulnerabilities justifies aggression as means of self-preservation.

James M. Cain expresses this logic in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), a novel of which Caspary would likely have been aware. Cain's novel is narrated by a drifter named Frank Chambers who begins an affair with Cora Papadakis, the proprietress of the diner where Frank works. Cora is an archetypal *femme fatale*, "the condensation of women and danger, sex and death" (Oliver and Trigo xxii). She is "a modern Circe [who] traps her victim through performing her seductive torch song" (Spicer 91). Cora convinces Frank to conspire with her to kill her husband, an act that ultimately results in Frank's downfall. An excerpt from one of the novel's several sex scenes between Frank and Cora offers a representative sample of the narration:

I began slipping off her blouse. “Rip me, Frank. Rip me like you did that night.”

I ripped all her clothes off. She twisted and turned, slow, so they would slip out from under her. Then she closed her eyes and lay back on the pillow. Her hair was falling over her shoulders in snaky curls. Her eye was all black, and her breasts weren’t drawn up and pointing up at me, but soft, and spread out in two big pink splotches. She looked like the great-grandmother of every whore in the world. The devil got his money’s worth that night.

(Cain 71)

Passages such as these throughout Cain’s novel seem to confirm Breu’s characterization of hardboiled masculinity. Frank describes Cora’s actions and her sexualized body—completely neglecting any description of his own presumed arousal—in a manner both distant in terms of emotional engagement and disdainful in moral assessment. The emotional distance created by the hardboiled narration combined with the physical immediacy of the encounter lead to an objectification of Cora’s body in which Cain has Cora willingly participate: ordering Frank to rip off her clothes, she twice tells him, “rip *me*” (emphasis mine). Cora’s wantonness provides the justification for both the hardboiled affect and the violence of the sexual encounter itself, as the violence serves to simultaneously sate Cora’s desire and punish her for it within the sadomasochistic logic of the novel.

In neither *The Great Detectives* nor her autobiography does Caspary mention specific contemporary detective stories or writers, and it is thus difficult to establish to whom Caspary might be referring when she has Laura critique hardboiled detectives. Cain, however, is certainly representative of the tone and style of the genre, and while *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is not itself a detective story, there is some reason to believe that the novel is at least among those to which Caspary is responding: *Laura* was originally serialized in *Colliers* magazine under the title *Ring Twice for Laura*, a possible allusion to Cain’s work (McNamara 21). Emrys never discusses Cain or any other specific hardboiled detective writers by whom Caspary might be influenced, except to note that Caspary shared Cain’s opinion that whether the criminal is arrested is “the least interesting angle” for a crime story (*Wilkie Collins* 133). Caspary seems to capture the Frank Chambers character type when expressing her distaste for hardboiled protagonists: “Quick, easy satisfaction would be that fellow’s dish,

pushovers with large exposed breasts his ideals" ("Mark McPherson" 144). Caspary eschews the hardboiled detective as a protagonist for her novel because he lacks the potential for deep emotional connections with women. After similarly dismissing the "stolid public servant" and the "impassive genius of deduction" as equally insufficient for her needs, she laments, "This is where the prejudice came in. . . . I loathed men who spied for money" ("Mark McPherson" 144). In a rather rapid progression of observations, Caspary implies an association between the emotional distance affected by detectives (both hardboiled and scientific) and the invasive nature of their work. As Laura puts it to Mark, "I don't like people who make their livings out of spying and poking into people's lives. Detectives aren't heroes to me, they're detestable" (Caspary, *Laura* 77). This implies that the conventional detective's masculine autonomy is maintained by violating the autonomy of those whom they are "poking into," be that Dago Joe, Helen Albury, or Carmen Sternwood. Indeed, the "dynamic of projection" that Breu identifies connotes not only physical violence but also a form of psychic violence inflicted through surveillance and scrutiny.

Ambivalent Affiliation

While she was not spied on, Caspary's attitude toward detectives may be connected to the period leading up to the novel's composition, when her own life was poked into by other means. Caspary twice wrote about the novel's composition: a short essay in *The Great Detectives* discussing Mark's characterization and a somewhat broader account in her autobiography. While in "Mark McPherson," the essay she wrote for *The Great Detectives*, she states, "I cannot say when or how the idea for the story of *Laura* came into my mind" (143), in *The Secrets of Grown-Ups* she offers two telling details about the context in which she wrote the novel. The first was her involvement with the Communist Party. Caspary had been active within the American Left for a number of years, but she describes a gradual loss of faith subsequent to the Stalin's signing of a nonaggression treaty with Hitler in 1939. After declaring her intention to leave the party, she describes interactions with the playwright who had recruited her:

Indulgent, fatherly, as though my defection were a girlish whim, he flattered and cajoled, finally agreed to regard my aberration as a temporary leave of absence. He came again and again until I informed him, through another comrade, that unless he quit pestering me, I'd break my promise and write a scathing piece about all I had seen and heard as a Party member.

(191–92)

Caspary attributes to the party a male voice, embodied by her colleague, with a condescending and infantilizing tone, whose “pestering” bears similarity to the invasiveness she attributes to detectives. Caspary asserts that the writing of *Laura*, initially as a play, was motivated by a desire “to escape the incessant talk of politics” (190). Given the tone in which this incessant talk occurs, it seems reasonable that a reworking of gender norms and an assertion of female agency should constitute an important component of the escapism.

The second significant contextual detail that Caspary offers in *The Secrets of Grown-Ups* concerns her work as a Hollywood screenwriter for hire. She describes three particular jobs as “trivial, empty and downright silly” (193). Two were as a writer of original stories for Jane Withers and Baby Sandy, child actors signed to Twentieth Century Fox and Universal respectively as those studios’ responses to the success of Shirley Temple. The third was as “the eighth or eleventh writer on a John Wayne feature” for Republic Pictures in which he was to play a district attorney (193). Caspary paraphrases the producer’s response to the question of why he must be a district attorney: “Herbert Yates, head of Republic, once made a picture called *Mr. District Attorney* and had a great success. So, except for cowboys, all Republic heroes had to be district attorneys” (193). These projects have in common a strong injunction to stick to a highly derivative formula—a formula over which the studio and not the individual writer retains full ownership. Caspary’s frustration with these projects exemplifies a common complaint among men and women working as Hollywood screenwriters, a disaffection with the inability to write in their own voice.

Earlier in Caspary’s memoir, her own disaffectedness takes a markedly gendered valence. A decade before writing *Laura*, Caspary describes researching a new novel to be set in a working girls’ home, quitting her job and moving into the home under an assumed name so as to capture the characters as accurately as possible. She draws attention to herself as deliberately writing against an established body of

fiction, stating, "In 1929 popular novels still had working girls talking like the street urchins of Horatio Alger" (*The Secrets of Grown-Ups* 121). Caspary's writing at the time can thus be understood as highly conscious of popular fiction's tendency to misrepresent female characters of a certain social stratum. What began as a novel, however, ultimately became the play *Blind Mice*. Caspary expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the play when she lost creative control over the story in the course of its production: "It had become a dirty play. The tender story of young love had been *rewritten by males*, had become a patronizing comedy with bawdy lines and leering suggestiveness. Winnie [the director Winifred Lenihan] and I were ashamed of having our names on the program" (133, emphasis mine). What had begun as a corrective to the systematic misrepresentation of female characters actually resulted in not only further misrepresentation, but also the outright disenfranchisement and occlusion of the female artists.

Caspary's experiences of frustrated authorial autonomy begin with her time as copywriter for an advertising company. Of her period in the marketing business, Caspary writes, "I worked like a computer that produces variations when different buttons are pressed. I had considered my work creative until I realized that I was merely manufacturing sales devices" (69). This realization prompted her to become a writer, but as already been seen, she encountered similar difficulties in her work as a playwright, screenwriter, and novelist. Taken together, these incidents paint a picture of Caspary as a woman who, although certainly not lacking in independence or creativity, is nonetheless profoundly frustrated by injunctions to work within a formula or subordinate her work to industry dictates. Caspary herself does not in every case suggest gender as a central or salient issue, but every instance of usurpation, disruption, or dismissal that Caspary describes is perpetrated either by male individuals or institutions figured as masculine. The pattern culminated when Caspary completed a draft of *Laura* and attempted to "sell it quickly and profitably" to a movie studio (193). The studio's rejection prompted her to turn the play into a novel, hitting on the "Wilkie Collins method" as a means of turning the detective into more than "simply a device," and in doing so, crafting a substantial feminist revision of the detective genre ("Mark McPherson" 143).

The complicated attitude that Caspary describes toward the detective genre in "Mark McPherson" and toward the culture industry at large in *The Secrets of Grown-Ups* evinces what Sandra Gilbert and

Susan Gubar refer to in *No Man's Land* as “a paradigm of ambivalent affiliation . . . which dramatizes women’s intertwined attitudes of anxiety and exuberance about creativity” (170). This combination of anxiety and exuberance stems from a central challenge facing women writers in the twentieth century: “Not only do a number of female artists analyze the relationship between male history and newly imagined female origins, they also perceive themselves as obliged to affiliate themselves with the powers of paternal and/or maternal traditions” (170). Female artists may have achieved autonomy and agency, and thus no longer exhibit the “anxiety of authorship” that Gilbert and Gubar had previously identified as characterizing nineteenth century female authors. But as autonomous agents they nonetheless must choose whether or not to engage in particular artistic traditions. Participating in these traditions might benefit authors in terms of increased prominence, financial gain, or artistic development, but at the expense of complicity with or tacit legitimization of genres and movements with retrograde sexual politics.

Given Caspary’s biography and the problematic gender dynamics of conventional hardboiled detective fiction, it is unsurprising that Mark’s character comes alive only after a self-conscious denial of detective genre types, or that Caspary considered Laura’s depiction successful only after she disrupted the monolithic male narratorial voice. The accounts of *Laura’s* composition that Caspary offers in *The Secrets of Grown-Ups* and *The Great Detectives* must be read with a certain degree of skepticism; both were written nearly forty years after *Laura* was published; as such, Caspary’s comments about writing the novel may very well be post-hoc constructions. Nonetheless, her suggestion of an ambivalent affiliation with detective fiction—hardboiled detective fiction in particular—sheds light on the thematic significance of several recurring motifs in the novel.

Reading and Reflecting Faces

Faces are central among these motifs. In his first conversation with Mark, Waldo asks, “why don’t you go out and take some fingerprints?” to which Mark replies, “There are times in the investigation of a crime when it’s more important to look at faces” (Caspary, *Laura* 10). Long before his aforementioned exchange with Laura, this

conversation situates Mark in contrast to the scientific detective who solves cases by means of forensic analysis. It also establishes Mark as the bearer of the gaze; he claims the authority not only to look at other characters but also to make determinations about their nature based on what he sees. In response to this statement, Waldo looks at himself in the mirror and replies, "How singularly innocent I seem!" (10). Waldo is clearly toying with Mark by joking about his own status as a suspect, and the irony of Waldo's assertion that he seems innocent becomes apparent when his guilt is ultimately revealed. The mirror is instrumental in Waldo's gamesmanship as it is the medium by which Waldo is able to claim some of Mark's authority to read faces. The presence of the mirror implies several conventional and easily recognizable symbolic meanings, including narcissism, duplicity, and the presence of a doppelganger. To this last meaning, the idea of Waldo having a doppelganger thematically parallels the fact that the woman Waldo killed was a doppelganger for the woman he had intended to kill. Mirrors, however, also reify the faces they reflect, framing them as art objects mounted on the wall. In this manner, mirrors serve as counterpoints to the portrait of Laura through which her appearance is first described. The fact of Waldo's self-assessment by means of the mirror may of itself be insufficient to draw this parallel, but Shelby, Susan Treadwell, and Mark are depicted by this means as well. When Mark first meets Shelby in Susan's home, Waldo narrates, "The long mirror framed his first impression of Shelby Carpenter. Against the shrouded furniture, Shelby was like a brightly lithographed figure on the gaudy motion-picture poster decorating the somber granite of an ancient opera house" (20). This depiction characterizes Shelby as vapid and garish by way of a simile counter-posing the ancient high culture of the opera house with the mass-produced and commodified culture of motion pictures. Later in the same scene, Waldo writes, "In the mirror's gilt frame Mark saw the reflection of the advancing figure [Susan]" (22). Much more blatantly than in the case of Waldo, these characters are "framed" as art objects, suggesting both distance and artifice.

If mirrors objectify the individuals seen in them, they nonetheless also signify a presence; one cannot appear in the mirror unless one is physically present in the room. Laura's portrait, on the other hand, supplements descriptions of her actual physical appearance for the first section of the novel, and the portrait thus comes to denote both Laura's

image and her absence. Waldo explains that Stuart Jacoby drew the portrait while he was in love with Laura and critiques it for being “a trifle unreal. . . a trifle studied, too much Jacoby and not enough Laura” (34). By Waldo’s estimation, some fundamental quality of Laura’s character escapes representation by the portrait, which Waldo attributes to the romantic mindset of the male artist. By emphasizing the erotic context in which the painting was produced, Waldo foregrounds the gender of the painter. That the resultant portrait is “too much Jacoby and not enough Laura” thus calls to mind not only the projection psychology of projection characteristic of hardboiled narratives, but also the occlusion of Caspary’s artistic voice that she laments in *The Secrets of Grown-Ups*. This is not to say that Laura’s character should be read as a simple stand-in for Caspary herself. The author and her character do, however, have much in common, most significantly their employment in the advertising industry and their perceptions of themselves as physically unattractive.¹ These commonalities suggest that Caspary employs Laura to critique the way men depict and perceive women, a critique grounded in Caspary’s firsthand experience.

Laura is the object of numerous men’s gazes throughout the novel and frequently serves as an empty signifier into which the gazing men pour their own meaning. Laura’s portrait is in fact Jacobi’s portrait (47). Waldo observes that, as he continued to learn about her, Mark “was shaping Laura’s character to fit his attitudes as a young man might when enamored of a living woman” (40). And Waldo himself sees his entire narration as a Pygmalion-esque project of memorializing Laura that aggrandizes him as much as it does her: “my friend, had she lived to a ripe old age, would have passed into oblivion, where as the violence of her passing and the genius of her admirer gave her a fair chance at immortality” (3). Shelby, himself more of an object than a subject, is the only major male character whose address of Laura is not depicted in this manner. Jacobi, Waldo, and Mark all unconsciously impose onto Laura a sense of artifice and unreality. The portrait can be viewed as the structuring image through which Caspary expresses this mindset. Indeed, when Laura first enters the novel, Mark only recognizes her by comparing her to her portrait (71). It is thus fitting that Jacobi is himself a highly unoriginal artist and the portrait is “a bad imitation of Speicher” (48). The portrait evinces all of the vices that Caspary describes encountering in her work for various sectors of the culture industry: it

misrepresents its female subject, it imposes on her meanings that have been constructed by male artists and audiences, and it portrays her by means of a highly derivative style.

These layers of meaning are absent from Preminger's film, where the portrait provides a much more glamorous depiction of Laura wearing an evening gown and not "perched on the arm of a chair, a pair of yellow gloves in one hand, a green hunter's hat in the other" as described in the novel (34). Preminger implies that Mark falls in love with Laura through the portrait well before it is revealed that Laura is still alive, and the film does not critique his mediated erotic gaze. Emrys writes, "The contrast between painting and woman illustrates the gap between Caspary's Laura Hunt and Preminger's revision of her character" (120). Preminger's depiction of the painting focuses more on Mark's uncanny attraction to the presumed-dead woman and characterizes Laura as a ghostly *femme fatale*. But Caspary deploys the painting as a symbol of the ways in which male authorship occludes female subjectivity, characterizing Laura as an independent woman whose presence disrupts that occlusion.

Disrupting the Male Gaze and Challenging Masculine Authority

As the narrative unfolds, Laura's emergence as a self-defining subject leads to the deconstruction of the image represented by the painting. Attendant to this deconstruction, however, is a progressive reification of the male characters initially established as most active and powerful. This can be seen in the two moments where Mark is viewed through a mirror. The first comes when Waldo tells Mark, Shelby, and Mrs. Treadwell that he has discovered a clue. He writes, "My eyes were fixed on Mrs. Treadwell, but beyond her floating veil the mirror showed me Mark's guarded countenance" (52). Waldo's clue is that someone has bid on the portrait, and though this fact is not exposed for another fourteen pages of the novel, Waldo knows that Mark is the bidder. Waldo does not reveal that it is Mark to Shelby and Mrs. Treadwell, and mentioning the bid in front of Mark constitutes another of the murderer's devious mind games. With his "guarded countenance," Mark retains the cold affect of a hardboiled protagonist, but Waldo's knowledge threatens to expose this affect as a mere

façade; Mark's desire for the painting belies his attraction to Laura, which violates hardboiled fiction's injunction of emotional distance. Mark's weakness in this moment is underscored by the grammatical structure of Waldo's narration; the mirror is the subject of the sentence. As opposed to "Mark's guarded countenance showed in the mirror" or "I saw Mark's guarded countenance in the mirror," Waldo's construction depicts Mark as passive, objectified, and trapped.

Also illustrative is the second scene featuring Mark viewed through a mirror. The scene comes near the end of the novel, during Mark's second section of narration, in which he comments on his emotions and thought processes throughout the case. He writes, "When I discovered that it was Diane Redfern who had been murdered, I went completely off the track. . . . During that stage of the investigation, I couldn't help looking in the mirror and asking myself if I looked like the kind of sucker who trusts a woman" (180). As a moment in which the narrator looks at his own image, the scene reflects Waldo's earlier gaze into the mirror to note his seeming innocence. Waldo's scene constitutes an assertion of agency, where emphasis is placed on the man looking *at* the mirror, but Mark's much later scene constitutes an admission of self-doubt, where the focus is squarely on the man *in* the mirror. Where Waldo's phrase "I seem" creates an ironic and jocular dichotomy between appearance and reality, Mark's "if I looked like" conveys an anxiety about whether appearance can honestly reveal reality. At this moment, Laura is the one seen as empowered, and Mark's problem with this stems explicitly from the gender dynamics of the relationship.

Mark describes his self-assessment in the mirror well after the fact, but the doubts and anxieties he describes as arising subsequent to Laura's return can be seen earlier in the novel as well. Indeed, Laura's reappearance profoundly disrupts the expected narratives of both Waldo—the professional writer, producer of culture, and murderer of a woman—and Mark—the detective who calls women "dolls" or "dames" and who is initially established as fitting the hardboiled mold of a character written by Hammett or Cain. This disruption operates on both a psychological and a metafictional level, and it clears a space for Laura to ultimately write her own portion of the narrative. Laura's return literally renders Waldo incapable of writing; as Mark puts it, "The prose style was knocked right out of him" (69). For all of Waldo's bombastic claims about immortalizing his friend, like Jacobi his ability to do so depends on occluding her true

character. Diane's murder may be seen as the first step in Waldo's creative process, and this association implicates the writing of crime stories in violence against women.

As Mark is the hero of the story, his authority as a narrator is disrupted in more circumspect ways. The first is through dialogue, as when Laura characterizes Mark as neither hardboiled nor scientific. In this same vein, Waldo later tells Mark, "It's like a bad novel" (111). These self-conscious comparisons to fiction increasingly bleed into Mark's narration. Speaking to Shelby and Laura, Mark writes, "I sounded like a detective in a detective story" (119). Later in the same conversation, he writes, "The scene was unreal again. I was talking detective-story language. Shelby made it impossible for a person to be himself" (121). Attributing this sense of artificiality to Shelby's presence is fitting given the objectified manner in which he is depicted throughout the story. Mark later writes, "Shelby honestly believed that his fatal beauty had led Laura to murder" (180). Shelby sees himself as an *homme fatal*, "the male counterpart to the deadly female" who tempts women into violence and eventual downfall (Spicer 89). The ultimate fallaciousness of his assumption, however, combined with his shallow characterization, renders him absurd, a parodic gender inversion of Cain's Cora.

Though he blames Shelby's presence, Mark's sense of being in a detective story emerges significantly as he accuses Laura of Diane's murder. The more of a threat Mark perceives Laura to be, the more he recedes into his own fictiveness. While more subtle than having the prose style knocked out of him, his self-reflexive similes denote a loss of authorial power more fundamental than anything in Waldo's narration. Being viewed through a mirror implies a kind of reification that does not necessarily deny agency or estrange the reflected individual from reality. These comparisons, however, implicitly empty Mark, Waldo—"It's like a bad novel" (111)—and Shelby—"a man who wasn't real" (117)—of substance as much as if not more than Jacobi's portrait emptied Laura.

Laura also experiences a moment in which she becomes tacitly aware of her fictitiousness. In her account, Waldo expresses his love for her and says that he does care if she is guilty, a statement that effectively accuses her of Diane's murder. Laura writes, "It was unreal; it was scene from a Victorian novel" (160). The line is noteworthy for the way in which it both parallels and diverges from Mark's

comparison of the narrative to a detective story. Laura and Mark are both aware of the surreal and artificial nature of the story, but they read that story as belonging to two different genres. Laura's understanding of the narrative as a Victorian novel may be a reference to Caspary's use of "Wilkie Collins" narration, but in any case it represents an important instance of generic discontinuity, defined by June Howard as "the inevitable articulation of different generic discourses in a specific text" (142). This discontinuity, along with Caspary's use of irony and self-reflexivity and her development of the theme of artifice through the motifs of portraits and mirrors, all serve to subvert masculine hardboiled genre expectations.

Conclusion

Laura's subversion of genre expectations makes it an outlier in the early history of noir in ways that Nino Frank failed to recognize in his 1946 article. In his article, Frank discusses the Victorian scientific detective stories of Poe and Conan Doyle, stories employing a formula that he likens to crossword puzzles. Pointing to the four films mentioned earlier, he asserts:

We are witnessing the death of this formula. Of the four works cited earlier, only *Laura* belongs to this outdated genre; but Otto Preminger and his collaborators forced themselves to renew this formula by introducing a charming study of the furnishing and faces, a complicated narrative, a perverse writer who is prosaic but amusing, and foremost a detective with an emotional life.

(138)

This is all Frank has to say about *Laura*. The other three films that he examines all trace their origins to the *Black Mask* boys.² *Laura* is an outlier, but not because it belongs to the "outdated genre" of the scientific detective. In fact, it is the other films that are outdated, more closely hewing to a hardboiled tradition that was at least twenty years old at the time Frank was writing. As discussed here, *Laura* the film may be an imperfect adaptation, but the novel on which it is based represents the most innovative revision of not just one formula but two. *Laura's* Mark McPherson is neither the scientific Victorian of Collins or Conan Doyle nor the hardboiled he-man of Hammett or Cain;

rather, he is a genuinely new kind of detective character who represents a significant feminist revision of the genre. By self-reflexively reworking the tropes of the hardboiled detective and using a casebook format associated with scientific detectives, Caspary crafts a narrative free from the strictures of a male-centered genre, creating a noir novel that boldly breaks from its hardboiled predecessors.

Notes

1. Caspary self-deprecatingly writes in *The Secrets of Grown-Ups*, "Working among men I had discovered that a girl need not be beautiful, not even particularly pretty" (44), while in *Laura* the central character discusses her jealousy of pretty girls: "Women with faces like mine can't be too objective about girls like Diane" (75). For neither Caspary nor Laura does this negative self-perception appear to present a serious psychological impediment to the women's confidence, autonomy, or romantic life.
2. *The Maltese Falcon* was based on the novel of the same name by Dashiell Hammett, serialized in *Black Mask* in 1929–30. *Murder, My Sweet* was based on *Farewell, My Lovely* by *Black Mask* mainstay Raymond Chandler, who also cowrote the screenplay for *Double Indemnity*, based on the novel by James M. Cain, his follow-up to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Works Cited

- Bakerman, Jane S. "Vera Caspary's Fascinating Females: Laura, Evvie and Bedelia." *Clues*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1980, pp. 46–52.
- Breu, Christopher. *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*. U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- Cain, James M. "The Postman Always Rings Twice." *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s and 40s*, edited by Robert Polito, Library of America, 1977.
- Caspary, Vera. "Mark McPherson." *The Great Detectives*, edited by Otto Penzler. Little, Brown and Company, 1978, pp. 141–46.
- . *Laura*. The Feminist Press, 2005. Originally published in 1942.
- . *The Secrets of Grown-ups*. McGraw-Hill, 1979.
- Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. Random House, 1939.
- . *The Simple Art of Murder*. 1950. Vintage, 2002.
- Conrad, Mark T., editor. *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. UP of Kentucky, 2006.
- Daly, Carroll John. "Three Gun Terry." *The Black Mask Boys: Masters in the Hard-Boiled School of Detective Fiction*, edited by William F. Nolan. 1923. William Morrow and Company, 1984, pp. 43–72.
- Dimendberg, Edward. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. Harvard UP, 2004.

- Emrys, A. B. "Afterward." *Laura*. Ed. A. B. Emrys. The Feminist Press, 2005a. 119–219.
- . "Laura, Vera, and Wilkie: Deep Sensation Roots of a Noir Novel." *Clues*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2005, pp. 5–13.
- Emrys, AB. *Wilkie Collins, Vera Caspary and the Evolution of the Casebook Novel*. McFarland & Company, 2011.
- Frank, Nino. "A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure." *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Eds. Philip L. Simpson, Andrew Utterson, K. Karen and J. Shepherdson. Taylor & Francis, 2004, pp. 137–40.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: Volume I: The War of the Words*. Yale UP, 1988.
- Hammett, Dashiell. "Finger-Prints." *Black Mask*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1925, pp. 127–28.
- . *Red Harvest*. Random House, 1929.
- Howard, June. *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. U of North Carolina P, 1985.
- Laura*. Directed by Otto Preminger, 20th Century Fox, 1944.
- McNamara, Eugene. *Laura as Novel, Film, and Myth*. The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992.
- Nyman, Jopi. *Hardboiled Fiction and Dark Romanticism*. Peter Lang, 1998.
- Oliver, Kelly, and Benigno Trigo. *Noir Anxiety*. U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism*. Columbia UP, 2002.
- Shaw, Joseph. Untitled Editorial Statement. *Black Mask*, vol. 12, no. 8, 1929, pp. vi.
- Spicer, Andrew. *Film Noir*. Longman, 2002.
- Van Dine, S. S. *The Benson Murder Case*. 1926 Scribner Paper Fiction, 1983.
- Wald, Alan. *Writing From the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics*. Verso, 1994.

Brian Matzke received his PhD in English Language and Literature from the University of Michigan in 2013. His research focuses on representations of scientists in twentieth century American literature and popular culture. He has taught courses on writing, literature, and film, and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Library and Information Science.