

***This Gun for Hire* (1942): Noir and War I**

This Gun for Hire (USA, Paramount, 1942) [81 minutes] helped establish a number of conventions of the noir genre, including the hard-boiled for-hire killer and the overlapping double-cross. The film stays moderately close to the Greene original, but the film moves it to 1940s America and adds a whole Fifth column traitor sub-plot. Raven's character has a disfigured wrist rather than the hair-lip of the book, and Ellen becomes a magician rather than just a dancer in a middle-brow musical.



Director: Frank Tuttle

Cinematography: John Seitz

Score: David Buttolph

Chief Cast:

Alan Ladd: Raven the hitman

Veronica Lake: Ellen the entertainer

Robert Preston: Michael the detective

Laird Cregar: Willard Gates the executive and nightclub owner

Though the headliner, Preston quickly took a backseat to Ladd's riveting performance. Raven was a breakthrough role for Ladd, and *This Gun for Hire* became the first of seven films for Ladd and Lake-- *The Glass Key* (1942), *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942), *Duffy's Tavern* (1945), *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *Variety Girl* (1947), and *Saigon* (1948). *The Glass Key* and *The Blue Dahlia* are both considered class film noir.

Characteristics of Noir

Film noir is a conversation rather than a single genre or style, though it does have a history, a complex of overlapping styles and typical plots, and more central directors and films. It is also a conversation about its more common philosophies, socio-economic and sexual concerns, and more expansively its social imaginaries.

The world of noir is a world out of phase with the order of wisdom. The vice-ridden figures of noir—gangsters, femme fatales, protagonists who give into temptation, corrupt cops and officials, even the psychotic—are defying the order of wisdom. Yet they often possess good qualities gone awry—intelligence, leadership, friendship, loyalty, love, courage, beauty, charisma. These at times are aimed at perceived goods, though they seek the good in the wrong ways, at too quick a pace, or in causing others

to suffer while seeking to avoid it themselves. And they at times act in sacrificial ways that partially redeem their earlier actions.

The world of noir cannot exist by itself; it exists in tandem with the good world, the world of human flourishing. The world of the gangster is often a shadow of the world of commerce; the common adulterous plot driver is dependent upon the longed for worlds of romance, marriage, and family; the investigation of crime, the police procedural, and the murder mystery all bear some desire for or approximation of a world of order and justice.

Even the grotesqueries of the psychopathic are feeding off the normal and healthy. At times, in earlier noir (40s) especially, the protagonist is the good man (less often good woman) who is pulled into the noir world. Other times, the person (as often a woman as a man) is lazy, jaded, and so on but finds some inner virtue to rise to the occasion. Sometimes the policeman, reporter, or official has grown weary in fighting evil and needs renewal.

Life and death are at the center of the way of wisdom; so they are at the heart of noir. Death haunts noir in numerous ways, most often murder and execution, but also the death of broken relations. Life is always being offered as the better way or being threatened by the noir world. Death (especially with a gun) is often treated instrumentally in noir—murder or killing simply removes something in the way, yet it can also act as a gift of the good death or just even a desired release. Its use in the film can provide the audience with fear, dread, a poetic judgment, or even excitement and pleasure. Part of this has to do with the death's place in the place, its marginal or central purpose. Deaths in the beginning, especially in detective investigations, are to be solved and explained. Deaths near the end tend to be about poetic justice, or at least about judgment on the characters' crimes. In the middle, deaths if focal points, are often the result of love triangles. These the lovers carry out in hopes of a perceived new free place and context. If the deaths are marginal, they speak of the business of killing in gangster culture or part of a string of killings to inspire fear.

Love and/or marriage is often the promise of life being offered the characters, provided they can survive the threat in question. In noir, adultery or involvement with the femme fatale more often than not lead to the path of death. Without love, the key characters of noir are often incomplete, missing essential self-knowledge. The place of peace is often restored only in the end for the protagonists, and this often includes such sense of better self-regard as well as regard of the other. Presence in particular is evidenced in the close-ups of two persons regarding each other in a loving gaze, rather in half-cloaked suspicion. The romantic gaze is often the easiest cinematically to employ, but it is not the only one.

Discussion Questions

1. How does moving the setting to 1940s Los Angeles alter the story?
2. How do the various place settings of the film shape its flow and meaning?
3. How does the film compress the novel? What are the key hinge-points of plot that remain?
4. How different is Ellen from Anne in the novel?
5. Is the change in Raven's affliction important?
6. Is Raven redeemed in the end?
7. What are some other ways in which the essential meaning of the film is different from that of the novel?
8. How would you describe the acting in the film?
9. What kinds of lighting are used in the film and to what effect?
10. What are some of the visual motifs that the film employs to build its atmosphere?