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EVOLUTION OF THE *FEMME FATALE* IN *OF HUMAN BONDAGE*: FROM TEMPTATION AND HUMILIATION TO INSANITY AND DEATH.

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the evolution of the female character in the film *Of Human Bondage* (John Cromwell, 1934), starring Bette Davis and Leslie Howard. The protagonist of the story plays the role of a typical femme fatale who goes through different stages throughout the film, which are analyzed in detail in this article. She appears at first discreetly and positively to go slowly transforming into a cold woman who constantly humiliates the male lead. Finally, as in other ends of black films previous to World War II, her character is punished by the screenwriters, sheltering her into madness finally leading to death. By contrast, the male character embodies the archetype of an antihero who will be positively transformed at the end of the story. In this paper, the evolution of the two protagonists of the film and particularly how woman as a femme fatale is represented in the different phases of history is studied. The analysis draws upon a narrative methodology and applies the principles of anthropological structures of the imaginariness introduced by Gilbert Durand in the 1960s.

KEYWORDS: Archetype -femme fatale- antihero-woman-genre-film

EVOLUCIÓN DE LA *FEMME FATALE* EN *CAUTIVO DEL DESEO*: DE LA TENTACIÓN Y LA HUMILLACIÓN A LA LOCURA Y LA MUERTE

RESUMEN

En este artículo se analiza la evolución del personaje femenino en la película *Cautivo del deseo* (*Of human boundage*, John Cromwell, 1934), interpretada por Bette Davis y Leslie Howard. La mujer protagonista de la historia encarna el papel de una típica *femme fatale*, que pasa por diferentes estadios a lo largo de la película, los cuales son analizados en detalle en este artículo. Aparece en un principio de forma discreta y positiva para ir poco a poco transformándose en una mujer fría que humilla al protagonista masculino constantemente. Finalmente, como en otros finales de

películas del cine negro anterior a la II Guerra Mundial, su personaje es castigado por los guionistas, refugiándola en la locura para llevarla finalmente a la muerte. Por el contrario, el personaje masculino encarna el arquetipo de un anti-héroe que será transformado positivamente al final de la historia. En este texto se estudia la evolución de los dos protagonistas de la película y en concreto la forma en que se representa la mujer como *femme fatale* en las diferentes fases de la historia,. El análisis parte de una metodología narrativa y aplica los postulados de las estructuras antropológicas del imaginario introducidas por Gilbert Durand en los años 60.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Arquetipo -femme fatale- antihéroe-mujer-género-cine

1. INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the feminine archetype of the femme fatale in *Of Human Bondage*, (John Cromwell, 1934).

The classical Hollywood cinema, between the years 1930 and 1940, is an exemplary example of the presence and definition of masculine and feminine archetype in collective unawareness. As Jung says, archetypes are instincts manifesting themselves through symbolic images (Jung, 1976). They are thought forms that were established long before man developed a reflecting conscience. These archetypes are transmitted through collective unawareness, which preserves and transmits the common psychological heritage of mankind. Currently, cinema and especially the authors being farthest from classism do not transmit this collective unawareness, because movies are a transference of their personal world. By contrast, in classicism, we find this universe in a pure state. It is also important to consider the female archetypes that are disseminated through the media because, as Piñeiro and Costa point out (2003), "*Women find cultural patterns that foster, from the stage of primary socialization, sex-depending expectations that will determine both one's position in society as well as one's conduct with regard to it.*"

This film tells the story of Philip Carey (Leslie Howard), a young man with a malformation defect in one of his feet that prevents him from walking normally. Philip arrives in London to study medicine after a stay in Paris, where he unsuccessfully tried to develop a career as a painter. In London, he falls for the waitress Mildred Rogers (Bette Davis), who does not reciprocate and rejects his marriage proposal. Still, Philip helps her when she is left pregnant by her husband. From this moment on, Mildred will always be present in the life of Philip, preventing him from developing a professional and sentimental career. Finally, Mildred dies and then Philip can begin to rebuild his life.

The film is an adaptation of the novel by Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*, written in 1898. The original title of the novel (*Of Human Bondage*) is the same as that of the American film, although in the Spanish version the title, *Captive of Desire*, is much more explicit about the subject.

2. OBJECTIVES

This article analyzes the basic characteristics of the main male and female characters in the film and their evolution, in order to analyze the presence of the classic archetypes of the solar hero and the femme fatale. Specifically, through the transformation of the character starred by Bette Davis, the different stages the prototype of daytime women go through detached from the signs of time and with neither maternal nor family pretensions are exemplified.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to study these characters draws upon Gilbert Durand's classifications made in his book *The Anthropological Structures of the Imagery*, which studied the symbolic motivations and provided a classification of the major symbols of imagination. Until the book was published in 1960, there was huge confusion about these issues since the classifications had been done under most diverse categories such as psychoanalysis, history of religion or anthropology. Durand unified these symbols into two regimes, which are the ones framing the general outline that I will follow to analyze the film. The Daytime Regime of the imagery "*is intended against the semanticism of darkness, of animality and downfall, ie, against Chronos, the immortal time*" (Durand, 1981, p.77). In this regime, we find symbols such as the scepter, the sword and cutting weapons, the sun and ascending schemes: staircases, diurnal birds, the spear or the sauroctonous hero. Instead, the Night Regime welcomes those symbols that consider our mortal condition: the beneficent femininity, the nurturing mother, the welcoming darkness or the intimate and peaceful retreat. "*The antidote of time will no longer be sought at superhuman level of transcendence and purity of essences, but at the level of the soothing and warm intimacy of the substance or at the rhythmic constants encompassing phenomena and accidents.*" (Durand, 1981, p. 184).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. The male character renouncing heroism

Both in the novel and in the movie, the absolute protagonist is the male character, Philip Carey. In fact, the novel begins long before the starting point of the film, as it explained the childhood of the male character, who was forced to live with his uncle after being orphaned.

Given the classifications established by Gilbert Durand, Philip is the perfect example of the antihero. At least, in respect of the hero who had been presented by the American cinema until then: a solar hero in constant motion, always ready to undertake heroic exploits. Philip is doomed to immobility because of his physical defect. The film starts by referring to this limitation, the character is defined out of this feature. In fact, the first minutes of the film are intended to show the incompetence of Philip, so that the viewer may tends o have pity on him

Apart from his limping, the first conversation also shows that he is a failure as an artist. His art teacher advised him to "*do something with your life*", because by painting pictures "you will just be a mediocre". This "*do something with your life,*" which will become the target of the clueless character throughout the story, shows how, far from

solar heroism, Philip Carey is a still being who does not move physically, nor does he know what direction he should give to his life. "*You could say that taking account of the body is the symptom of the change of the imaginary regime*". (Durand, 1981, p.192).
In the book by Somerset Maugham, there is a paragraph in which Philip reflects on his condition: "*The greater abandonment of passions the hotter and more active self-restraint could be, and I believed that inner life could be multiple and varied, rich in experiences, like the life of those conquering kingdoms and exploring unknown land*" (Maugham, 1945, p.438). In this reflection, Philip makes his renouncing heroism clear.
We are therefore facing a losing protagonist who does not know what to do with his life. He could be an ideal man for a night and maternal heroin. But, obviously, it is not like this. Philip Carey will be allured by the charms of a daytime, unscrupulous femme fatale.

4.2. Presentation of the femme fatale: a woman detached from the signs of time

The femme fatale of this story is starred by Bette Davis, an actress recognized in this area in films like *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938), *Dark Victory* (Edmund Goulding, 1939), *The Letter* (William Wyler 1940) or *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941).
The character of Mildred Rogers embodies destructive femininity in every way, she has no positive overtones. Physically, she is tall and slender, without any voluptuous curve. When Philip first sees her in the bar he can hardly notice her presence. Visually, the image separates them too: he is sitting and she is standing; we can see his face, we can see her back; he is stern and she is laughing. A set of oppositions that little seems to indicate the addiction Mildred will arouse in Philip. Nothing unites them, and even the first thing Philip speaks about her appearance is that she is anemic. I think it is interesting to include the definition Somerset Maugham makes in his book about this moment:

> Often they went for tea at a barroom on Parliament Street, since Dunsford admired one of the waitresses. She looked scarcely attractive to Philip: she was tall and slender, with narrow hips and a chest like a girl "(...)" She was very anemic; her lips were pale, her delicate skin was greenish, without a single shade of pink not even on her cheeks; her teeth were very white. *(Maugham, 1945, p.277).*

As we can see, her attributes are not those of the motherly woman. Even if we consider the studies made by the French Frédéric Monneyron (Monneyron, 2006) her clothes are the typical ones for daytime: a blue dress with a square neckline. According to this author, the geometric shapes, the verticality and luxurious fabrics belong to daytime imagery, while floral motifs, scales, wool and cotton would be part of the night imagery.

> The square or rectangular closed figures symbolically emphasize the themes of defense of inner integrity. The square room is that of the city, it is the fortress, the citadel. The circular space is rather the garden, the fruit, the egg or the womb, and it moves the symbolic accent into the secret voluptuousness of intimacy. *(Durand, 1981, p.236).*

The role of Bette Davis in the film is small, like in the book. She appears and disappears at unpredictable times, and we never know what she thinks about

anything. We never hear her talking to friends or confidants, and when talking to Philip, her words are full of indecision. "*Why not?*" "*I do not care*", "*If you want*", "*It is all the same to me,*" "*If I remember ..*" ...

Her power over Philip is not born from seduction, or from exploiting the power of the gaze. Mildred is alien to anything human, to any link, and she is much more interested in the adventures she can live surrounded by heroic and daring characters than in the placid and calm assurance offered by Philip. His limp is indifferent to her at first, though she does not like his being a man without a purpose and without any income. In fact, one of the other suitors of Mildred tells Philip "*You're too artist.*"

Despite her being scarcely interested, Philip begins to celebrate her and propose her dates. He is increasingly in love.

Mildred, however, as a daytime femme fatale, is not subject to the dictates of time, she is always late or waits for him in the wrong place. On their first date, they agree to meet under the watch of the station, on the second-class platform. Philip waits for her for a long time and they finally meet by chance, as it turns out that she was waiting for him on the first-class platform. The only kind thing she says, three times throughout the film, is: "You are a gentleman in every way". But it looks like she utters this phrase rather as an insult than as recognition of the good manners of Philipp.

On another of their dates, when Philip proposes marriage, she refuses saying that she just wanted to tell him that she had already been committed to marry another man who had more money and social standing. So, Mildred had acted until now without taking Philip into account. She dated him while she was planning to marry another. And when she explains so, she seems to have neither remorse nor shame. Thus, this female character, like most femmes fatales, is like a new portrait of Hesiod's myth Pandora. According to Hesiod, Pandora was the first woman, she was offered to men as a gift. Each God gave her a quality and thus she received grace, beauty, manual dexterity, persuasion ... But Hermes also gave her lying. As Núria Bou says:

> Pandora is sensual and dangerous, clever and deceitful, the archetype of the dual, ambiguous and reckless femininity and she seduces and destroys men. Being always an attractive figure to the creative - plastic, literary or musical imagination- Pandora hides under various names such as Carmen, Salome or Lulu, but it is in the darkness of movie theaters where we find her kinetic fixation. *(Bou; 2004, p. 26).*

In this case, our particular Pandora is starred by Bette Davis.

From this scene, she disappears for a while. Philip even tries to rebuild his life, but he is unable to forget her. The femme fatal has inoculated him with poison and he can no longer recover. Likewise, it does not take many scenes for her to reappear. She needs a home and money because her husband has left her pregnant. Philip sees an opportunity to recover her and goes on to provide her with whatever she may need. He breaks his engagement with another girl and intends all the little money he has to make Mildred lack nothing. In the book, there is a paragraph that perfectly illustrates the fact that why he leaves the other girl without thinking and returns to Mildred: "*(...) It is always more important to love than to be loved, and all his soul tended toward the other (Mildred). He would rather spend ten minutes with that one (Mildred) than an entire*

afternoon with this one (Nora, his new girlfriend), and he valued a kiss from those cold lips much more than all what Nora could give him". (Maugham, 1945, p. 348).
In this part of the story, we have another example of the diurnal character of Mildred, unleashed from any symbol that makes her temporal: despite her being pregnant, she shows no maternal spirit. Virtually everything is in offscreen (except for a brief shot of the crib) and she quickly gets rid of her child, giving him to another to look after him. As Jacques Siclier says, referring to the femme fatale of *Leave Her to Heaven* (John M. Stahl, 1945), "*we find the same rejection of motherhood and induced abortion proper to all wrong-doing beasts acting like Barbara Stanwyck does*"(Siclier, 1956, p.88).
Being quickly detached from her child, Mildred asks Philip to take her to dinner, to make her have fun. Household matters have enormously been boring and she only wants to have fun again by partying and meeting people. To satisfy her, he invites a friend of him to help him entertain her. In this scene, Philip humiliatedly watches the attraction that arises between the two characters. The only thing he can do, exactly as his friend says, is "to pay the bill" for dinner. Desperate, when the next day his suspicions are confirmed and Mildred claims to be in love with his friend, the character does not know what to do. It is then when, for the first and only time in the entire film, Philip looks straight to the camera, though briefly not to break the rules of transparency of classic films. It looks like he were asking for advice from us, as if the viewer could offer him a solution. It is a time of reflection that will pay off because it is right after this scene when the character, despite the help he always give her, begins not to want Mildred anymore.

4.3 Ðegradation of the femme fatale: shelter in madness

The above described the second time the character was required by the femme fatale, but it will not be the last time. After the affair between Mildred and Philip's friend is over, she is left alone again, with the aggravating circumstance that she begins to be in poor health. In this third time, Mildred appears in the life of Philip, she, for physical reasons, is unable to go look for him but asks someone else to give him her address. We see how her strength gradually decreases and she does not go to Philip but sends a messenger instead. It is a progressive weakening of the character. Her son is dead, she is alone and emaciated, sick. Mildred falls into his arms, but he just wants to offer help as a doctor. He sets her up in a house and advises what the best way of life is. Here Philip behaves like a real home-loving woman while Mildred is unable to keep the house tidy. "*The house is always the image of relaxed intimacy, (...) the definite ''seat" of interior lighting*" (DURAND, 1981: 232) says Durand, who, like Bachelard, identifies the house with femininity. But this idea of home has nothing to do with the femme fatale proper to this film, neither did the femme fatales of the *noir* film like the woman in *Scarlett Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945), who has the house completely upside down throughout the film.
At that time Mildred flirts with him, showing herself willing to yield to him. But Philip does not want to have any sentimental relationship with her, and in a conversation he even comes to say, "*You disgust me, Mildred*". She cannot believe it. When she hears these words, her eyes bulge, and she rages. Throughout the film, her gaze is always lost, she never looks straight into Philip's eyes, she does not use this

recourse to allure him. In fact, as we have noted, in the first scene they do not look at each other. And this time, when it is clear that Philip does not want her, she does not know where to look, her crazy eyes seek a solution looking quickly at all the corners. At that moment, Mildred loses the roles. It is a situation reminiscent of the last scene in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) when Scarlet is abandoned by Rhett Butler. Jaques Siclier notes that Scarlet is scornfully cornered by the male protagonist and, for the first time, this rejected lady has no other choice but madness, to become, over the years, the unbalanced Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951). This statement is debatable if we take other films as reference but, in the case of Bette Davis in *Of Human Bondage*, she is also completely obliterated after that moment. A first moment of madness and, from that moment on, also the degradation of the character due to illness. She will appear less and less time on screen and her influence on Philip will gradually fade. It is true that, while Mildred is alive, her power over him will be very important, preventing the male character from developing normally, but from the moment he verbalizes his contempt (which does not mean he feels that way), the story develops differently.

In her own impulsiveness out of despair, in this scene Mildred takes a last action to destroy her character. She begins to insult Philip the way she can hurt him more "Cursed lame", "*Crippled*" ... She destroys the house, breaks the paintings and burn the money she finds. The fire is an invention of the film, since it does not appear in the original book, where Mildred just destroys the furniture. This flame, this fire, is a symbol of change. "*If all that changes slowly is explained by life, what changes quickly is explained by fire*" *as Bachelard puts it.* "*By fire everything changes. When you want everything to change, you resort to fire.*" (Bachelard , 1966, p.17).

4.4. The end of the femme fatale: death as punishment

From here, the change in Philip is remarkable. After a while, once he has recovered more money due to an inheritance, he decides to have his foot operated. He meets a nice girl, the daughter of a patient who he has been looking after. This new young girl, who he met at home, is totally opposed to Mildred. "*The girl smiled shyly, showing white and irregular teeth. And she blushed. She was well shaped, tall for her age, with beautiful gray eyes, a spacious forehead, and pink cheeks.*" (Maugham, 1945, p.429). Philip has finally found a direction for his life. The presence of Mildred still haunts him, but we know that, without his love, the femme fatale is weakened.

Quietness, however, has not yet come over Philip's life. One day, when leaving a room in the hospital where he works, he sees how the dead body of a young woman is taken away. He does not see her die, but a torn paper on the floor lets him know that it is Mildred. Philip reflects for a moment, but immediately afterwards he goes out to find his beloved. He had gradually moved away from the domination of Mildred, but the sensation of knowing he is free forever from his presence is new to him. "You are free," says a character, referring to something else, but it has a special meaning this time. Being out of the domination of the femme fatale and the physical defect of his foot being solved, he can begin a life of a hero. He gets in a taxi, and the film ends with motion, with Philip heading into a future where he will finally be the only one to decide what direction to take in his life.

This ending is very different from the last part of the book. In the book, Philip does not have his foot operated. Instead, the film needs to confirm the final conversion of the protagonist into a hero. At least, it ends nearer the Daytime regime than at the beginning. The operation allows him to be more active, to walk with determination and, ultimately, it relates him to all the climbing and verticalizing symbols of daytime. As Durad says, "All these ritual symbols are means to reach heaven." (Durand, 1981, p. 120). They are images that serve as a counterpoint to downfall and allow passage from a stagnant reality to a dynamic one.

The second difference is that, in the book, the character of Mildred does not die. She just ends up degraded, ill, working as a prostitute, but unlike the movie, the femme fatale is not punished with death.

A cruel death, since the fatal heroin who has dominated the man at will throughout the film ends up being reduced to a broken role: her medical history torn and thrown away on the floor. In fact, as she has been ill, her presence on the screen has declined. Her degradation is an offscreen process. Thus, there is no possibility for the viewer to have pity, to understand her, neither can she explain herself. There is no choice of any transformation or evolution of the character.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The heroine of this film, Bette Davis, is evil from start to finish and there is no chance for her to be saved. She is evil like most of the characters in the movies previous to World War II, where women who showed some kind of desire (of love or freedom) were always punished, they had no possibility of transformation.

Mildred's death is the death of a daytime femme fatale because we do not sense that Mildred can possibly become a night femme fatale, aware of her role. No time for reflection to see a different femininity in her that could save her. Mildred disappears progressively in the film and no compassion is ever shown towards her. Possibly, her character does not have any final redemption because we have not seen any spark of love inside her. She has acted out of spite throughout the film, with no clear objective.

Punishing her with death is certainly an extreme solution. All Mildred has done is complicate the life of Philip, but unintentionally, she is not a scheming heroin. Mildred really does not want anything from Philip. It is he who accidentally falls into her hands, and Mildred governs him because both the circumstances and he himself allow so once he has madly fallen in love with her. The story of this movie is even banal if we look well. What surprises, while being the true reflection of the feminine archetype of that time, is the negative way in which Hollywood treats Mildred. It is quite clear that, at that time, there was no room for a solar heroin renouncing the ties of time.

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