

Film Noir Protagonists

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Film noir creates a dark, gritty environment where crime is apparent and the streets are littered with the underbelly of society. It's not easy living in such a corrupted world where lust, greed, betrayal and death are inevitable. It takes its toll on some people. We see this through the protagonists in the films English 2400 has watched so far. We see how this world has affected individuals' character and motives. They have to learn to adapt in order to survive these harsh conditions. In this paper, I will argue that despite the crooked and selfish actions of the noir protagonists of the early 1940s-1950s, they can still be considered the "heroes" of the genre as opposed to villainous characters as many people seem to see them. I will be looking at Samuel Spade from *The Maltese Falcon*, Walter Neff from *Double Indemnity* – the book and film—Jeff Bailey from *Out of the Past*, Dix Handley from *The Asphalt Jungle* and last but not least, Philip Marlowe from *Murder, My Sweet*. These men have the archetypal traits that help define future protagonists of this genre.

The characters these films give us share one unifying characteristic: they're all jerks. They constantly defy authority. Sam Spade hides information from the police department, for instance. They're rude, brash, and constantly drinking. Some talk to women like dogs, as with such rash lines as: "Why don't you quit cryin' and get me some bourbon?" (*The Asphalt Jungle*). Sam finds out that his partner has been murdered and goes on with the investigation as if it were just another case. The movie even throws in that he cheats with his partner's wife just to drive home how offensive a person he is. They all have their moments.

In their defense and on a more serious note, you have to be a jerk to live in this environment. You have to be tough and gritty and show no vulnerabilities. The top men who run this "noir city" will eat you alive if you don't; you'd never survive being weak. This is why the protagonists have such witty, fast-talking, suave, sometimes harsh personalities. This bravado shows others that they are confident and can handle themselves. The bad guys respect this; they won't bully someone who acts like one of them.

Seeing that the characters we are supposed to see as "good" can be on the same side as the bad guys gives them a sense of ambiguity. They possess qualities of a good guy, but also those of a bad one. Since they did grow up in this rough side of town, it's understandable how they can act this way. We see Spade hiding evidence from the police and even cutting deals with Kasper Gutman, the crime boss in the movie, as a means to an end (to find out about the Maltese Falcon). The same goes with Bailey in *Out of the Past* when he accepts jobs from Whit, a man

with an obviously shady background—one that includes gambling, the mistreatment of Kathie, and his questionable sources of income. Money seems to be a recurring theme that motivates their actions. A quote from *Murder, My Sweet* puts it nicely: “You're not a detective, you're a slot machine. You'd slit your own throat for 6 bits plus tax.” They commit to these jobs and decisions because money is always involved, from the insurance fraud in *Double Indemnity* to the jewel heist in *The Asphalt Jungle*.

It should be found admirable that despite this, these men do choose the side of good. In fact most protagonists in this genre have careers being detectives or private eyes: they're on the side that fights crime. They always turn in the criminal, whether that is the love of their life, as in *Out of the Past* or even themselves, like in *Double Indemnity*. Even though their character and manners can easily be described as wrong and selfish, they always choose what's morally right in the end: a selfless decision. These inner struggles between good and bad give rise to deeper emotions. They don't know which side they'd rather be on and this creates a distance that occurs within them. For instance, Walter Huff in the book version of *Double Indemnity* explains why he agrees to kill a man for the scam:

All right, I'm an agent. I'm a croupier in that game. I know all their tricks, I lie awake nights thinking up tricks so I'll be ready for them when they come at me. And then one night I think up a trick, and get to thinking I could crook the wheel myself... If that seems funny to you, that I would kill a man just to pick up a stack of chips, it might not seem so funny if you were back of that wheel, instead of out front. I had seen so many houses burned down, so many cars wrecked, so many corpses with blue holes in their temples, so many awful things that people had pulled to crook the wheel, that that stuff didn't seem real to me anymore. (Cain 15)

Huff had seen so much pain throughout his life that he disconnects himself from the real world in order to cope. It's not surprising that he and the rest of the protagonists feel alone.

These feelings of aloneness become apparent when they first meet their respective femme fatales. The men are impulsive when they see a beautiful woman. They would go to great extremes, even agree to kill a man, if it meant keeping the person they potentially love. They assume that this is what's going to make them happy, a feeling that they all are missing and try to hide behind a rough exterior. The characters depend so much on money, women, gambling and lust to bring them happiness because those are the only things readily available in this noir urban environment. They're used to it. It's only when they get betrayed by the money and women that they realize there's nothing better this world they live in has to offer. When we see Dix drive back to his farm on the countryside or Bailey and his gas station in the middle of a small town, this is when the character's real nature shows. When they leave the noir city, all of its influences are gone with it

and the protagonist can finally enjoy the little things life has to offer, things that bring them true joy.

I want to take a closer look at *The Asphalt Jungle* because it stands out from the rest. In this film, there is no clear-cut “hero,” or femme fatale. The woman we are given is one who loves Dix dearly and wants to see him succeed. She pulls no tricks and has no bad intentions; she just wants to be with him. The protagonist we are following is actually a low-life criminal, this time choosing the bad side of society. This is someone we are supposed to dislike but really grow to sympathize with throughout the movie.

At the start of the film, Handley is on a lineup and we are led into believing that he’s the antagonist and Lt. Ditrich is the usual gritty protagonist. As the story progresses, we find out that Ditrich is a corrupt cop who abuses his power and blackmails criminals. Dix on the other hand is a small time thug who is just trying to pay his rent. He lives in a small apartment and doesn’t seem to need any more than that. In fact, when Doc offers him riches in the form of the jewels, Dix refuses without hesitation saying: “What would I do with them?” (*The Asphalt Jungle*). He also does a few other noble things such as: saving Doc’s life when they were held at gunpoint by Emmerich, offering Doll a place to stay when she gets kicked out of her apartment, and returning to his childhood farm to see his horses one last time before dying. This character is still a likable guy despite the bad path he chose for his life. We can assume he was led down this path because of the influence the noir city has on its inhabitants, especially our main character.

What makes these men heroes is not the same as what makes Superman or Spiderman a hero. These detectives, thugs, private-eyes, and insurance salesmen don’t have super powers; they’re just regular guys living in a messed up world. A hero is someone with courage, someone who is noble and makes the right choices in the end. In this world that the genre created, it’s not easy to have these qualities when everything’s out to get you. Sam and Jeff both do the noble thing by turning in the woman of their dreams. Walter has the courage to confess to his crimes. Similarly, Dix doesn’t go on a revenge-fueled killing spree when he gets injured. He has the willpower and strength to stay alive to see the last thing that mattered to him in life. This is very touching and generates much respect for the character.

A hero is also someone we can admire. I admire these men for their charisma, the way they handle themselves, their independence, their confidence. They stand up to anyone who gets in their way. The decisions they make may be questionable but that doesn’t change the fact that they are strong-willed and strong-minded characters. Other people in film noir can also find the protagonist admirable and see him as a personal hero. Doll, for example, finds Dix to be her hero because he gives her a place to stay when she has nowhere else to go, or Ann from *Out of the Past* because Philip helps bring her devious mother to justice.

It’s strange how supporting characters like Keyes from *Double Indemnity* or the police commissioner from *The Asphalt Jungle* aren’t considered the heroes of the story since they are the men trying to catch the criminals. In reality, they are the ones we are supposed to root for since these guys are trying to catch the criminal. We grow up being taught that if a person does bad things, then they are

labeled as the bad guy and the person trying to bring this person to justice is the good guy. But we don't side with the "good guys" because we grow to like these "bad guys;" we feel a connection and want to see them succeed as with any hero. We know what struggles they have gone through and feel sorry for them. We want to see them get away, not get into more trouble. The "good guys" hinder this and try to foil the protagonist's plans. If you look at it from this angle, these supporting characters could almost be considered a sort of villain; someone who doesn't want to see the protagonist succeed.

Film noir is an interesting genre as it gives an exaggerated yet thought-provoking look at the dark side of humanity. In a world rich in lust, temptation, greed, and crime, it's hard not to become overtaken by it all. The protagonists seen in these films are not nice people, far from it. But as we grow with these characters, experience their hardships, and see what they go through, we can get a sense of why they act this way. Their witty, arrogant personalities are a defense mechanism for adapting to their surroundings while keeping their true emotions and morality stored away, until that morality is eventually seen in the film's resolution. These movies show us that there's always some good to be found even in the most corrupt of societies.

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