

Lindsay Mitchell—The Femme Fatale

Why I Love Teaching This Course

The femme fatale, a sexually attractive woman who brings destruction to the men she encounters, fascinates me because she seems to express endless contradictions. A pulp fiction [trope](#) that came to prominence in the United States not long after women gained suffrage, the femme fatale is accorded an almost supernatural level of power, but that power derives from her sexuality and so is totally dependent on the approval of men. She occupies the visual center of the media in which she appears, but her centrality is often interpreted as a [metaphor for her narcissism](#) and is reviled. She is liberated, but that liberation must be contained by the end of the stories that feature her—she is almost always vanquished or killed. Her allure is real but ominous.

Because diametric opposites define the femme fatale, she has become possibly the most enduring female archetype in American film, reflecting through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries rapidly evolving attitudes toward female empowerment. The trope's flexibility has meant that the femme fatale is equally apt for conveying the [blatantly misogynistic message of classic noir](#), as well as the mixed or supportive messages on female empowerment that sometimes appear in neo-noir. In my course, we look at the femme fatale archetype over time, from the height of its prominence during the 1930's and 1940's, to the modern era where many femme fatales retain some of the original sexist implication of the noir version, but also often represent significant twists on the archetype. We'll start the semester by examining the archetypal femme fatale from the 1930's era pulp fiction novel *Double Indemnity*. Then we'll turn to updated versions of the archetype in the turn-of-the-century films [Ten Things I Hate About You](#) and [Election](#), both featuring high school-age fatales. For the last unit of the course, students will choose to research and write about any figure—either real or fictional—they think represents a modern version of the trope. [Whether or not the femme fatale can ever be a purely empowering archetype for women](#) will be an enduring question of the course.

One of my favorite parts of the class is applying the femme fatale archetype as a lens for understanding public discussions of real women, such as [Nicki Minaj](#), [Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez](#), or [Michelle Wolf](#). In this class we'll honor several "Femme Fatales of the Week" who represent categories of women who might be perceived as dangerous for the way they embody threats to traditional gender norms. These discussions help students imagine how they might approach writing about their own modern femme fatale for the final research paper, while also gesturing toward the larger stakes of the course topic—that many modern strong women are viewed as femme fatales, even though the "destruction" these real women bring to men is usually imagined or symbolic rather than literal. We'll talk about how this dynamic applies to female professionals in comedy, in government, and in the music industry. How is their power viewed differently in each case, and how does the femme fatale archetype shed light on why even widely popular female icons sometimes draw ire for possessing that power?

Since the femme fatale is so common in pop culture, we'll also watch clips from several popular shows and movies that illuminate and celebrate the archetype in surprising ways, including [Do I Sound Gay](#), [Crazy Ex-Girlfriend](#), and [Batman Returns](#). So in addition to engaging with the serious implications of the femme fatale archetype, we'll also have plenty of fun with it, as the femme fatale is a pop culture product and is meant to be entertaining above all.