James M. Cain and the Naturalistic Hardboiled

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Several interesting theses have already been written on the Absurd in the work of James Mallahan Cain (1892-1977). In fact, Albert Camus had affirmed Cain was an inspiration for him, and a substantive number of Cain's publications matched the golden age of the philosophical movement in the nineteen-forties, with the publication of Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The confession of Meursault in *The Stranger* and Clamence's assumption that "le crime n'est pas tant de faire mourir que de ne pas mourir soi-même"[1] (92) in *The Fall* both parallel the situations and predicaments of hardboiled characters Walter Huff in *Double Indemnity* and Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.[2] The "hardboiled" fiction has been defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica as "a tough, unsentimental style of American crime writing that brought a new tone of earthy realism or naturalism to the field of detective fiction," using "graphic sex and violence, vivid but often sordid urban backgrounds, and fast-paced, slangy dialogue." This "new tone of earthy naturalism" needs to be investigated further.

The hardboiled genre is broadly a story about tough guys experiencing tough personal events and making tough choices in a naturalistic or realistic setting. Rooted in the disillusionment of the 1920s Lost-Generation writers like Ernest Hemingway and Francis Scott Fitzgerald, it is commonly acknowledged that the hardboiled fiction is a continuity of the roman noir, generally staging a disabused hero – often a private eye – struggling against an oppressive environment. However, very little is known about the naturalist tendencies of the "hardboiled" Cain's novels have been labeled. The reason is probably because naturalism was an active and prominent literary movement from the second half of the nineteenth century and petered out at the very beginning of the twentieth century, three decades before the beginning of Cain's career as a novelist with the publication of *The Postman* in 1934. American writer and critic, David Madden gives food for thought in the first chapter of his 2011 *James M. Cain: Hard-Boiled Mythmaker* in which he argues that:

> Nearly all critical studies on Cain focus on particular theoretical approaches (especially psychoanalysis) that tend to ignore the larger arcs of his fiction. Still, the tough novel's literary line of descent if fairly apparent: the European naturalism of Émile Zola; the Americanized naturalism of Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, commingled with the European realism of Gustave Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac; and the American selective realism of Stephen Crane. (2)

The statement was made, even if further justifications resting upon concrete passages of Cain's work were expected. In this article, the main purpose is to develop Madden's idea and perceive Cainian characters as embodiments of the naturalists' theories.

The importance of naturalism for the shaping of the roman noir is undeniable. Some aspects of Cain's novels are closely linked to the notions, which naturalists had elaborated in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the very beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, in *La Bête humaine*, Séverine suggests: "Vois-tu, j'ai lu ça, je ne me rappelle plus où, dans un roman bien sûr ; le mieux serait de faire croire à un suicide..."[3] (406) echoing the lovers' strategy after Mr. Nirdlinger's death in *Double Indemnity*. Additionally, the plot in Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* particularly resembles Cain's disposals of husbands. Whether it is with Cain or Zola, the murderous lovers tend towards pretense with disguised murders and veiled mischief. The likeness speaks volumes. American scholar Donald Pizer in *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* articulates his thoughts about naturalism as follows:

> [A naturalistic novel is] an extension of realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The naturalist, however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature. The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. (11)

The excessive nature of Cainian characters would be important to analyze in order to reinforce the affiliation of these two genres. However, Cain's hardboiled novels are not inherently naturalistic in the sense that some of the naturalistic features are absent. Naturalism favors detailed descriptions to perfect social observations. Cain does not. Naturalism opts for an external focalization. Cain prefers first-person narratives with the male protagonist as the narrator. Naturalist writers season their novels with free indirect speech. Cain greases his with raw extensive direct speech. The latter, as a "neo-naturalist," borrows a lot but adapts it just as much. The objective of this paper is then to elaborate on the notion of a revitalized naturalism through the example of James M. Cain's career as a journalist and by highlighting the recurring themes of his novels and naturalists as well – the *femme fatale*, human bestiality, figures of authority and fatality. This article is a comparative analysis of Cain's *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman* with other novels which are generally accepted as naturalistic[4], due to the sense of amorality, the Darwinist views and scientific and psychological principles they are endowed with. Similarities will be drawn to legitimize my statement and favor a consensus on the influence of naturalism long after its finest period. It will be a gateway to further assessments and contribution to the specificities of this revised naturalism suffusing Cain's craft and the hardboiled genre in general.

Naturalism Revitalized for the Sake of Journalism

Naturalism was concerned with the interlinking of social sciences and literature. Writers wanted to faithfully transpose scientific methods into art. To keep the lexical field of medicine, naturalism wanted to swab truth from fiction. Inspired by the theories of French physiologist Claude Bernard and positivist thinkers like Auguste Comte and Hippolyte Taine, naturalism finds its domain of inquiry in natural history, atheist views of the world and the study of biological

and geological sciences. Jean-Marie Charon wrote in an article entitled "Journalisme et sciences sociales. Proximités et malentendus" that the intersection between social sciences and journalism is self-evident. He notes that "ces écrivains et notamment l'école naturaliste, avec à sa tête Zola, […] vont se tourner vers la sociologie naissante pour développer le reportage social."[5] (18) Comparatively, Henri Mitterand described Zola's studies explaining that the famous novelist used to ask complete information about the salaries of workers while working on a new book or article, the organization of their working times; he wanted to know everything about their domestic life, what they ate, what they wore, etc. (36). In the same way, Cain was a reality-seeker. In *Characters and Plots in the Fiction of James M. Cain*, Robert L. Gale evokes the context of the birth of Cain's short story "Pastorale":

> During their meeting, Patten told Cain a yarn about two westerners who killed an old man, cut off his head, and were troubled when it bounced around in their wagon. Roy Hoopes also reports that "[t]o Patten's horror, Cain thought the story hilarious and asked if he could use." With Patten's permission, he did so, "Pastorale" being the result. (176)

Naturalists and Cain alike dealt with societal concerns and studied them, getting into low and middle-class environments in order to fully understand and exhaustively depict processes in their writings. Cain covered the Ruth Snyder case that would become the triggering event for the birth of *Double Indemnity*, and was part of the attendees during the trial. As an Easterner, born in Annapolis, Maryland, when he came to Los Angeles, he observed Californian people meticulously to see things from their point of view when writing his first-person narratives.

When comparing *The Postman* and *Double Indemnity*, it appears that Cain wanted to get up-to-date observation on California and issues on fraud. Many passages in one novel echo to the other and vice versa, making it obvious that he was working on the subject with great scrutiny:

> All the big money on an accident policy comes from railroad accidents. They found out pretty quick, when they began to write accident insurance, that the apparent danger spots, the spots that people think are danger spots, aren't danger spots at all. (…) They pay double indemnity for railroad accidents. (Cain, *Double Indemnity* 381)

This section parallels "that little $10,000 policy that Papadakis carried on his life" (Cain, *The Postman* 53), and the fact that "his widow would get $10,000 if he was killed in an accident, and $20,000 if the accident was a railroad train" (Cain, *The Postman* 60). For that matter, they have many other things in common when one considers both storylines. They are first-person narrated stories about sex, money and mariticide. It starts with an encounter. Inevitably, what interests Cain is the development of the encounter, the fermentation of the two germs.[6] A man and a woman have a love affair and decide as an afterthought that their romance cannot be complete without disposing of the problematic husband. The beginning of the stories involves a passage of seduction, followed by the murder which happens in a car, the woman driving the macabre procession. In the end, the murderous lovers undergo the deterioration of their union. Two blood-stained suns cannot share the same sky, or as François Guérif outlined: "la terre n'est pas assez vaste pour contenir deux êtres qui ont un tel secret entre eux,"[7] (101) or as Walter himself admits

in *Double Indemnity*: "the world isn't big enough for two people once they've got something like that on each other" (440).

Yet, a dissemblance is to be highlighted. In *The Postman*, Frank is not aware of the indemnity and the benefits beneath it. The theme of the fraud is minor; the characters are acquainted with it unintentionally whereas the fraud is at the core of *Double Indemnity* in which Walter is an insurance sales agent and perfectly knows about fraud and alternatives to circumvent the law. Walter kills to put years of training into cold practice; Frank does not. *The Postman* (1934) was rather a draft than a complementary piece of work to *Double Indemnity* (1943).[6] As a journalist, Cain searched for further details in the insurance world. As a writer, he upgraded the murder into a planned and much more cunning process.

Before his breakthrough as a novelist, Cain had written fourteen years for newspapers including *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Lorraine Cross*, a paper he edited during his military service with the Seventy-ninth Division of US Army during the First World War, and seven years for *The New York World* until it folded in 1931. When Cain published *The Postman* in 1934, his long-time journalist career easily manifested itself in his work and set the tone for the reviews that were to come. American poet and critic William Rose Benét began his review in *The Saturday Review of Literature* by saying that "[y]ou read about such people as those in this novel almost every day in the newspapers." He even concluded that *The Postman* originated from "the sensationalism of America fostered by the daily press." (503) Then, he interestingly benchmarked Cain's budding novelist career against Frank Norris's. Furthermore, Cain was not the first journalist turned into a writer. Indeed, Ernest Hemingway began the same year his career as a journalist – it was in 1917. Before them, other great figures of American literature had first been reporters; Stephen Crane (1871-1900), Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) and John Steinbeck (1902-1968) in the United States and Emile Zola (1840-1902) in France, who all bore the naturalist stamp, had the same professional standing. Journalism should not be seen as a concession by default, an intermediary or a way among others to earn a living, but rather as a means to reach the fictional writing of an observation – the observation of societal behaviors. A journalistic background on a resume then proved to be suitable for someone who was willing to launch into naturalistic writing.

The *Femme Fatale*

The first element that drastically connects nineteenth century naturalism to the twentieth century hardboiled novels is the likeness of the depiction of their female antiheroines. In his book *Les idoles de la perversité*, Bram Dijkstra puts into light the negative imagery women are being given in nineteenth century art:

> Au dix-neuvième siècle, qui se croit volontiers le siècle du progrès, l'un des subterfuges favoris du dualisme pour entraver le changement sera de piétiner les droits de la femme en la faisant passer pour la bête de l'Apocalypse.[8] (230)

The same connection between the woman and lethality is to be perceived in Cain's twentieth century viewpoint. The typical Cainian *femme fatale* is a woman who acknowledges the power of her sexuality and uses it to overthrow the male sex.

Femmes fatales are strong women facing weak men they easily get rid of: "If [Cora's husband] had had any brains, he would have known there was something back of it (...) [but] he was dumb, and kept crabbing." (Cain, *The Postman* 7) In *Double Indemnity*, Mr. Nirdlinger walks on crutches; additionally, his first name is never mentioned in the novel, which tends to put him in a position of inferiority and dislocation. Eventually, the inability of the husbands to suspect adultery and their wives' arousal towards another man is to a considerable extent the cause of their murders. Towards the end of *Double Indemnity*, the twist reveals that Phyllis is a dangerous psychopath, who had previously been a killer nurse. She yearns for an extreme emancipation and is at odds with the mother figure archetype. At the end of Walter's account, Phyllis "looks like what came aboard the ship to shoot dice for souls in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*." (465) What came aboard to shoot dice for mariners in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem is Death, represented as a skeleton. Phyllis is Death, obviously the most symbolic – and flattering – depiction a *femme fatale* could get. It is then important to recall that she is living, as soon as the story starts, in the "House of Death" (Cain, *Double Indemnity* 365), and wears the insignia of stated sexuality: "She had on a white sailor suit, with a blouse that pulled tight over her hips, and white shoes and stockings. I wasn't the only one that knew about that shape. She knew about it herself plenty" (371). Phyllis gets close to famous courtesans like La Belle Otero or Zola's Nana whose abilities for symbolical castrations cannot be questioned. She is an accomplished destroyer that puts men to auto-destruction.

In the nineteenth century, progress was made in criminology and a shift from the established classical school to the Italian school of criminology occurred. The concepts stating that human nature is imbued by crime from the start was debunked by the *crème de la crème* in terms of physiognomy and phrenology. Criminology was studied alongside biological anthropology; criminals were to be diagnosed in accordance with their skeletal structure – especially the skull – which was supposed to give an indisputable answer for someone's criminal behavior. The most famous theorist of this school of thought, Cesare Lombroso, often considered the father of the modern criminology, considerably inspired Zola's reflections on psychopathologies. He identifies in his book *The Female Offender* the physiological characteristics of the woman turned into a criminal. The subterfuge pointed out by Dijkstra had started. The woman – predictable enterprise – becomes the ideal persecutor. The affiliation of Cain's hardboiled fiction with the Lombrosian point of view gets deeper since the Cainian female criminal looks interestingly similar:

> The female born criminal does not always commit her crime herself. Often, unless she be endowed with masculine strength of muscle, or her intended victim be another woman, or her contemplated crime an insidious one, such as poisoning or incendiarism, her courage fails. (…) For the born criminal is especially to be recognised by the fact that in a joint crime the part played by her is that of an incubus, to use an expression of Sighele's: she eggs on her accomplice to the deed with an extraordinary refinement of wickedness. (178)

Phyllis's and Cora's succubus roles are undeniable; they seduce Walter and Frank as soon as the first dialogue is arranged. From a categorical refusal to the resolute encouragement, the limit is rapidly crossed. In *Double Indemnity*, it only takes one short sentence from Walter to make Phyllis change her mind:

> "Please, Walter, don't let me do this. We can't. It's simply – insane."
> "Yes, it's insane."
> "We're going to do it. I can feel it." (378)

Diagnosing Phyllis as a lunatic would be too simple; her supplication for not killing her husband follows her own decision to hint at the possibility of having her husband dead. The strategy for Cainian wives is to engage a proposal to the newly found lover. Then, they make this proposal appear as horrendous as if it had not surfaced from their own initiative. And finally, they stimulate the lover, ask him to take into consideration the idea, even if, suddenly, they give the impression to refuse. For Cora in *The Postman*, the problem is that Frank wants to run away with her to dispose of the husband, unharmed. It puts her in a difficult position – she wants the money Frank's nomadism would not provide. First, she puts out feelers for plotting the murder by stating that she "just can't stand it anymore." (13) After Frank's proposal to answer the call of the road, Cora set herself up as a devoted lover who would not bear seeing Frank "in a smock." (14) In fact, it is the very idea of seeing herself miserable which makes her refuse Frank's first offer.

In focusing closer on Cainian female protagonists' attitude and appearance, one may easily acknowledge the verisimilitude of Lombroso's theory. A well-known Lombrosian preconception is the connection of female criminals to the already well-established idea of hysteria. Etymologically speaking, the term is already strongly linked with the female sex; the Ancient Greek *husterikós* "suffering in the uterus, hysterical" and *husterá* "womb" recall an ancient belief that hysteria was uterine and *per se* a feminine affliction. Medically recognized in the nineteenth century by famous neurologists and psychologists like Jean-Martin Charcot and later by Sigmund Freud, women were commonly diagnosed with hysterical ailments. At odds with the male type, linked with neurasthenia, Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* also seems to be affected by the illness after the murder: "Get out! Get out! I'll go insane!" (410) whereas Walter's neurasthenic symptoms, as if contaminated by the female sex, appear about an hour later: "I was sicker than I had ever been in my life. After that passed I fell into bed" (411).

Bestiality and the Resurgence of Cruelty

The animal imagery in Cain's writing is undoubtedly similar to nineteenth century naturalism's bestial representations; human beings have primitive instincts of violence. McTeague has "an ape-like agility" which foresees an upcoming resurgence of animal instincts. In addition, Trina, who "fought for her miserable life with the exasperation and strength of a harassed cat," (Norris 205) echoes the cat imagery in *The Postman* and *Double Indemnity*. Indeed, Cora looks "like a hell cat," (Cain, *The Postman* 13) Frank's "breath was roaring in the back of [his] throat like [he] was some kind of a animal," (Cain, *The Postman* 41) Walter notices that "[t]he firelight was reflected in [Phyllis's] eyes like she was some kind of leopard" (Cain, *Double Indemnity* 380) and he finds Phyllis and himself "snarling at each other like a couple of animals." (Cain, *Double Indemnity* 410)

To back up his argument on the criminal profile, Lombroso wrote in *La Femme criminelle et la prostituée* about the scene an acquaintance of his had been the witness. The animal

infidelity and perversity of this account drastically resembles the human depiction of Cainian and nineteenth century naturalistic criminal couples:

> Charles Vogt raconte que depuis quelques années, un couple de cigognes faisait son nid dans un village près de Solette. Un jour on remarqua que lorsque le mâle était à la chasse, un autre plus jeune venait courtiser la femelle ; d'abord il fut repoussé, puis toléré, puis accueilli, et à la fin les deux adultères volèrent sur la prairie ou le mari chassait les grenouilles et le tuèrent à coups de becs.[9] (179)

One of the greatest achievements of naturalism was to knock humanity off its pedestal. Such philosophers as René Descartes or contemporary thinkers like Donald Davidson had persuaded – and still do – a larger portion of the population that animals, human beings excepted, are unconscious. We, humans, are endowed with the gift of rationality and reason. Naturalism jettisoned the undeserved gift, or, one could say, proved the gift to be cheap junk. From then on, human beings are offered back the uncontrollable instincts which approximate them from the wild animal since time immemorial. In *The Postman*, Madge Allen interestingly associates human deeds to animalistic nature. Indeed, the likeness grows clearer when she speaks about one of her pumas and states that "[i]f it was people, he would be a crazy person." (81) The tendency of the protagonists to become beasts is the corollary to their wild natures, their inability to consider civilization as their natural environment.

In *Double Indemnity*, Walter analyzes his relationship with Phyllis through animal incompatibility – he "loved her like a rabbit loves a rattlesnake." (426) His animal instinct drives him impulsively, irrationally – unconsciously, Descartes would have said – towards the enemy. An English reader would say that he has walked *into the lion's den*, a French one would conclude that he has fallen *dans la gueule du loup* (idiomatically, 'into the wolf's mouth'). In any case, naturalism uses zoomorphism on purpose; anthropologically-speaking, human beings are part of the animal kingdom, they are not immune to bestiality, which can momentarily spring up. Naturalism adores reptilian imagery to insist on this fact: in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, at some point, Tess "was yawning, and [Clare] saw the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake's" (179). It calls to mind Keyes's derogatory terms, comparing Phyllis to "an Irrawaddy cobra" (Cain, *Double Indemnity* 456).

The *femme fatale* in naturalistic novels is often in a state of transformation, which raises an objection concerning her femininity. Cesare Lombroso meticulously discussed the ultimate female criminal:

> [T]he female criminal, who is excessively erotic, weak in maternal feeling, inclined to dissipation, astute and audacious, and dominates weaker beings sometimes by suggestion, at others by muscular force; while her love of violent exercise, her vices, and even her dress, increase her resemblance to the sterner sex. (…) But when by an unfortunate chance muscular strength and intellectual force meet in the same individual, we have a female delinquent of a terrible type in-deed. (Lombroso and Ferrero 187-188)

It is quite difficult not to think of Phyllis while reading this excerpt in which all the characteristics – except the clothes – match her profile. These elements may reevaluate her

female sex; her lethality is equated with the succubus's. An interesting passage in *Double Indemnity* may imply that Phyllis is not a woman but a female-shaped demon: "That man must have weighed 200 pounds, but she had him on her back, holding him by the handle, and staggering along with him, over the tracks." (408) Phyllis is endowed with an exceptional physical strength, which corroborates Lombroso's statement. The Cainian woman is a beast. As a wife, she "wears the pants" and is the only one who decides when her marriage must come to an end.

Figures of Authority

The role of the poisonous *femme fatale* in roman noir and naturalist novels is closely linked. The *Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* states that "although scholars typically associate this character type with film noir, Orr locates its origins in literary naturalism." (Newlin 489) Examples abound: in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Carrie is seeking independence and strives to become a powerful woman. She uses her charms to manipulate Drouet with keen mindedness. Carrie double-deals and plays a role to set up what will later be a breach of trust: "Carrie was an apt student of fortune's way – of fortune's superficialities. Seeing a thing, she would immediately set to inquiring how she would look, properly related to it." (81) In the same way, Cora and Phyllis, respectively in *The Postman* and *Double Indemnity*, appeal to Frank and Walter's goodwill. It does not mean the *femme fatale* would have not committed murder all by herself, especially with as dark a background as Phyllis's, but making it by using a man is tempting. Manipulating him and persuading him to kill another man is a challenge a *femme fatale* adores because it is the living proof that her charms still work.

Therefore, women are depicted in a derogatory way. Tess is a "damned witch of Babylon!" (Hardy 118), and Cora "looked like the great-grandmother of every whore in the world" (Cain, *The Postman* 75), recalling Zola's quasi-monstrous depictions of his Nana, an ogress of lubricity. Although intimidating, the woman is physically and symbolically wounded in the womb. Indeed, Tess loses her baby; Thérèse has a miscarriage; Nana does likewise, later gives birth to a child but he will transmit the smallpox to her; and Cora dies while being pregnant, rendering her purification by the sea non-symbolic and inefficient for virginity regained. These four women demonstrate through the fatality of the mother that there is punishment for the mother's posterity. The authority of the *alma mater* is undermined. The progeny, being marked by the ruthless seal of Fate, recalls atavistic perspectives.

To offset the amorality pervading naturalistic and hardboiled novels, the power of justice is often exerted by secondary characters. Mme Raquin in *Thérèse Raquin* is the figure of truth, of uncompromising sense of justice. At the end of the novel, while suffering from a locked-in syndrome, she becomes a repository of unremitting blame. Keyes in *Double Indemnity* plays an identical role – the one of the father figure Walter wants to surpass. The notion of justice is reassessed, and figures of authority are not the ones we may have expected. Except for Tess and Frank, other murderers are not arrested by the police. Justice is considerably distorted. In *The Postman*, the trial "began to sound like a sales track" (60) and the main purpose of the battle in court turns out to be a bet between the attorneys Katz and Sackett. In *Double Indemnity*, Walter is helped by Keyes to avoid the death penalty for commercial reasons. It would have been a disaster for the image of the insurance company:

> We can't hush it up, we know that. But having it come out that an agent of this company committed murder is one thing. Having it plastered all over every paper in the country for the two weeks of a murder trial is something else. (460)

Justice is intrinsically self-serving. Worse still, in Norris's *McTeague*, the act of revenge is rendered trivial. Marcus rapidly forgets to avenge Trina's murder because his own future is at stake and matters more than the honor of a dead cousin and ex-fiancée: "the sense of enmity between the two had weakened in the face of a common peril" (241).

Finally, the ghost figure, which enables the downfall of the protagonists, appears to be a figure of authority in both nineteenth century naturalist novels and Cain's hardboiled stories. In Cain's *The Postman* and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* and *La Bête humaine*, the ghost of the dead husband materializes and takes the form of the murderers' torments. It is the ghost who is the first to shove them out from their mountain of irresponsibility. At some point, Frank lets on about his life which has become an ordeal:

> I want to go somewhere else, where every time I look around I don't see the ghost of a goddam Greek jumping out at me, and hear his echo in my dreams, and jump every time the radio comes out with a guitar. I've got to go away, do you hear me? I've got to get out of here, or I go nuts. (Cain, *The Postman* 78)

Frank, Walter, and also Laurent and Thérèse in *Thérèse Raquin* or Séverine who has "un élancement de souffrance si aigu, qu'elle se sentit prête soudain à tout affronter, pour en finir (…) allant là comme on se suicide"[10] in *La Bête humaine*, experience post-murder symptoms of discomfort and psychosis: an "awful crack" (Cain, *The Postman* 64) in Frank's ears and traumatic nightmares for Laurent: "Ses rêveries recommencèrent. (…) Le cadavre lui tendait les bras, avec un rire ignoble, en montrant un bout de langue noirâtre dans la blancheur des dents"[11] (Zola 2004, 136-137). The reason is that they are all haunted by gnawing remorse. The indigenous belief of ghost sickness becomes an issue for urban populations.

Thérèse Raquin, *The Postman* and *La Bête humaine* are stories which prefigured hauntology, a term which was first coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*. To justify his idea of situational disjunction, he first used the example of Communism in Europe, which has been lost in time but still haunts the minds, being absent and present at the same time. The host becomes the ghost, the husband is hovering in the air, and becomes a feared absent present. Murderers are then puzzled – the dead don't die, do they? If they do actually die, their presence is to be felt in the present; consequently, they fracture the concept of temporality.

The Sense of Tragedy

Cainian characters experience disillusionment up to the lassitude and the disgust naturalist heroes are generally acquainted with. The enjoyments of life gradually make way for an abyss of discontent and survival. The murderous lovers have unleashed forces they cannot master; finding out that they cannot cope with these excessive forces, they turn lethargic, abashed and bitter. The aftermath could not be anything except tragedy. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Charles Bovary is a mediocre husband and cannot give Emma any satisfaction in life, just like Nick Papadackis

and Mr. Nirdlinger. Bovarysme denotes an attitude of denial concerning the reality of life. Bovaryst characters generally use a variety of stratagems to veneer disappointment with layers of illusions to intensify frenzy. Just like in Flaubert's novel, the ignorance of reality and excessive romantic heroism bequeath Cainian characters a great strength of character. They go beyond the reality of marriage, governmental authority, moral laws and values. In *Double Indemnity*, Walter and Phyllis even disregard the conventions of life, they are the only one to dictate the principles they bend to. They become heroes who have the audacity to dismantle the monotony of their lives. Their alleged suicide by throwing themselves in a shark-infested ocean gives another dimension to their 'swimming against the flow' behavior. Walter and Phyllis do not sail away, carried by the waves; on the contrary, they crash into the water, an indicator that the reality of life run smack into them. In the same way, Emma's realization of her loss of potential and crippling debt is a blow. Denial cannot be maintained; arsenic poisoning is the only available solution.

Flaubert defined the term Bovarysme stating that: "L'homme est ainsi: il va alternativement du Midi au Nord et du Nord au Midi, du chaud au froid, se fatigue de l'un, demande l'autre et regrette le premier"[12] (Terrien 6). It is in compliance with the attitude of indecisiveness and impulsivity Cain's characters develop. It does not take long for Frank to suggest a trip to someone he has been talking to for a couple of minutes, implying that he got tired of Cora: "What do you say we turn this thing around, point her south, and you and me take a little trip for about a week?" (Cain, *The Postman* 80) He has asked for someone else but quickly regrets his choice. Thereafter, Madge Allen is only a memory; Cora and Frank hastily get married. Moreover, the process of debunking the husband is as acute in Cain's novels as in *Madame Bovary*. The unsatisfying husband cannot keep up with the temperamental wife's demand. The split was inevitable. The predominance of brief dialogues between the wife and the husband for each novel is indicative of a state of solitude, of a world where communication lacks. The husband is expendable; Emma, "comme si vingt fois déjà elle n'avait pas suffisamment apercu sa médiocrité,"[13] (Flaubert 263) would have easily plotted to get him killed if her character had been created by a Raymond Chandler or a Dashiell Hammett. The same thing happens in Cain's *The Postman* where Nick's greasiness is a plague for Cora: "It was being married to that Greek that made her feel she wasn't white, and she was even afraid I would be calling her Mrs. Papadakis." (7)

Another characteristic included in both Cain's novels and naturalistic works is the opposition between death and life. Trina's murder in *McTeague* happened in the cloakroom of a kindergarten and her body was found by the children, youth being a blatant symbol of life. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis's past as a killer nurse gives the same Manichean contrast between poison and cure. In *The Postman*, it is said that when Frank and Cora kiss, they are kisses "that come from life, not death" (95), but it is actually deceitful. Their union comes from death and death permeates the story – sarcastically enough, Cora attends her mother's funeral just before the scene... In *McTeague*, McTeague's pursuer is metaphorically Death, hanging upon his heels, seeking to complete the retribution he deserves. The place is telling – he is being chased in the Death Valley. McTeague experiences his Stations of the Cross; the Cross he bears is the burden of his greed and the consequences of Trina's murder: "He was scorched and parched from head to heel. It seemed to him that the smart of his tortured body could not have been keener if he had been flayed." He is "flagellated with heat" and the "score of black, crawling objects" (234-

235) he describes recalls the Erinyes in Greek mythology, revengeful persecutors and, due to Athena, protectors of Justice.

Whether it is in Cain's novels or in any other naturalist novel, the protagonists have to face an inevitable ending. Phyllis admits through an innuendo, that the only way out for them is to die: "There's nothing ahead of us, is there Walter?" (Cain, *Double Indemnity* 464) Cora, in her case, seems trapped. Her pessimistic view of her future is telling:

> But I thought an awful lot, Frank. Last night. About you and me, and the movies, and why I flopped, and the hashhouse, and the road, and why you like it. We're just two punks, Frank. God kissed us on the brow that night. He gave us all that two people can ever have. And we weren't the kind that could have it. (Cain, *The Postman* 74)

Just like Marcus and McTeague who have no water left and even no bullets left to put an end to their predicament, they are all doomed. The importance given to fatality is also remarkable in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The day of the wedding, the "crowing of a cock" (221) in the afternoon brings to mind a traditional superstition of bad luck for the bride and the groom. The bad omen is quickly confirmed as, after the wedding, Tess is told that "poor little Retty Priddle has tried to drown herself." (227) The impression that life is fragile suffuses every instant of Tess's existence and every corner of places she goes along. Later in the novel, Angel lays Tess, though living and in good shape, in a coffin (251) and enhances the already well-established moribund aspect of the story. Later, her encounter with a shepherd solidifies the fatality and seals her fate:

> "What is the meaning of that old stone I have passed?" she asked of him. "Was it ever a Holy Cross?"
> "Cross – no; twer not a cross! Tis a thing of ill-omen, Miss. It was put up in wuld times by the relations of a malefactor who was tortured there by nailing his hand to a post and afterwards hung. The bones lie underneath. They say he sold his soul to the devil, and that he walks at times."
> She felt the *petite mort* at this unexpectedly gruesome information, and left the solitary man behind her." (306-307)

Symbols, remarks and ominous imageries entrap the protagonists from naturalistic and hardboiled novels towards suffering and extinction. In Stroheim's 1924 adaptation of *McTeague*, while Trina and McTeague's get married, a funeral procession is passing outside the window. The fatality surrounding the couple provided by the juxtaposition of the wedding with the unalienable touch of death in the background is striking. In *The Postman*, the electrocution of the cat during the first attempt to kill Nick Papadakis definitely anticipates the fall of the lovers. Cora is herself often assimilated to a cat; the electrocuted animal mirrors and anticipates her own death. Later, she even tells Frank that she has "heard of women that had a miscarriage" (97), unaware that she will die while pregnant. The womb becomes tomb. In addition, *Ossessione*, Visconti's adaptation of *The Postman*, opens with Giovanna's husband Giuseppe singing Germont's aria "Di Provenza Il Mar" from Verdi's *La Traviata*. Fatality is at its finest, bedizened with an opera which recounts Violetta and Alfredo's unconditional love, tragically ending with Violetta's death in Alfredo's arms, dying of tuberculosis.

Conclusion

Cain points out the social characteristics of his time by incorporating it straight within his characters. Cora and Frank and Phyllis and Walter are embodiments of a generation which gets more and more modern, organic and anticlerical. Cheating becomes commonplace. The Cainian lifestyle is a foil to Romanticism and its opinion on adultery, a theme written about in such romantic novels as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, depicting an archaic and bygone strictness the naturalists and realists had already pointed out. The twentieth century individual opts to respond to the requests of his or her body and mind over the traditional demand of society. Consumerism, overpowering capitalism, the increase of urban life and democracy, the Church's decreasing influence and progress in psychology are some of the many factors which undoubtedly helped the shift from marital entrapment to the undemonization of adultery. Taking into consideration that *Double Indemnity* – and a substantial part of *The Postman*'s storyline – have been influenced by the antecedence of a controversial case of murder could even open up new interesting perspectives on Cain being a trailblazer for nineteen-sixties New Journalism and the influence that the nineteen-thirties American literature, American and European naturalism could have had on such writers as Tome Wolfe, who wrote an introduction to a 1969 trilogy of early Cain novels, or Truman Capote and his 1966 non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*.

Hardboiled and naturalist heroes are antagonistic to the Nietzschean superhuman, the Übermensch or like Raskolnikov's opinion that some men can kill, and others cannot in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The Cainian protagonists, just like the aforementioned characters from nineteenth century naturalism, try at all costs to free themselves from the confining forces of society yet end up being subjugated by them. Like a vast majority of naturalist heroes, Cainian protagonists stand out from the crowd by choosing an individual destiny. They strive for their emancipation; they fight for a liberty that goes far beyond conventional expectations and they indulge themselves with their own interpretation of justice and personal happiness. The path they decide to take is the symbol of a freedom of character, a vital need for satisfaction, an outrage for moral integrity but a complete devotion for the insolent integrity of the self. Freedom should not be restricted to the strangleholds of moralization and sanctimony. Total individualism for the wife comes with the disposal of the husband. Total individualism for a citizen comes along with a nonchalance and denial of the restrictive laws of society. They are free because they give themselves the right to kill.

The Cainian utopia is Murderland. The lovers are avant-garde people, visionaries of a new way to encapsulate love and grasp opportunities of success. They are restless idealists in their desires for extreme claims of independence, whether it is conventionally good or evil. Naturalism, just like the hardboiled fiction, is a representation of a profoundly individualistic population. Society is a dangerous entity in which social interactions are risky games. The reason why Walter prefers to metaphorically be a croupier rather than a player comes from the ability of the first one to perceive the contrivances of society. Characters do not trust the environment they live in anymore; the only people deemed trustworthy are themselves. Frank and Walter favor introspection when things lead them astray. From the start, they are left to their own devices. No mention of their parents, of any friend or relative… they both yield to the temptation of the *femme fatale* they meet because of the seclusion of their own hearts. Seclusion correlates with the finest

subtleties of emotional vulnerability. The internalization of ferocious feelings is favored; naturalist and hardboiled protagonists have first emphasized on their apparent callosity, the explosion of their inhibited feelings afterwards.

Notes

[1] "[…] the crime is not so much the act of killing but self-survival."

[2] From now on, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* will be referred to as *The Postman*.

[3] "Look here, I have read this somewhere, I have forgotten where, in a novel for sure: the best thing would be to make believe that he committed suicide."

[4] Flaubert always rejected any affiliation, considering his work to be deeply realist. *Madame Bovary*, however, differs from almost all his other works due to the influence of the countryside milieu over Emma and the scientific content surfacing from Bovarysme.

[5] "These writers, and the naturalist school in particular, Zola at the head of it, turned to nascent sociology to develop social reporting."

[6] French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne metaphorically developed his ideas on the importance of the social environment for the development of a criminal mind with this aphorism: "Le milieu social est le bouillon de culture de la criminalité ; le microbe, c'est le criminel, un élément qui n'a d'importance que le jour où il trouve le bouillon qui le fait fermenter." ["The social environment is the breeding ground for crime; the germ is the criminal, an element that becomes important the day he discovers his breeding ground for fermentation."] (Renneville, 2)

[7] "Earth is not big enough to contain two souls who share such a secret."

[8] "In the nineteenth century, thought to be the century of progress, one of the favorite subterfuges of dualism to hinder a change was to trample on women's rights in making her appear as the beast of Apocalypse."

[9] "Charles Vogt observed a couple of storks that had for several years built their nests in a village near Solette. One day it was noticed that when the male was out in search of food, another young bird began to court the female. At first he was repulsed, then tolerated, and welcomed. At last, one morning the two birds flew away to the place where the husband was hunting for frogs, and killed him."

[10] "with such a keen pang of pain, that she suddenly felt ready to encounter anything, to put an end to the business (…) wending her way with the feelings of a person going to commit suicide."

[11] "His reverie began once more. (…) The corpse extended his arms to him, with a vile laugh, displaying the tip of a blackish tongue between its white teeth."

[12] "A man is that way: he goes alternately from South to North, from North to South, from heat to coldness, gets tired of one, asks for the other and regrets the first one."

[13] "As if she had not, twenty times already, seen his mediocrity enough."

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