

“THAT GIRL OF YOURS, SHE’S PRETTY HARD-BOILED”: *FILM NOIR* AND THE  
CLAIMING AND PERFORMANCE OF GENDER IN *VERONICA MARS*

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Corine Elizabeth Mathis

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## VITA

Corine Elizabeth Mathis, daughter of Glen and Kathy (Andrews) Mathis, was born September 5, 1984, in Kingsville, TX. She graduated from East Limestone High School in 2002. She attended the University of South Alabama and graduated *magna cum laude* in May 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a history minor. She entered Auburn University's Master of Arts in English program in August 2006. Upon graduation in May 2009, Corine plans to take a position teaching English in Huntsville, Alabama.

THESIS ABSTRACT

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*Veronica Mars*, a television series aired on the WB and CW networks from 2004-2007, presents a world in which violence and conspiracy abound. The series starts off with the conspiracy that has most closely touched Veronica’s life—the murder of Lilly Kane. Lilly was Veronica’s best friend, and her murder set off a series of events that led to Veronica’s father losing his position as sheriff, her mother leaving town, and Veronica being drugged and raped at a party. After Lilly’s murder, Neptune’s *noir* universe shifts; Veronica goes from a fun-loving, happy cheerleader to a vengeful, hard-boiled detective.

This study contends that *Veronica Mars* uses the conventions of *film noir* to create space in which gender can be discussed, evaluated, and reconstructed. First, the conventions of *film noir* are addressed in order to establish a framework for

understanding how they are essential in the creation of *Veronica Mars*' universe. The second section examines Veronica's world in order to note that the *noir* transformation was inevitable, as well as explaining both the stylistic and thematic consequences of this shift. Finally, the project addresses the ways in which gender is restructured in the show as a direct effect of Veronica's repositioning as the hard-boiled private investigator.

Instead of being a biologically determined trait, gender becomes a fluid, claimed thing for the inhabitants of Neptune. Fredric Jameson's theory of the pastiche is used to frame discussions of the series' overall impact, while Judith Butler's work on gender performance is the primary lens by which characters' motivations are discussed.

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Style manual used: MLA style manual, 6<sup>th</sup> edition.

Computer software used: Microsoft Word 2003.

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During July and August of 1946, American films returned to French screens after a wartime absence. After watching these films—*The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Laura* (1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), and *The Woman in the Window* (1944)—French film critics began to notice a trend.<sup>1</sup> The films, which revolve around murder and its consequences, reflect a postwar mindset of bleak alienation, isolation, and paranoia. Nino Frank was the first critic to write on these films; in his 1946 piece, “Un Nouveau Genre ‘Policier’: L’aventure Criminelle,” he referred to this trend as *film noir*, or black film, a term which came from both the cinematography and the overall mood of these films.<sup>2</sup> Often, they were directed by European Jewish refugees such as Billy Wilder, who had seen far too much of conformity and blind submission under Hitler’s reign. Unsurprisingly, these directors addressed their concerns in their films—alternate realities that seem all too real, where the seemingly wonderful authorities are actually a cover for the reality of a corrupted government, and where it is imperative that the conformity they demand must be resisted. These films went against the prevailing Hollywood focus on moral excellence and sweet romance, but still enjoyed popularity. As Mark T. Conard notes in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Krutnik, Frank. *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, and Masculinity*. London: Routledge, 1991. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ottoson, Robert. *A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir: 1940-1958*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981. 217.

inversion of values, the alienation and pessimism, the violence, and the disorientation of the spectator”, but the classic *noir* period is usually designated as beginning with John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and ending in 1958 with Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil*.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that critics are still divided on the correct designation for *noir*—genre or style? For the purposes of this study, *film noir* is a style of filmmaking rather than a genre. This reflects the variety of genres represented within *film noir*; there are western *noirs*, science fiction *noirs*, and—the subject of this study—even teen *noirs*. Because most *noir* films are essentially crime dramas, there are police procedurals, as well. The most recognizable and enduring characteristics are actually found in a minority of *film noir*; the hard-boiled detective, the *femme fatale*, and a gritty, urban setting are usually associated with the style, but these films were just as likely to concern a weak, sexually frustrated man in suburbia. These figures may be so prominent because they best exemplify the aura of paranoia and fatalism that so define the *noir* style.

While it is not the intention of this study to suggest that American culture after World War II was a monolith of fear, it is true that an overwhelming anxiety was at work for many citizens, and *film noir* reflects this.<sup>4</sup> R. Barton Palmer describes this mood quite well, saying that “[v]iolence and moral ambiguity, as well as murky character and action, create the effect of film noir, which is nothing less than making the spectator experience what these desperate characters feel: anguish and insecurity”<sup>5</sup>. These characters live in a

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<sup>3</sup> Conard, Mark T. *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. Lexington, KY: Kentucky UP, 2006. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Chopra-Gant, Mike. *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006. 146-148.

<sup>5</sup> Palmer, R. Barton. *Hollywood’s Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. 19.

world of alienation and paranoia; nothing is ever as it seems, and any character who is comfortable with the world is either corrupt or hopelessly naïve. Either way, the character is likely to die because of that comfort. There is an air of pessimism, disenchantment, and melancholy that permeates the atmosphere. The *noir* universe is essentially hopeless; characters struggle futilely against fate.<sup>6</sup> Bruce Crowther notes that the tone is one of moral ambiguity and occasionally moral bankruptcy; often, the protagonist, while possessing a morality that would be questionable in the real world, is the closest thing to a moral center.<sup>7</sup> *Film noir*, especially in its golden age, dealt with themes that were edgy and provocative; however, even though they used sex and violence to advance the storylines, directors and screenwriters got around the Hays Production Code by working within what was not explicitly banned. Much of each film's content rests on what the audience can imagine; still, in keeping with the Code, transgressive characters are punished.<sup>8</sup>

Stylistically, *film noir* is very distinctive. The shots are used to represent the disorientation of the protagonist; as they try to puzzle out their situation, the audience tries to gain their balance throughout low-angle shots and the prevalence of reflective, distorting objects. Night is the primary setting, with the action taking place on wet streets and seen through rain-slicked windows. The photography is dramatic, utilizing darkness just as much as light to create stark contrasts. These films are generally in black and white, making those shadows that much more important to see through. *Double*

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<sup>6</sup> Palmer, R. Barton. Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. 18-20.

<sup>7</sup> Crowther, Bruce. Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror. London: Columbus Books Ltd., 1988. 10-12.

<sup>8</sup> Palmer, R. Barton. Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. 50.

*Indemnity* (1944) is a good example of the style; Walter Neff is hidden by shadows at the beginning of the film, only emerging to begin his confession, and is often shown through the light allowed by partially open Venetian blinds. There is a preference for confessional style voiceovers, especially in those tales concerning a man destroyed by a *femme fatale*, which allow the character to clear his conscience and also help to structure the often confusing narratives. The hard-boiled detective protagonists, especially those played by Humphrey Bogart, have a wry, sarcastic—and sometimes sexist—way of speaking that has bled into the lexicon of American popular culture.

The protagonists of *noir* are antiheroes, and are some of the most recognized characters in American cinema. The hard-boiled detective, such as Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, is one of the most emblematic characters in *noir*. He is an Everyman; he drinks, smokes, and—one assumes—would curse a blue streak if not for the Production Code. He is obsessive, sexually or otherwise, and struggling to survive. As a result, he is generally distrustful, which is a job requirement, as

...the film noir detective must critically analyze everyone involved; not only his client, but also the people he is investigating. This is where toughness and cynicism pay off. For private detectives, cynicism is more than an attitude; it is something of a life skill, keeping them properly suspicious of those who might try to take advantage of them...Not understanding the situation can lead to arrest and imprisonment and even, sometimes, death.<sup>9</sup>

This private eye is a loner, isolated by choice and alienated from society. Because of this, he has few, if any, friends, and many enemies. He is not a talker; he is often

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<sup>9</sup> Knight, Elizabeth. "On Reason and Passion in *The Maltese Falcon*." *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky P, 2006. 209.

distinguished from the less trustworthy characters by his refusal to chatter about nothing. Still, he can be a witty conversationalist, a talent that reveals his hidden intelligence. As represented by Sam Spade, he is taciturn and abrupt, but often finds humor in the ridiculous, even though it is not a humor he intends to share with others—for him, it is more of a reminder of the futility of resistance in a world he cannot control.

He distrusts and is impatient with the police force, and any other socially approved justice system, because he sees them as essentially ineffective. Often, the detective will work alone to solve the case while the police fruitlessly chase red herrings and, occasionally, the protagonist himself. Even though he works tirelessly on the case, he is far from morally admirable, especially in the beginning. Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart), in *The Maltese Falcon*, is a good example of this. When his partner, Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan), is murdered, he immediately pledges to find his killer. In the following scenes, however, it is revealed that Spade and Archer's wife were having an affair, and Spade generally reacts coldly when Archer is mentioned, even going so far as to quickly remove his presence from the office by repainting the door and having Archer's desk taken away. In the end, Spade is shown to have his own peculiar brand of morality that requires a sort of justice, and he satisfies it by turning Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) in to the police.<sup>10</sup>

As seen in his dealings with the police and unfaithful women, the hard-boiled detective has a temper when provoked, but controls it well. Still, he is aggressive and single-minded, refusing to give up until he comes to the truth. He finds women to be too much trouble, and is usually right, considering the women he comes into contact with.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Maltese Falcon*. Dir. John Huston. Perfs. Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor, Gladys George. 1941. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.

He does have interactions with other women, usually a secretary that he acknowledges in a paternal way and as a potential sexual partner. He is also almost always broke, and makes no apologies for being financially motivated.

Other protagonists generally fall into the “fall guy” category, whether explicitly or implicitly noted in the film. They are flawed, disillusioned men who are undone by fate and their own weakness of character; they fall into the grips of a duplicitous, manipulative woman and are left alone to deal with the consequences. These men, such as *Double Indemnity*'s insurance salesman, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), know what they got themselves into; they generally take responsibility, but know that the impetus was their obsessive desire for a woman. Neff begins his voiceover and confession by bluntly stating, “I killed Dietrichson... Yes, I killed him. I killed him for money—and a woman—and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman”<sup>11</sup>. Throughout the film, Neff is reckless because of his intense sexual attraction to Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck); although his murder and cover up plans are well-thought out, he has difficulty masking his feelings for her around others. During Phyllis's meeting with Edward Norton, Jr. (Richard Gaines) and Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), Neff watches her with a hungry look, clearly caring little if others see him. This is not one-sided, at least on the surface. Phyllis Dietrichson and Walter Neff have a tangible sexual chemistry, at first explored through witty, double-entendre-filled banter. Phyllis exemplifies another convention of *film noir*, one defined by her sexuality—the *femme fatale*.

The *femme fatale*—the fatal woman—has become so iconic that her designation has become part of the American cultural consciousness. Even those without a

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<sup>11</sup> *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Perfs. Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson. 1944. DVD. Universal Legacy Collection, 2006.

familiarity with *noir* would likely be able to give her *modus operandi*. She is a woman who uses her sexuality to advance her own interests in a variety of ways; she can represent herself as an erotically appealing innocent or a vixen who knows exactly what she is doing. At the heart of the concept is one simple truth—she is primarily a figure of sexual obsession who leads men to destruction. The *femme fatale* is a strong woman in a world of weak-willed women and innocent girls. James F. Maxfield notes that she represents “the archetype of the subversive female. In the absence of social, political, or economic means of control she strives to rule men through their emotions”<sup>12</sup>. The *femme fatale* bridges the gap between Rosie the Riveter of World War II fame and the Doris Day-esque homemaker of the 50s and 60s. At the end of the war, men returned home to find their wives running the household admirably—they brought home the paycheck and still managed to be good mothers and homemakers, which threatened many men. The *femme fatale*’s predatory sexuality is a clear response to the resentment some men felt about their wives’ capabilities.<sup>13</sup>

She also represents another prevailing post-war fear—the possibility that even a trusted ally was capable of betrayal. These women have no problem double-crossing anyone they charm into helping them, regardless of the consequences, and feel justified in doing so because they are desperate. Both Brigid O’Shaughnessy and Phyllis Dietrichson claim desperation when attempting to justify themselves to the men they duped, and it is clear that each woman truly believes this; however, Sam Spade and Walter Neff—and perhaps by extension, the audience—consider this a last-ditch effort

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<sup>12</sup> Maxfield, James F. *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Telotte, J. P. *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*. Urbana: Illinois UP, 1989. 33.

for sympathy. These women play both sides until their machinations collapse upon them, but those machinations are built upon a foundation of sexual obsession, a tool without which no *femme fatale* can operate. She “lures men with her sexuality and apparent vulnerability, manipulating them so as to achieve some goal or other, usually involving money”<sup>14</sup>. Clearly, they are women of questionable virtue, a bold move in the days of the Production Code.

Often these women turn to one of two strategies—clear seduction or playing the victim. Phyllis Dietrichson opts for the former, beginning her seduction when she meets Walter Neff; wrapped in what appears to be nothing more than a towel, she conducts an entire conversation from a second floor landing, where one can assume most of her body is visible to the susceptible Walter, who is standing underneath her. Walter calls on Phyllis later, ostensibly to discuss an insurance policy, and she has conveniently forgotten that they are alone in the house—it is the maid’s night off. Walter and Phyllis engage in witty banter, and he pays particular attention to an anklet that she wears, something he continues to fetishize throughout the film. Phyllis reinforces her hold on Walter through seduction, and he is a willing participant until he finds out that she is also in a similar relationship with her stepdaughter Lola’s ex-boyfriend, Nino Zachetti; only then can Walter take the necessary steps to attempt to break Phyllis’s hold on him.

Sometimes a *femme fatale*, like *The Maltese Falcon*’s Brigid O’Shaughnessy, plays the victim to win men’s pity and arouse their protective instincts. She walks a fine line between pushing Sam’s buttons to keep his interest and telling her sob story to make him want to save her. Brigid is clearly tough, but she also lets a sweet side show through,

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<sup>14</sup> Knight, Elizabeth. “On Reason and Passion in *The Maltese Falcon*.” *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky P, 2006. 215.

a strategy that works well on Sam. Even though Brigid is not as overtly sexual as Phyllis Dietrichson, she is just as manipulative. At the end of the film, it is revealed that she was playing multiple men, and using the same game. For Brigid, all that matters is the falcon, and she will do whatever it takes to get it, including manipulating—and sometimes killing—every man she encounters who might be useful. It must also be established that, whatever her strategy, the *femme fatale* is also ultimately fatal to herself. Her actions lead to death, whether it is Phyllis Dietrichson's literal death at Walter Neff's hands, or Brigid O'Shaughnessy's metaphorical death—her implied life sentence for Miles Archer's murder. Her subversive actions require a punishment, one usually meted out by the protagonist.

Even though *film noir* punishes the *femme fatale*, it is also clear that her actions are partially motivated by a lack of personal and economic freedom. As a woman, she is bound by these societal constraints, and she becomes desperate. Still, she has other choices, as the “good girl” character demonstrates. She is also known as the “nurturing woman” or the “redeemer,” and is very dull in comparison to the *femme fatale*. The hero finds himself drawn to the good girl, and she also functions as a type of redeemer who can help him escape from his melancholy world. She is clearly designed for marriage, which is why the protagonist can ultimately never have her; she is a remnant of previous film universes, and demands a normal, happy life—a life that is unattainable in the nihilistic world of *noir*. She represents the ideal, and is often shot that way, in flattering light with direct angles. Lola Dietrichson (Jean Heather) functions as the good girl in *Double Indemnity*. She represents a world that Walter Neff's actions have barred him from ever being a part of. At the end of the day, she is much too good for him, and any

further association with him will corrupt her. Later in the development of *noir*, the femme fatale is sometimes replaced by a different type of threatening woman—the marrying type. To possess her, the hero must marry her, and he refuses to give up his freedom in that way. It would force him to be a part of the corrupt societal conventions that he is committed to resisting. The marrying type is not a bad woman, but she is dangerous to the hero because she hopes to change his mind about conventionality.

Aside from the *femme fatale*, the antagonists include a corrupt and incompetent police force and justice system, as well as everyday criminals, gangsters, and others who operate outside of the law. More often than not, the hero cannot distinguish between them, and the criminals can be more sympathetic than the police. These characters provide many of the dangerous places the hero finds himself in—gambling dens and nightclubs are his best source of information. The police, who one would assume would welcome any help, ignore the admonitions of the hero to pursue flimsy leads, and often blame the crime on the hero himself. For example, in *The Maltese Falcon*, the police spend more time hindering Sam Spade’s investigation than doing any good police work. In the *noir* universe, money and jealousy are primary motivating factors, and most crime involves at least one of them.

While the 1940s and 1950s might have been the golden age of *noir*, the style has continued to be an important part of filmmaking, with contemporary directors like Quentin Tarantino and the Coen brothers working within the *noir* tradition. In the past ten years, *noir* has experienced a surge in popularity. The question must be asked: why now? In contemporary American society, what is the appeal of both law and lawlessness? It is clear that in post-9/11 America, there is a sense of paranoia and worry

about the future that manifests itself in troubling ways—what *Washington Post* opinion columnist E. J. Dionne, Jr. termed “a kinder and gentler form of McCarthyism”<sup>15</sup>. Film critics Ronald Schwartz<sup>16</sup> and Mark T. Conard<sup>17</sup> have referred to the contemporary—broadly defined as the 1960s to the present—films made in the *noir* tradition as *neo-noir*. The most recent of these films reflect a postmodern sensibility, both artistically and within the narrative itself. These filmmakers are consciously creating *noir*, and they often blend genres and allude to other films and pieces of popular culture; more importantly, they are concerned with “our ability (or lack thereof) to know and understand the world and...the value and significance (or lack thereof) that our lives and actions have”<sup>18</sup>. These films are, at their core, concerned with the possibility of redemption. However, while a postmodern sensibility marks the style, its most different attribute is not stylistic, but distributional—the style is now not merely limited to film. Many television series take cues from *film noir*, but few draw as heavily from it as the 2004-2007 WB/UPN series, *Veronica Mars*.

### **Rain-Soaked Streets and Tangled Sheets: The *Noir* of Neptune**

*Veronica Mars* starts with a rain-soaked street and a secret rendezvous, and a voiceover coming from what sounds like a world-weary, jaded private investigator. As the camera pans away from the adulterous couple and the tawdry Camelot Motel, that private investigator is revealed. She is world-weary and jaded—and cannot be older than 16. After she complains that getting her “money shot” is cutting into her studying time, a

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<sup>15</sup> Dionne, Jr., E. J. “The New McCarthyism.” *The Washington Post*. 28 June 2005, natl. ed.: A15.

<sup>16</sup> Schwartz, Ronald. *Neo-Noir: The New Film Noir Style from Psycho to Collateral*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow P, 2005. xi.

<sup>17</sup> Conard, Mark T. *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Lexington, KY: Kentucky UP, 2007. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Conard, Mark T. “Reservoir Dogs: Redemption in a Postmodern World.” *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington, U of Kentucky P, 2006. 101.

motorcycle gang surrounds Veronica's car, and its menacing leader begins to threaten her. In less than three minutes, it becomes clear that while Veronica may seem like she belongs in the teen soap universe, she and Neptune are the children of *noir*.

However, before any real inquiry can begin, it must be noted that *Veronica Mars*, while made in the *noir* tradition, is a *neo-noir* series. Why does this matter? The term may seem to be a useless reference to the production era, but *neo-noir* denotes not only a style that is reminiscent of the classic *noir* era, but one that expands upon its themes.<sup>19</sup> It has the same concerns—alienation, disillusionment, and moral ambiguity—but goes a step beyond them by exploring the reality attached to them. *Neo-noir* addresses these issues through a post-Vietnam and, in the case of *Veronica Mars*, post 9/11 lens, showing a world in which the Production Code is no longer at work. These characters are thrust into a world in which good and evil are harder to distinguish; the audience is just as likely to sympathize with the gang leader as the hero. As Mark T. Conard explains in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*,

...neo-noir films in some ways seem better able to embody the noir outlook...in neo-noir the criminals can, and, indeed, very often do, succeed. Good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people (just like in real life!), which seems in line with noir's cynicism and pessimism.<sup>20</sup>

For most series, this nod to another filmic era would quickly be dismissed as the work of a well-informed writer or a kitschy audience lure. However, *Veronica Mars* moves past the typical teen soap formula and transforms itself into *neo-noir*, a type of film which itself is a changed space; the old structure—*noir*—remains, but the details inside are

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<sup>19</sup> Wager, Jans B. *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir*. Austin: U Texas P, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Conard, Mark T. *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Lexington, KY: Kentucky UP, 2007. 2.

shifted and transformed. In this way, *neo-noir* becomes a cultural artifact that, by virtue of its own transformation, becomes a space in which change is allowed and encouraged. In doing so, it approaches a type of the postmodern art that Fredric Jameson refers to as the “nostalgia film.”

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson discusses this concept, noting that it “was never a matter of some old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content, but instead approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image”<sup>21</sup>. Jameson is not advocating a political stance, but it is important to make this connection. The series deliberately plays with a filmic past, much in the way Jameson describes. However, this is merely a point of similarity; as Jameson is concerned with history, it is not where he is truly helpful, but it leads to thoughtful discussion of the series. Jameson’s idea of the nostalgia film is preceded by what he calls “pastiche,” which

is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter...Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs...<sup>22</sup>.

This concept is important to consider in context with *Veronica Mars*; the series is not an homage to or parody of *noir*; it is a pastiche that uses the conventions of *noir* to work toward a destabilization of gender norms. The series’ creator, Rob Thomas, is

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<sup>21</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. 18.

appropriating an entire filmic movement, with its inscribed gender roles and scenarios, to create a space in which those same gender roles and scenarios can be reassigned and played with. Its purpose is to use the style's conventions to create a world that, through its extremes, opens up real possibilities for discussion of what femininity is. *Noir* is not a female-friendly space—these women are killed, literally and metaphorically, for their transgressions, and those who fall in line are relegated to the background, as easily forgotten as their drab clothing and seemingly boring personalities. However, as the saying goes, once you know the rules, you can break them, and Thomas does just that. He deliberately engages and references the stylistic conventions of *noir*, which he must use if he wants to create a thoughtful examination of gender roles. Approaching the “past” in this concentrated, deliberate way allows *Veronica Mars* to become a creative space in which images are examined, understood, and then torn apart to create new and better ones. However, for these approaches to be successful, as *Veronica Mars* attempts to be, a certain nod to tradition is necessary—a nod, not a strict adherence.

*Veronica Mars* revels in this self-referentiality. Stylistically, the series does not seem to take place in sunny southern California, but in a gritty, urban *noir* environment. For example, Veronica (Kristen Bell) and Keith Mars (Enrico Colantoni) are often revealed through Venetian blinds in their private investigator's office. There are overt references to the *noir* style as well; the Casablancas family's name calls to mind one of *noir* star Humphrey Bogart's most famous films, while the actual dialogue both references and actively mimics the easily recognizable *noir* style. One particularly humorous example comes from Keith and Veronica.

Veronica: Tough day?

Keith: That ain't the half of it. See, this dame walks in and you shoulda seen the getaway sticks on her. Says something's hinky with her old man.

Veronica: Did ya put the screws to him?

Keith: You ain't kidding. He sang like a canary.

Veronica: Well, you're in luck, Philip Marlowe, because it's dessert for dinner night and I've got a whole sundae thing set up here.<sup>23</sup>

Keith and Veronica deliberately play on the *noir* tradition; they both realize that they exist in the tradition and see the humor and limitations within it. Veronica is relegated to the trusty receptionist position, asking her employer about his day, and Keith takes on the world-weary persona of the hard-boiled detective as he makes the expected replies.

This exchange is just one of many points where the series explicitly addresses its *noir* influences; often the reference is more subtly referential and is as simple as commonality of theme or plot device. This is especially evident in the way Neptune's history is revealed, particularly in the pilot. Over a series of voiceovers, Veronica tells the audience about her past—her father's fall, her mother and Duncan's desertion, Lilly's murder, and her own rape—"You want to know how I lost my virginity? So do I"<sup>24</sup>. She narrates her rape in an ironically detached tone, as if she should have expected that she would be drugged at a wild party full of teenagers who resent her father. As terrible as that sounds, Veronica is right. Nothing good happens in a *noir* universe; the odds were that something life-changing would happen to her that night.

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<sup>23</sup> "Return of the Kane." Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season. Writ. Rob Thomas and Phil Klemmer. Dir. Sarah Pia Anderson. UPN. 2 Nov 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> "Pilot." Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Mark Piznarski. UPN. 22 Sept 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

*Veronica Mars'* neo-noir sensibility is also manifested in the overwhelming classism and racism that abound in Neptune and often drive the series' plot. These characters live in a *noir* universe, but their diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century surroundings require that such a corrupt world be represented appropriately—it would be problematic to show widespread crime without also showing how that crime informs Neptune's social structure, so much that it becomes a byproduct rather than a cause of the tensions in the community. On the surface, that seems like an obvious point; *noir* requires a certain amount of crime to make it run. However, classic *noir* sees crime punished, while *neo-noir* allows crime to flourish. Neptune takes it one step further and allows class to determine the type of crime committed and how, and if, it is prosecuted.

The wide gulf between the rich and poor of Neptune lays the foundation for many of the conflicts in the series, no matter their age or social position. Veronica succinctly explains the situation as she drives her beaten-up Chrysler LeBaron into a parking lot filled with late-model foreign cars, saying, "This is my school. If you go here, your parents are either millionaires, or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, California, a town without a middle class"<sup>25</sup>. This is a good place to frame the situation; classism is the basis of Neptune High. The school, like any high school, has a definite hierarchy, but it goes beyond typical bullying. The Pirate Points system, wherein those involved in sports and student council—the students whose parents can afford it—are allowed extra privileges, openly favors the rich students and disenfranchises the poorer ones. It is taken for granted, until outcast and PCH girlfriend Wanda Varner (Rachel Roth) decides to run for student council president and eliminate the Pirate Points system.

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<sup>25</sup> "Pilot." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Mark Piznarski. UPN. 22 Sept 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

Veronica: How do you account for your sudden popularity?

Wanda: Isn't it obvious? It's class warfare, the haves versus the have-nots. You, more than anyone at school, should understand that...The rich kids, they run things around here. They're the minority and they're corrupt. They get away with murder...Pirate Points is just another way they reward themselves for being so swell. They have all the power; we're the disenfranchised, but only because we let ourselves be. It's time to take action!<sup>26</sup>

In keeping with the *noir* tradition, Wanda quickly switches allegiances after the election, using her new popularity to climb the social ladder. No one seems to be able to resist the lure of power. Pirate Points are only a drop in the bucket, though; the rampant favoritism extends to discipline as well.

PCH gang leader Eli "Weevil" Navarro (Francis Capra) and rich 09er<sup>27</sup> Logan Echolls (Jason Dohring) get in trouble in English class for talking during a test, but the situation is handled differently for each of them. The teacher, Mr. Daniels (Steven Williams), punishes both students even though Logan is both the instigator and the antagonist, baiting Daniels after he admonishes him. We must note the disparity here; Logan disrespects the teacher, and gets detention, while Weevil—along with the rest of the class, but perhaps more openly—laughs, and gets sent to detention with him. Mr. Daniels works in stereotypes; Weevil is a troublemaker, and even if Daniels did not catch him this time, he should probably be punished retroactively. Even Daniels' choice of cutting remarks shows his inherent classism and racism—interesting, for an African-

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<sup>26</sup> "Return of the Kane." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas and Phil Klemmer. Dir. Sarah Pia Anderson. UPN. 2 Nov 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> This refers to the exclusive 90909 ZIP code; only the richest of Neptune citizens—such as the Echolls, the Kanes, and the Casablanacas families—live here.

American teacher who is not wealthy, either—by assuming that Weevil is headed for a menial job in a gas station.

As Daniels' continued punishments—meant to “teach them respect”—get more and more unbearable, Weevil and Logan retaliate by stealing his car and impaling it on a flagpole—the car he had made them wash previously. One would assume that both students would be punished equally, but classism rears its head again, and not only is Weevil the only one punished, but he is expelled. Vice-Principal Van Clemmons (Duane Daniels) and Mr. Daniels do not even consider Logan a suspect, even though he is the natural connection between Weevil and Daniels. Dick Casablancas (Ryan Hansen), always one to state bluntly what everyone is thinking, does not shy away from the real issue.

Duncan: I didn't even know they expelled people at our school.

Dick: Well, not our people.

Logan: They expelled him?

Duncan: They had security escort him off the grounds. I was in the office getting my schedule changed and you could just hear Daniels blowing a fuse. “Tell us who helped you! Tell us who helped you!”

Dick: If he starts selling oranges in front of my house, I'm going to be pissed.<sup>28</sup>

In Neptune, classism is often underscored by racism—Weevil is the leader of a motorcycle gang, certainly, but he is one of the few who takes school seriously. The real problem—indirectly referenced by Dick—is that Weevil is a poor Latino troublemaker. This is reinforced when Logan confesses his part in the prank, and through using his

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<sup>28</sup> “The Girl Next Door.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Jed Seidel and Diane Ruggiero. Dir. Nick Marck. UPN. 9 Nov 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

influence and rich, famous father, gets a much lighter sentence; he and Weevil must paint over graffiti in the school courtyard. Neptune High School has evolved into a training ground for these students; once they graduate, they will have learned through experience what awaits them as adult residents of Neptune.

Unfortunately—and, in a *noir* universe, necessarily—the legal system in Neptune is entirely corrupt, operating within the same classist and racist structure that the town is built upon. Aaron Echolls (Harry Hamlin) is the most notorious graduate of the Balboa County justice system; he escapes a conviction for the brutal murder of Lilly Kane (Amanda Seyfried). The jury refuses to believe the evidence that tells them their favorite action movie star is a sexual predator and murderer. Even worse, Aaron retroactively plants evidence implicating Duncan Kane<sup>29</sup> (Teddy Dunn), effectively regaining any trust he might have lost with his more skeptical fans. It could be concluded that this was merely a safeguard; Aaron is secure in his position as a wealthy pillar of the community. He would likely have never been convicted, and this knowledge adds an edge to his character that has previously been unseen.

Aaron: Freedom, it's pretty damn sweet. I like it.

Veronica: So did Lilly. Bummer you murdered her.

Aaron: You know, I can see why the two of you were such good friends. You're so much alike. You're not afraid to speak your minds. You know, that just might

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<sup>29</sup> "The Quick and the Wed." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. John Serge. Dir. Rick Rosenthal. UPN. 22 March 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

be the best part about the day I smashed her head in with an ashtray...knowing that once and for all, she would finally shut the hell up.<sup>30</sup>

Aaron has already shown that he is psychotic; he is much more dangerous now that he has proven himself untouchable. Yet again, Neptune's legal system fails its citizens. There is no telling what Aaron might have gone on to do had Duncan Kane not had Clarence Wiedman (Christopher B. Duncan)—Kane Software's menacing head of security—assassinate him.<sup>31</sup>

There is certainly no real justice in Neptune, and each class has reacted differently; while the rich 09ers use that absence literally to get away with murder, those in the 90905 ZIP code have had to create their own type of justice system. The 05ers are the poorer side of town, residents who missed the Kane Software technology boom. These citizens, who are more often than not Latino, rely on the PCH motorcycle gang. They are a direct response to the town's view of them; as poor minorities, they are already viewed as untrustworthy, criminal elements, so they have no compunction about becoming what others believe them to be if it leads to a feeling of safety. The PCH gang is in charge of the 90905 ZIP code, and they work as its judge and jury. When they declare war, their community supports them, even though they rule without any real mercy. The PCHers have a twisted sense of morality; with Weevil as their leader, they refuse to run drugs, having seen how their rival gang—the Irish Fitzpatricks—and their

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<sup>30</sup> "Not Pictured." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas and John Enbom. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 9 May 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> "Not Pictured." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas and John Enbom. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 9 May 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

primary position as drug pushers has affected their community.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, they practice vigilantism, resorting to the methods used by the gangsters of *film noir*. R. Barton Palmer notes a few of these methods in *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir*. As Palmer explains,

the shoot-out, the beating, and the cold-blooded execution...the immorality and pointlessness of these encounters reveal a brutal world hostile to human happiness. Violence does not uphold or reestablish justice but signals its absence.<sup>33</sup>

The Neptune justice system has chosen to ignore the problems of the town's poorer citizens, and it is at fault for the racial tensions that result.

This "rich white versus poor Latino" mentality is the basis for the second season's beginning conflict—class warfare between the 09ers and the PCH motorcycle gang that begins when Logan is (falsely) accused of killing PCH member Felix Toombs (Brad Bufanda) and is released for "lack of evidence,"<sup>34</sup> something that the entire town knows is predicated upon his wealth and influence, which is represented by his 09er status. In Neptune, your address is your destiny; the residents live with that reality every day, but never actively protest it until Logan's release. Those who live in the affluent 90909 ZIP code live charmed lives, even outside of their wealth. In Neptune, power comes from location, regardless of the kind of person you are; those who live in the "09" include Dick Casablancas, Sr. (David Starzyk), whose entire real estate firm is built on selling shares

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<sup>32</sup> "Ahoy, Mateys!" *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. John Enbom and Cathy Belben. Dir. Steve Gomer. UPN. 23 Nov 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Palmer, R. Barton. *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. 19.

<sup>34</sup> "Normal Is the Watchword." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 28 Sept 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

in fake properties; his son Cassidy (Kyle Gallner), or “Beaver,” whose claim to fame is blowing up a school bus filled with students; and Woody Goodman (Steve Guttenberg), the pedophilic mayor. While Logan is not an actual criminal, he is far from perfect; his release becomes the impetus for a series of events that culminate in violence and vandalism between the two groups, occasions that are always racist and classist in tone. As Veronica notes, “[a]fter the D.A. decided not to press charges against Logan, Neptune became a different place”<sup>35</sup>. For example, after the PCH gang shoots the back window out of Logan’s SUV—while he and Veronica are in the backseat—Logan and his 09er friends retaliate by setting the community pool on fire—something that would only affect the poorer residents, as the 09ers all have pools in their backyards.

The poorer citizens are not the only ones adversely affected by the *noir* at work in Neptune; the women in Neptune also tend to fall in *noir* categories and rarely come out of it well. The good girl is alive and well in Neptune, but has shifted slightly to represent better the concerns of *neo-noir*. The most important change is that the good girl is now sexually active, but only within monogamous relationships. Meg Manning (Alona Tal) is a beautiful blonde California girl, on the honor roll and the pep squad, and sexually pure at the beginning of the series. Meg is a good person, and the only 09er to want to be Veronica’s friend in the aftermath of the Lilly Kane scandal. Still, even Meg is not safe from the *noir* of Neptune—here, even the good girls can be bad sometimes. Allowing transgressions is an important hallmark of *neo-noir*, especially for women. It is the first step toward ownership and agency for these female characters. Finally, the *femme fatale* is not the only female *noir* character with multiple dimensions.

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<sup>35</sup> “Normal is the Watchword.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 28 Sept 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

This is especially helpful in Meg Manning's case. Ordinarily, she would be relegated to the sidelines; her character would require marriage and a family, but nothing much else. This is not how Meg's character is handled, however. Meg's good girl status is shattered when she is revealed to be carrying Duncan Kane's child<sup>36</sup>, but she is saved from becoming a "bad girl" through her daughter's birth; her death, while unexpected, fulfills the requirement that "...neo-noir women are usually punished for transgressions or indulgences of questionable urges"<sup>37</sup>. Even though Meg is punished, she is still redeemed through the consequences of her actions; her death triggers Duncan's rapid maturation, culminating in his flight from Neptune with their daughter, Lilly.<sup>38</sup>

Hannah Griffith (Jessy Schram) is another good girl who transgresses sexually; she is manipulated by Logan Echolls to retaliate against her father, Dr. Tom Griffith (Rick Peters), the false witness in Logan's murder case. Hannah's first appearance is incredibly sweet—she meets Logan when she works at the school carnival, offering stuffed animals for a frog toss.<sup>39</sup> Their subsequent relationship is filled with the trappings of John Hughes movies; every encounter Hannah has with Logan reveals her inexperience and his comparatively debauched history, and her innocence gradually wins Logan over. When Hannah makes the decision to advance their relationship sexually, she is punished in the traditional sense. Her father walks in on the pair and sends Hannah to

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<sup>36</sup> "My Mother, the Fiend." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Phil Klemmer and Dayna Lynne North. Dir. Nick Marck. UPN. 30 Nov 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Schwartz, Ronald. *Neo-Noir: The New Film Noir Style from Psycho to Collateral*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow P, 2005. 3.

<sup>38</sup> "Donut Run." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Rob Thomas. UPN. 25 Jan 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> "Ain't No Magic Mountain High Enough." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Diane Ruggiero. Dir. Guy Norman Bee. UPN. 8 February 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

a boarding school in Vermont to keep her away from Logan.<sup>40</sup> The important distinction here is that while Hannah might not have been able to follow through with her intent to sleep with Logan, she fully intended to do so. Like Meg, she had to be punished—being sent across the country is a figurative death for a sixteen-year-old—and like Meg, her punishment marks the beginning of a redemptive arc for her boyfriend. Logan uses his guilt over using Hannah to fuel his quest against Dr. Griffith and the Fitzpatricks, ultimately showing Neptune, and Veronica, that he is capable of real change.

Meg and Hannah might have influenced their lovers to change, but neither of them rock Neptune quite as much as *femme fatale* Lilly Kane—her senseless murder affected the entire town of Neptune. Lilly is the reason hard-boiled Veronica is able to come into being; her death triggers an onslaught of tragedy in Veronica’s young life, culminating in her rape and social death. Lilly’s destruction not only becomes the catalyst for Veronica’s emotional changes, but it also marks the end of the adherence to typical *noir* gender roles in Neptune; through this “moment of reappropriation,” Veronica becomes the Spade-like private investigator, and her friends undergo their own transformations.

Lilly is always presented as a sexual, dynamic being, especially in comparison to Veronica, who, before Lilly’s murder, was very conservative and sweet. This erotic, magnetic aspect is a vital component of the *femme fatale*; as Andrew Dickos describes her,

the *femme fatale* is cinema’s destructive force sine qua non, offering her men mystery and temptation predicated upon sexual desire...[she] may indeed be

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<sup>40</sup> “The Rapes of Graff.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. John Enbom. Dir. Michael Fields. UPN. 29 March 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

wicked, but she is also fascinating, because she does not (or does not easily) acquiesce or suffer the traditionally imposed travails of her subordinated function in a male-dominated society.<sup>41</sup>

Lilly was fully committed to her *femme fatale* position, and enjoyed playing men against each other, but she was still a high school girl, and unprepared for her affair with Aaron Echolls. Still, she remained strong, even when she discovered that Aaron tapes their sexual encounters; as shown in a flashback to her murder, when Aaron confronts her in a murderous rage, she flippantly mentions giving the tapes to *Access Hollywood*.<sup>42</sup> Lilly Kane feared no one.

Lilly was a fascinating figure, but her most important role is her friendship with Veronica; their bond was an unlikely one, but it remained strong long after Lilly's death. Lilly and Veronica were about as opposite as two teenagers could be; Lilly enjoyed being a dangerous woman, while Veronica was her more virtuous foil—a good student and daughter, and of course, a virgin. They should have had very little to do with each other, but Duncan brought them together. After that, they were inseparable, becoming what Barbara Hales refers to as “female doubles.” Veronica and Lilly, while not twins and therefore literal female doubles, are clearly doubles before Lilly's death, a doubling described by Hales as “the juxtaposition of virgin and whore”<sup>43</sup>. Veronica and Lilly operated in this manner, often referencing each girl's sexual experience as a point of conversation around their boyfriends, ending with Lilly's exasperation at Veronica's

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<sup>41</sup> Dickos, Andrew. *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*. Lexington, KY: Kentucky UP, 2002. 156.

<sup>42</sup> “Leave It to Beaver.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas and Diane Ruggiero. Dir. Michael Fields. UPN. 10 May 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Hales, Barbara. “Projecting Trauma: The Femme Fatale in Weimar and Hollywood Film Noir.” *Women in German Yearbook*. 23 (2007): 232.

refusal to sleep with Duncan. This happens often in teen drama; there, it is yet another example of the teenage characters mimicking what they believe to be adult concerns and conversations. Here, it works a little differently. Lilly wanted Veronica to experience life, and these sexual conversations are instances of more experienced Lilly attempting to lead virginal Veronica toward liberation through sexual activity.

Lilly loved the process of seduction, weaving it into her every action. However, Lilly's seduction also extended to Veronica in a sense; their relationship almost foreshadows Veronica's shift to the male private eye persona. As Elisabeth Bronfen illustrates in "Femme Fatale—Negotiations of Tragic Desire," the *femme fatale* "uses her seductive powers to lead the *noir* hero from the sunlit exterior into a nocturnal world of transgressions, betrayals, and, ultimately, his demise"<sup>44</sup>. Lilly performed this role in Veronica's life as well, leading her into numerous youthful indiscretions that Veronica would never have attempted herself—drinking, staying out all night, and a brief kiss intended to titillate their boyfriends.<sup>45</sup> Lilly's spirit even continues to influence Veronica after her death; she appears dressed in her bloody pep squad outfit, head wound dripping, and advises both Veronica and Duncan on the investigation of her murder.

Lilly's death is important, as it drives the first and second seasons, but the wrong emphasis has previously been put on Lilly's influence. If Veronica had not also been caught up in Lilly's universe, she would not have become the *noir* private eye that her audience loves so much—she would be just another one of Neptune's underdogs, unable to fight for herself. Without the *neo-noir* created after Lilly's death, which in turn creates

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<sup>44</sup> Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Femme Fatale—Negotiations of Tragic Desire." *New Literary History*. 35 (2004): 106.

<sup>45</sup> "The Wrath of Con." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Diane Ruggiero. Dir. Michael Fields. UPN. 19 October 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

a space in which gender can be weighed and evaluated, and thereby reconsidered, *Veronica Mars* would be another teen series about a girl and her many secrets. Instead, the series takes the opportunity presented by Lilly's death to explore the fluidity of gender.

### **The Claiming and Performance of Gender in Neptune**

Lilly's death signals a change in Neptune; it plunges the town further into *neo-noir* territory, but, more importantly, it marks a shift in the way gender is perceived and performed. This "moment of reappropriation," or the moment where feminist positions take precedence, destabilizes gender—for these characters, it becomes a fluid, claimed thing, rather than a physically determined characteristic. This may seem to be a random connection upon first glance; what does a promiscuous teenager's murder have to do with anything concerning gender? On the surface, nothing, but when that murder incites another young woman to put on the persona of the hard-boiled detective—essentially claiming a traditionally masculine role—it matters a great deal. In their book, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*, Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones explain that

[t]he feminist appropriation of the hard-boiled mode can redefine textual and cultural boundaries precisely because it comes into intimate contact with them. In other words, such practices make it possible to renegotiate the 'generic contract' between industry, authors, audiences, and texts.<sup>46</sup>

Veronica's claiming of the hard-boiled position enables her and the rest of the town to claim their own gender however they see fit. This manifests itself in a variety of ways.

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<sup>46</sup> Walton, Priscilla L. and Manina Jones. *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. 87.

Some characters choose to stay with their culturally inscribed gender, but others find a way to break free and claim whatever gender they feel appropriate.

Veronica is the clearest example of this; before Lilly's death, she is the "good woman," a faithful lover and friend. Barbara Hales discusses the fate of the good woman in "Projecting Trauma: The Femme Fatale in Weimar and Hollywood Film Noir" and says, "[v]irtuous female figures are often murdered at the beginning of the film, inspiring the male protagonist to seek revenge"<sup>47</sup>. Of course, Lilly—Neptune's *femme fatale*—is the one who is murdered, but, through her death, Veronica's previous innocent self is killed and she is reborn as the revenge-seeking "male" protagonist. After Lilly's murder and its subsequently mishandled investigation, she sees the need to intervene—if she does not get to the bottom of this, who will? However, she is met with resistance—something she is not used to—and she begins to lose control over her previously well-ordered world. Her first inclination is to put on a brave face, intending to show her peers that they cannot break her; in other words, she takes a stereotypically feminine position of nonviolent, nonconfrontational resistance. This contradictory position is consistently preached to teenage girls; their parents, teachers, and other role models tell them that, in today's society, they have a measure of control previously unavailable to them. They have whatever power they claim for themselves. However, many girls learn that any power naturally comes with strings; asserting power over others can lead to personal attacks, and teenage girls most often see these attacks take an overtly sexual tone, whether it is something as simple as gossip about their sexual lives, or something as horrifying as sexual violence.

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<sup>47</sup> Hales, Barbara. "Projecting Trauma: The Femme Fatale in Weimar and Hollywood Film Noir." *Women in German Yearbook*, 23 (2007): 232.

The girl detective, who straddles each side of the gender divide, helps to bring this into focus. In her article “Not Nancy Drew but Not Clueless: Embodying the Teen Girl Sleuth in the Twenty-first Century,” Marla Harris notes that

[t]he figure of the girl detective exposes the contradictory messages of empowerment and disempowerment that surround the adolescent female body, giving her agency and authority, on the one hand, while emphasizing her vulnerability, on the other. Blurring the boundaries between female victim and female detective, the girl detective genre supports [Joan Jacobs] Brumberg’s assertion that ‘Contemporary girls *seem* to have more autonomy, but their freedom is laced with peril.’<sup>48</sup>

Veronica learns this first-hand; by going to Shelly Pomroy’s party, she hopes to reassert her power over her peers. Instead, she is drugged, sexually violated by her ex-boyfriend, and finally raped by Cassidy Casablanca. Her assault comes on the heels of Lilly’s death, and it becomes her breaking point. Lilly’s death makes room for this change, but Veronica’s rape makes her choose the change. Her rape could also be seen as another manifestation of the aforementioned good woman’s “point of death”—Veronica is getting revenge for herself as much as for Lilly, especially after Lilly’s murder is solved. This double motivation is important; it drives the plot further than Lilly’s murder could take it. The murder is solved in one season and prosecuted in another, but that prosecution is only addressed in a few episodes. Veronica’s rape helps her keep going, because it is the one result of Lilly’s murder that has touched her most personally.

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<sup>48</sup> Harris, Marla. “Not Nancy Drew but Not Clueless: Embodying the Teen Girl Sleuth in the Twenty-first Century.” Nancy Drew and Her Sister Sleuths. Ed. Michael G. Cornelius and Melanie E. Gregg. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. 154-155.

Veronica's choice to become the hard-boiled private investigator comes from her father, a private investigator himself, who is a great fan of *noir*. Keith and Veronica are quite literate in popular culture, and this persona is one she has both grown up with—her father can be very hard-boiled when he feels it is necessary—and has seen held up as a powerful masculine ideal. Veronica's appropriation of the hard-boiled persona is initially a deliberate act that she feels will help her regain the power taken from her after her rape; for her, this is a conscious attempt to achieve an agency she feels has been taken from her. In taking on this masculine gender, Veronica is enacting a gender performance, as Judith Butler describes in her article, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." As Butler explains,

...gender is in no way a stable identity...it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.<sup>49</sup>

Veronica appropriates what she considers to be an invulnerable masculine identity to protect herself in the wake of the horrors of her sophomore year; in doing so, she enacts a performance that is entirely dependent upon her faithfulness to a consciously created gender identity.

Veronica lost her social standing, her mother, and her virginity all in the space of a few months—and she willingly surrendered none of them. As a result, she has developed a hard, cynical exterior; much like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, Veronica is

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<sup>49</sup> Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Henry Bial. New York: Routledge, 2007. 187.

tough, and she refuses to be anything else. In the original pilot script, creator Rob Thomas describes her this way: “She is not cute. She is sexy. Tough. Prematurely jaded. Angelina Jolie at 17”<sup>50</sup>. She puts away anything that she feels is too feminine to immerse herself in the private dick persona; she cuts her long blonde hair into a short bob and trades her long pastel dresses for more punk-inspired fashions. Veronica is very conspicuous at a high school filled with bubbly southern California girls. This masculine identification manifests itself most clearly at Neptune High; when she goes from being a happy-go-lucky cheerleader, she is marked as a possible discipline case. As Veronica explains to journalism teacher Ms. Dent (Sydney Tamiia Poitier), the guidance counselor thinks she is “disconnected and passionless”<sup>51</sup>. Veronica is not a troublemaker; in fact, she is an excellent student. However, she is acting just as her male classmates act; she is proactive and decisive, and refuses to let others control her actions. When she feels something is a waste of her time, she quickly moves past it instead of meekly accepting it as a routine part of her day. This is not what her teachers expect from a female student, though, and Veronica is quickly marked as “different.”

Veronica’s classmates also mark her; her first lunchtime appearance on the series shows her sitting alone, quietly eating while others swirl around her at a quickly sped up pace.<sup>52</sup> The cinematography quite deliberately reflects Veronica’s position at Neptune High—alienated and ignored unless she draws attention to herself in some aggressive or overly masculine act. While Veronica’s peers originally stayed away from her because

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas, Rob. “Veronica Mars: Original Pilot Script.” [Rob Thomas Online](http://www.slaverats.com/files/Veronica%20Mars_original%20pilot%20script.pdf). <[http://www.slaverats.com/files/Veronica%20Mars\\_original%20pilot%20script.pdf](http://www.slaverats.com/files/Veronica%20Mars_original%20pilot%20script.pdf)>.

<sup>51</sup> “Credit Where Credit’s Due.” [Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season](#). Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Mark Piznarski. UPN. 29 Sept 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> “Pilot.” [Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season](#). Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Mark Piznarski. UPN. 22 Sept 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

she aligned herself with Keith, they continue to stay away because of the persona she has created. Veronica is abrasive and difficult, with a biting wit that often leaves other students dumbfounded. As a result of gossip related to the night she was drugged, she has also been labeled as dangerously promiscuous. Essentially, Veronica has committed herself to regendering herself in a masculine way to protect herself, but her classmates reject her for doing so.

Veronica also rejects any kind of emotional intimacy as too dangerous, drawing on her painful breakup with Duncan, Lilly's death, and her subsequent social rejection as proof. This is directly in line with the hard-boiled detective, who enacts a typically masculine emotional resistance in his dealings with women, seeing them as inevitably duplicitous. Veronica refuses to engage with anyone in her school, deciding that there is no point, and rejects any men who attempt to draw her into a romantic relationship. She has evidence to support her, but it seems a bit premature at such a young age. However, she is consistently proven right; as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe encounter a parade of *femmes fatales*, Veronica attracts, and is attracted to, bad boys. Consider her relationship with Troy Vandergraft (Aaron Ashmore). After the relationship falls apart, Veronica retreats back into herself for more than six months—an eternity in high school time.

However, as time goes on—and she opens herself up to friendships with Wallace (Percy Daggs III) and Mac (Tina Majorino)—Veronica chooses to enact some stereotypically feminine characteristics. It would seem that her gender choice is not one that will stick, but further study shows that she begins to use her feminine traits as a means to an end, quickly discarding them when they are no longer useful. She is simply acting, and quickly goes back to her chosen gender identity; therefore, she has no

compunction about sweet-talking a new deputy in order to break into the police evidence locker<sup>53</sup> or dressing up as a gamer's dream girl<sup>54</sup> if it brings her information. This playacting allows her to become another person, one who is not compelled by circumstance to inhabit a masculine position as the hard-boiled detective. This only helps Veronica's investigations: "[h]er ability to step outside her identity, to regard her own body as other, prepares her, however, to interrogate other's identities and bodies, and to appreciate how outward appearances can be distorted or deliberately deceptive"<sup>55</sup>.

Veronica does recognize that she is playing into cultural gender norms whenever she does this—that is the point. Veronica works people over; she finds their vulnerable points and presses hard, much like the typically masculine hard-boiled detective. For example, when she and her father need to get information out of a hotel clerk at a luxury hotel, she plays on the female clerk's suppositions about a middle-aged man who hauls an anxious teenage girl into a hotel.

Keith: We need to talk to somebody in security right now. Right now!

Veronica: Dad! Will you just back off and let me handle it?

Keith: You handle it or I'll handle it, but we're gonna get to the bottom of this, right now.

Veronica: No! Would you just stand over there? You're scaring people. [to the clerk] Hi. I'm really hoping you can help me with this...I came in here about a month ago with a guy...long story short, I'm pregnant...The next part's a little

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<sup>53</sup> "Silence of the Lamb." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Jed Seidel and Dayna Lynne North. Dir. Sarah Pia Anderson. UPN. 4 Jan 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> "The Wrath of Con." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Diane Ruggiero. Dir. Michael Fields. UPN. 19 October 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Harris, Marla. "Not Nancy Drew but Not Clueless: Embodying the Teen Girl Sleuth in the Twenty-first Century." *Nancy Drew and Her Sister Sleuths*. Ed. Michael G. Cornelius and Melanie E. Gregg. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. 161.

embarrassing. I don't remember the guy's name. Or what he looks like.

Tequila? Never again. My dad's wondering if there's any sort of surveillance video we could take a look at or...? Here's the credit card bill. He had me pay for the room.

Receptionist: Let me go talk to a manager.

Keith: [to Veronica] That was good.<sup>56</sup>

Veronica plays off the clerk's reactions and adjusts her story and manner appropriately. The clerk's face immediately registers surprise and sympathy, perhaps personally identifying with the story, and she breaks security protocol to get Veronica the guest information she requests. Veronica is certainly playing into gender stereotypes—as well as class stereotypes, that of the spoiled, promiscuous, rich party girl—but after she gets what she wants, she quickly throws that mantle off. Clearly, Veronica does not see these choices as slipping back into her old life; she sees them as necessary detective choices.

It is important to note, however, that Veronica does not abandon typically feminine aspects, or even every *noir* idea of femininity; when threatened by a masculine power that she views as potentially dangerous, she defaults back into culturally prescribed notions of femininity, namely that of being helpless in the face of an enraged man. In keeping with stereotypical ideas of femininity, Veronica is protected by Keith. When she feels confident in her ability to outthink her opponent or talk her way out of a situation—which includes any dealings with the sheriff's office—Veronica feels free to leave Keith out of the loop. However, when Aaron Echolls tries to kill her, Veronica's intelligence is no match for his murderous intent. Unable to think, she freezes, allowing

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<sup>56</sup> "Credit Where Credit's Due." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Mark Piznarski. UPN. 29 Sept 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

Aaron to overpower her, entombing her in an old refrigerator and setting it on fire. At this point, Veronica has abandoned all attempts to remain hard-boiled. After Keith pulls her from the flames—getting badly burned himself—the audience sees a rare glimpse of a vulnerable Veronica. Sobbing and shaking, she clings to her father, brokenly repeating, “I love you. I love you so much. I knew you’d come, I knew you’d save me”<sup>57</sup>. As Veronica matures and embarks on a romantic relationship with Logan, he shifts into the role of Veronica’s protector/savior. Still, though Logan would like to play this role in every situation, Veronica only allows it when she feels she is in mortal danger; when Cassidy reveals he is Veronica’s rapist, she is again paralyzed with fear. By attacking her as a woman, and thereby exposing a fear rooted in her biological makeup, Veronica is unable to act, and Logan must step in to save her from Cassidy’s threat.<sup>58</sup> Later, when Veronica is again threatened sexually—by Mercer Hayes (Ryan Devlin), the Hearst College rapist—Logan plays the hero again, narrowly saving her from Mercer’s attempted rape<sup>59</sup> and murder.<sup>60</sup> Veronica uses her wits to avoid violent encounters; when she is confronted with them, she only functions in her hard-boiled capacity until she feels threatened with bodily harm.

Why, then, is Veronica’s positioning as the hard-boiled private investigator so important for feminist criticism, especially if her position is not constant? Put quite simply, Veronica brings in a new era in hard-boiled storytelling. There have been female

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<sup>57</sup> “Leave It to Beaver.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas and Diane Ruggiero. Dir. Michael Fields. UPN. 10 May 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>58</sup> “Not Pictured.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas and John Enbom. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 9 May 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>59</sup> “Of Vice and Men.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete Third Season*. Writ. Phil Klemmer. Dir. Harry Winer. WB. 14 Nov 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> “Spit and Eggs.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete Third Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Rob Thomas. WB. 28 Nov 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2007.

detectives, and there have been female private investigators, but the main connection between them has been that they were grown women. They would have previously been objectified, but one assumes that in contemporary film and television, they would have some measure of agency. In using not only a female protagonist, but a teenage female protagonist, the previously predatory male gaze that Laura Mulvey and others have called into question has been turned on its head. Veronica Mars is the embodiment of many male fantasies, and the teenage girl who would have previously been the object of the male gaze is now the one who directs the audience's attention, reclaiming the power previously held by jaded middle-aged men. In appropriating this position and claiming the power that goes with it, Veronica creates a space in which her perspective is the only one offered; as such, her gaze is the one that is privileged. As Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones note,

[t]he female dick, in effect, signifies difference. This in-between locus can counter dominant constructions of gender and sexuality by placing in question the clear-cut and essentialized character of the norms established by previous practices of the hard-boiled mode. And mainstream formula fiction offers a controlled space that enables a wide audience to explore the borders of established categories and conventions.<sup>61</sup>

By virtue of her age and sex, Veronica's position as the hard-boiled private investigator makes further gender performance possible, but it is something that is consistently challenged by the inhabitants of Neptune who have chosen to stay faithful to their inscribed gender roles.

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<sup>61</sup> Walton, Priscilla L. and Manina Jones. Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. 106.

Even though Veronica marks a radical change in the often misogynist leanings of *noir*, it must be noted that the other characters—both men and women—often try to force her back into the position of the gazed-upon. The student body’s collective memories of Shelly Pomroy’s party ensure that Veronica’s perceived sexual appetites are always up for discussion when appropriate. Generally, that appropriateness is defined as whenever her supposed promiscuousness can be used as an emotional weapon. One would assume that Veronica would encounter this primarily from the other girls at her school—and thereby reflect some reality of high school—but she primarily runs into this issue when dealing with male students. Weevil’s conversations with her are laden with sexual innuendo, and it is clear that if he had not come to respect Veronica, he would pursue her. From the beginning, Weevil refuses to communicate in anything other than sexual propositions.

Weevil: Sister, the only time I care what a woman has to say is when she’s riding my big old hog, but even then it’s not so much words, just a bunch of oohs and ahhs, you know?

Veronica: So it’s big, huh?

Weevil: Legendary.

Veronica: Well, let’s see it. I mean, if it’s as big as you say, I’ll be your girlfriend. We could go to prom together!...What seems to be the problem? I’m on a schedule here, vato.<sup>62</sup>

Veronica’s saving grace here is her refusal to be intimidated—a trait she borrows from the hard-boiled tradition. As a result of this conversation and her help with a PCH legal

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<sup>62</sup> “Pilot.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Mark Piznarski. UPN. 22 Sept 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

issue, Weevil and Veronica come to a mutual understanding and grudging respect for each other.

Still, Veronica's position as the hard-boiled detective is the very reason others objectify her; underclassman Justin Smith (Bobby Edner) and his friends rate the attractiveness of the girls on campus, and Veronica's PI status earns her a high position, because, in Justin's eyes, that automatically makes her sexy.<sup>63</sup> For younger men, as well as men who enjoy domination, Veronica is the embodiment of the perfect woman—aggressive, aloof, and confident. It is clear Justin enjoys the abuse that Veronica heaps on him. Ben (Jonathan Taylor Thomas), the ATF agent assigned to Neptune High, feels that Veronica's position as a female private investigator makes her the perfect person to use as sexual bait in his investigation; in recruiting her, he calls on her patriotism, but instead of asking her to use her computer skills to uncover secrets, Ben asks her to manipulate a classmate's sexual feelings for her. Veronica outwardly complies, but is still in control, as she cuts Agent Ben out of the investigation.<sup>64</sup> Veronica will use her femininity and sexual allure when necessary because they lie within her control; however, her masculine identification will not allow others to manipulate her sexuality for their own purposes, a choice which the series clearly privileges. Veronica is at her sleuthing best when she is true to the masculine persona she has adopted while still letting her femininity emerge when necessary.

Gender is coded and assigned based on behavior and reaction to situations that arise in the *noir* universe of Neptune. Butler addresses this same idea, saying that

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<sup>63</sup> "Meet John Smith." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Jed Seidel. Dir. Harry Winer. UPN. 12 Oct 2004. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>64</sup> "Weapons of Class Destruction." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Jed Seidel. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 12 April 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

“gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo”<sup>65</sup>. Neptune’s shift in gender perception also forces those whose gender is already contested to perform it more emphatically—generally, teenage males who have absent or abusive fathers and male relatives. These young men are victimized because they do not entirely conform to gender norms, whether it is naturally or as a reaction to consistent abuse, and resort to extreme measures to prove themselves. This is a singularly male-focused occurrence; the fluidity of gender in Neptune brought about by Lilly’s death and Veronica’s appropriation of the hard-boiled persona shows the “complex performance of gender and genre [that] may destabilize and denaturalize the very gender categories inherent to the phallogocentric ideologies”<sup>66</sup>.

On the surface, Logan Echolls seems to be totally secure in his masculine identity—a carefree playboy who asserts his power over his classmates through his superior wit, Logan is introduced as an antagonist. However, as his family history is revealed, it becomes clear that Logan’s masculinity is a complicated performance that results from his father’s physical and emotional abuse. From Aaron, Logan has learned to react to abuse and loss by acting hypermasculine. The beatings make Logan vulnerable; he is shown cowering in shadows and scrambling over couches to get away from his father. To regain a measure of control, Logan goes into overdrive, avoiding a subsequent beating by presenting the public persona that Aaron requires—the well-adjusted, popular son of two movie stars—and hiding his battered emotions behind arrogant posturing and smart aleck remarks, the hallmarks of high school masculinity.

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<sup>65</sup> Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Henry Bial. New York: Routledge, 2007. 188.

<sup>66</sup> Walton, Priscilla L. and Manina Jones. *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. 99-100.

Aaron also sets an example of promiscuity with an outward example of monogamy. He accepts Logan's choice to have a steady girlfriend, as that is a requirement of his own performance as a good father, but he does everything he can to upset the balance of Logan's relationships—he sleeps with and murders Lilly and attempts to murder Veronica. For Aaron, masculinity is the appearance of monogamy, but “enjoyment” of other women is necessary to be a “true” man; he cheats on wife Lynn (Lisa Rinna) with everyone from their domestic help to their mutual friends. Logan internalizes this attitude and, as part of his gender performance, engages in many meaningless sexual relationships with girls who are girlfriends in name only; there is no love or real connection there, as Aaron has stressed in his own extramarital affairs.

For Logan, loss also leads to an emphatic performance of his chosen gender. Again, he is reacting to the exposure of his vulnerability; from Aaron, he has learned that any moment of vulnerability is unacceptable. Aaron considers himself the ultimate masculine example—which is reinforced by his adoring fans—and values stoicism. There are no tears in the Echolls house. Logan learns this lesson well, and avoids public tears and emotional scenes. When his sister Trina (Alyson Hannigan) appropriates Lynn's credit cards after her death, Logan is confronted with the reality of his mother's suicide; he becomes aggressive, realizing that he is close to breaking down. He almost succeeds; the mention of his father's abuse in front of Veronica, who was unaware of the situation, makes it impossible.

Logan: Dad could've used you there.

Trina: So now you're concerned about Dad's welfare. Isn't he the big bad wolf?

Cigarette burns and broken noses. Oh, the stories you used to tell...I'm heading

home now. I guess some accountant finally cancelled Mom's cards.

Logan: But if you're coming home, who will play Dead Hooker Number Two on CSI this week? How will you get your attention fix?

Trina: Maybe I can be the ring girl at one of your bum fights.<sup>67</sup>

One would initially assume that Logan would continue fighting with his sister and take his grief to a private place, but, finally, the performance becomes too much, and he breaks down in the hotel lobby. Veronica's expression of shock shows the audience that Logan's performance has never faltered before, at least not in front of her. Logan can no longer perform his required gender to his father's satisfaction in the face of his mother's death. Upon realizing this, he attempts to regain quickly that gender position by getting drunk and going to a school dance. His enactment of a stereotypically male high school experience safely places him back in his preferred and prescribed gender position.

Aaron also values stereotypically masculine ideas of protecting women; in his own life, it manifests itself as keeping his affairs from Lynn, but for Logan, this protective, territorial instinct becomes a large part of his gender performance. Once he commits himself to Veronica, he proves over and over that he will fight for her, something that self-sufficient Veronica often rejects in favor of doing things herself. However, she does occasionally let him enact his performance when it benefits her; again, often when she is physically threatened. When it is revealed that his friend Mercer is the Hearst College rapist—and attempted to rape Veronica—Logan takes a baseball bat to a police car's windshield to place himself in a position to attack Mercer in jail, thereby

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<sup>67</sup> "Ruskie Business." *Veronica Mars: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Phil Klemmer and John Enbom. Dir. Guy Norman Bee. UPN. 22 February 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

performing the act that validates his position as the man who loves Veronica.<sup>68</sup> Still, by this point, Aaron is dead, and Logan is still enacting the masculinity that Aaron approved. In Neptune, male masculine performance is a much more complicated issue, and rarely validated.

Cassidy “Beaver” Casablancas is the clearest embodiment of this idea; his character is an exploration of the construction of gender. Unlike Logan, Cassidy is portrayed and referred to as overly feminine; his brother Dick spends a great deal of time insulting him, and those insults are usually a variation on the theme of Cassidy’s supposed homosexuality. Cassidy is physically weak, pale (for a Californian), and very intelligent—all signifiers of improperly enacted masculinity. Along with a typically feminine first name, he is also burdened with a slang term for female genitalia as a nickname; when placed alongside his father and brother, who are both called Dick, this is brought into sharp relief. Cassidy is the unacceptable Casablancas son, despite being, from all appearances, sweet and polite. He is desperate to earn his father’s love and respect, but cannot seem to be taken seriously. In essence, Cassidy is such a disappointment that Dick, Sr. forgets he is there, and thereby neglects him emotionally. When Dick, Sr. does notice Cassidy, it is only to torture him; he and other son Dick, Jr. have contests to see who can make young Cassidy cry.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly, Cassidy has deep-seated emotional issues as a result of his father’s emotional abuse and neglect. Still, he could react as Logan did, and enact his masculinity as modeled on his father’s actions. Instead, Cassidy retreats into a more feminine

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<sup>68</sup> “Spit and Eggs.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete Third Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. Rob Thomas. WB. 28 Nov 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> “I Know What You’ll Do Next Summer.” *Veronica Mars: The Complete Third Season*. Writ. Jonathan Moskin and David Mulei. Dir. Nick Marck. WB. 15 May 2007. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2007.

performance where he is comfortable. The question that arises, then, is why. Cassidy's gender identification is complicated by his sexual abuse at the hands of Woody Goodman. It is unclear if Cassidy was destined to turn out as the "weaker" Casablancas brother, or if the abuse resulted in a shift in Cassidy's gender identification. Regardless, it becomes clear that Cassidy is sexually confused because of it; the trauma caused by his molestation has rendered him essentially impotent, as evidenced in his inability to consummate his relationship with Cindy "Mac" McKenzie. Whether or not he is homosexual is unclear. He rapes Veronica, but she calls him on the act and analyzes his motives, which she knows had nothing to do with actual sexual attraction.

Veronica: Now let me ask you something. How is it I got chlamydia? Woody was treated for it. I ended up with it. Shelly Pomroy's party, sophomore year. You said Dick pushed you into a room with me after I'd been roofied. But you didn't run out like you said you did, did you? Nope. You wanted to prove you were a man. It helped that I was unconscious, didn't it? Easy to imagine whatever it is you needed to imagine. You raped me!

Cassidy: And Dick still thinks I'm a virgin.<sup>70</sup>

Cassidy rapes Veronica as an attempt to enact a masculinity that his brother approved. However, afterward, he is still unable to move beyond his previous feminine performance.

Cassidy is unassertive and quiet among other males, which could potentially be excused, but his reticence extends to his relationships with women as well. Even when Cassidy begins dating Mac—who, from her masculine name and gender neutral dress, is

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<sup>70</sup> "Not Pictured." *Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Rob Thomas and John Enbom. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 9 May 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

not a choice of someone consciously performing masculinity—he is portrayed as the weaker partner. It is only when he betrays Mac and his violent actions are revealed that he begins to be seen as masculine. When he leaves Mac after their aborted lovemaking, it is a gendered betrayal. In a hotel filled with partying seniors, everyone knows what Mac and Cassidy were doing in their room. When Cassidy leaves Mac naked and alone after her disastrous attempt at losing her virginity to him<sup>71</sup>, it is her most feminine portrayal yet. By humiliating her in this way, Cassidy begins to perform his version of masculinity. For Cassidy, masculinity is power over your surroundings—much like Veronica’s masculine performance. For both of them, this choice is based on sexual assault. Cassidy’s turn to masculine performance comes when his assault is potentially made public; it becomes imperative that he quiet the other abused boys.

Cassidy chooses to enact his masculinity in a hyperaggressive way, as Logan occasionally does. However, the important difference is that Logan tends to focus his aggression on one person and lets it go after the incident is over. Cassidy begins by blowing up a bus<sup>72</sup>—he does not do anything halfway. Cassidy regains control through this destructive act, but it is his rooftop confrontation with Veronica where he truly performs his masculinity. He lures her up to the roof with Mac’s cell phone, then threatens her with a gun, a masculine symbol that Veronica does not employ. In his attempt to murder Veronica, Cassidy finally comes to a position of power wherein others are at his mercy. He finally performs his masculinity as he sees fit. When he loses

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<sup>71</sup> “Not Pictured.” Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season. Writ. Rob Thomas and John Enbom. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 9 May 2006. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>72</sup> “Normal Is the Watchword.” Veronica Mars: The Complete Second Season. Writ. Rob Thomas. Dir. John Kretchmer. UPN. 28 Sept 2005. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.

control to Logan, it is unacceptable, and Cassidy has no other option than suicide; he will never regain that power and ability to fully enact his masculinity. As the main villain of season two, Cassidy Casablancas is clearly not enacting an approved masculinity. He is building his own version of it, using his father and brother as templates. His character allows the audience to see beyond his performance to the inherent construction of gender. Beyond that, especially considering Logan's performance, a series-validated masculinity is the opposite of what Logan and Cassidy enact. They are working from their fathers' and their communities' very flawed views of masculinity; their performance depends on both another's performance and another's view of their own performance. It is Veronica who blazes the trail by using herself as the guide for performance, and it is this choice that the series implicitly endorses.

*Veronica Mars* might seem to be a quirky bright spot on UPN and the CW's otherwise often formulaic rosters, but its influence is far reaching. Maggie Humm is certainly correct when, in her book, *Feminism and Film*, she claims that

...media work is crucial to feminist cultural politics and theory. Firstly, the media are a major influence on women's perceptions of themselves and constructions of identity since it is in the media that visual fantasies of, and for, particular subjectivities are created.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, no series is perfect—*Veronica Mars* is certainly a well-scripted and – performed series, but a complicated one as well. It reaches great heights in its disruption of gender norms through Veronica, Logan, and Cassidy; however, the series also reinscribes those same gender norms. Veronica's performance is potentially problematic;

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<sup>73</sup> Humm, Maggie. *Feminism and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997.

by choosing to appropriate the masculine hard-boiled persona, she is actually privileging masculinity. Her more feminine choices are ones that lead her into danger, danger usually represented by a threatening masculine presence that puts her into physical and sexual jeopardy. Veronica's feminine moments are rarely moments of agency; they are not choices that the series endorses.

It seems that *Veronica Mars* implicitly assigns agency to masculine performance—it is the only time that Veronica, Logan, and Cassidy are able to bring order to their skewed worlds. While the series certainly brings masculinity into question, it does not take a position that would suggest masculinity is anything other than a mimicked performance. These characters work from examples of masculinity that come from popular culture and their own family, but because they are using these examples to give themselves a measure of agency, the series presents a complicated view of masculinity. While it reveals the construction behind masculine performance, it also reinforces some privileged gender norms, relegating feminine performance to villains and the hero and heroine's more vulnerable moments. Still, any piece of popular culture that engages gender so intensely should be studied, as the gender identities it privileges are transmitted and potentially internalized by its viewing audience—often members of a rising generation that has the power to further the series' work.

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