

Rushing Towards Death: Alienation and Doom in the 1940s American Crime Film

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Abstract

While the criminals found in classic American crime films take many forms, from frontier outlaws to big city gangsters, they all serve, on some level, as surrogates for audiences' darker impulses and desires. And, while these criminal characters have undergone many changes and permutations, a small cycle of gangster films from the early 1930s have come to disproportionately represent a broad period of classic Hollywood crime films. *Little Caesar* (1930), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) have dominated the discourse surrounding the classic American crime film to such a degree that important variations on the criminal character can become generically linked to these early films even though their defining qualities are, in reality, quite different. In this study, I will examine one criminal variation which I have labeled the "Doomed Criminal." I will both disentangle this unique Doomed Criminal archetype from the influence of pre-Code characterizations, and determine the significant factors which led to the development of this new character that appeared in a cycle of films throughout the 1940s. Also, by first situating the Doomed Criminal within the socio-historical framework of its time, I will establish the proper background for a focused look at the authorial contributions of W. R. Burnett and John Huston to the Doomed Criminal. Both of these creators were responsible for the three films I use as case studies in my textual examination of the character: *High Sierra* (1941), *This Gun for Hire* (1942), and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). By giving each of these three films a close textual analysis, I will be able to illuminate and support the traits identified as unique to this character throughout this study. This multi-pronged approach will ultimately reveal a distinct character archetype that was noble, professional, competent, and, above all, doomed to alienation and death within a world in which it had no place.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“Remember what Johnnie Dillinger said about guys like us?

[He said] that we were just rushing towards death.”

- from Raoul Walsh’s *High Sierra* (1941)

The criminal character is one of cinema’s most iconic and enduring characters. From the terrifying thrill of a train robber slowly bringing his gun to bear on the audience itself in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to the bombastic heists found in the blockbuster *Fast and Furious* franchise of the present day, the criminal protagonist has been a cinematic mainstay for almost as long as film has been an art form. In 1947, John Houseman, writing on “What Makes American Movies Tough,” says that “from frontier days till now brutality has been a constant and often dominant element in American life. The “Chiller” has long been a staple of film entertainment; so has the shooting-drama, be it gangster-film or horse opera. Violence has always played an important part in popular American entertainment” (120). Though, in the other narrative arts, the criminal character’s history goes back far earlier than the beginning of the 20th century, in just over a hundred years, film has managed to produce a great deal of variations on the central concept of a citizen violently living outside the confines of the social contract.

This thesis will expand the generic understanding of one particular criminal character found throughout the 1940s in classic Hollywood crime films—a character that I have titled the “Doomed Criminal.” I have chosen to focus on this Doomed Criminal character not just because of its importance to the crime film, but also because of the way in which it has been so commonly subsumed by the generic dominance of a handful of pre-Code Hollywood gangster

movies from the early 1930s—the most famous of which are: *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932). While the pre-Code gangster that was found in these early films, almost without exception, was also a character doomed to death, the overwhelming sense of fatalism that surrounds the Doomed Criminal character archetype with which this thesis concerns itself is so strong that referring to the character as a Doomed Criminal is a very fitting appellation for my purposes. Beginning with the introduction of this Doomed Criminal character in *High Sierra* (1941), and ending with the most developed example of the character in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), this thesis will bring the details and nuances of this character archetype into focus through an examination of the significant factors (both genre and industry focused, as well as authorial) that led to its creation.

By determining these significant factors, this thesis will provide much needed scholarship on a rarely isolated variation on the classic Hollywood criminal. My methodology will employ a genre-based textual criticism of key films, while at the same time recognizing the most important authorial contributions to the character. Prominent in this discussion will be the contributions of director John Huston and writer W.R. Burnett, both of whom were involved in the creative process for almost every film that I will discuss. This thesis will also examine the impact of societal, industrial, and production concerns on the development of the Doomed Criminal character archetype. John Huston and W. R. Burnett did not work in a vacuum, and the importance of styles like *film noir* on the Doomed Criminal will be vitally important to fully understanding its origins. The goal of this focused, multi-front approach will be to both draw attention to an overlooked permutation of the criminal character in film, and to extricate this Doomed Criminal character archetype from the complexities inherent in genre study at a granular level.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to draw attention to a neglected character archetype within the classic Hollywood crime film, a character archetype which I will refer to as the Doomed Criminal. Starting with the film *High Sierra* in 1941, this Doomed Criminal character recurred multiple times throughout the 1940s, and was as much an offshoot of *film noir* as it was an evolution of the pre-Code gangster. And, while the Doomed Criminal was a very different character than the pre-Code gangster character of the early 1930s (indeed, in many cases the Doomed Criminal was a solitary criminal with no involvement in any kind of a gang at all), it has nevertheless often been classified as simply a continuation of the basic generic traits outlined by the pre-Code gangster.

In addition to defining the specific qualities that both set this character apart from what came before and influenced what was to come, I will also examine the origins of the character itself. I will begin by focusing on the socio-historical factors that created an environment in which this character could exist before moving on to look at the authorial contributions of director and screenwriter John Huston and author W. R. Burnett--each of whom directly contributed to every major portrayal of the Doomed Criminal in the 1940s. Utilizing the complex framework of genre studies focused at a granular level, I will combine all of these elements to provide a multi-layered portrait of the traits and origins of the Doomed Criminal.

Because the distinction between the pre-Code gangster and the Doomed Criminal has so often been confused in the discourse surrounding the classic Hollywood crime film, I will finish this section by illustrating how the key characteristics of the pre-Code gangster differ from those of the Doomed Criminal. By clearly and thoroughly defining this distinction now, I hope to

eliminate any ambiguity as to what I mean by Doomed Criminal as I progress through the following chapters. While combining the two character archetypes is largely unproblematic when discussing the crime film in broad terms, such a melding has the long-term effect of obfuscating a character that deserves much more scrutiny than it has previously been afforded. Not only is the Doomed Criminal a unique and distinct character, related to the pre-Code gangster only on the surface level, but the Doomed Criminal is also an extremely important and influential character within the crime film itself. The influence of this character can be felt to the present day, both on a national and on a global scale.

The Pre-Code Gangster

Discussions of “classic” Hollywood gangster films prior to the 1950s typically evoke images of Little Rico in *Little Caesar* (1930) asking himself in the third person “Is this the end of Rico?”, Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931) viciously shoving a grapefruit in his girlfriend’s face, and Tony Camonte in *Scarface* (1932), brandishing a tommy gun and saying “Get out of my way Johnny, I’m gonna spit!” These three films, more than any others, have come to embody the classic American gangster film, which, in turn, has come to embody the classic American crime film. However, Jonathan Munby has suggested that perhaps these films are considered classics, not because they fit in with the rest of the early 1930s gangster films, but rather because they stood out from the early 1930s gangster films as something different (16). This is not to say the “big three” pre-Code gangster films were the only examples of their type at the time of their release. Films like Archie Mayo’s *Doorway to Hell* (1930), and George W.

Hill's *Secret Six* (1931) both follow in the tradition of little man making big through crime, and yet have only recently begun to reappear in the discourse surrounding the early gangster film.

The crime-lord character at the center of these early films, a self-made gangster pulled up by his bootstraps through pure American pluck and individualism, became so embedded in the American moviegoer's psyche that the character did not disappear with the enforcement of the Hays Code. James Cagney played variations on the character as late as 1949 in *White Heat*, while the character also remained popular even in comedies with examples like George Raft's Capone variation Spats Columbo in 1959's *Some Like it Hot*. However, due to the pop-cultural saturation of this "prohibition kingpin" character, many other criminal characters of the time have come to be erroneously categorized as a version of the pre-Code gangster character model as well. Thus, it is necessary to define the most important characteristics of the pre-Code gangster character in order to show how the Doomed Criminal protagonist that I will discuss in this thesis differed from the pre-Code gangster.

The pre-Code gangster as depicted in *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*, was a hothead, a man swept up by his Dionysian thirst for instant gratification. From meager beginnings, his desire for more led him straight to the top of his chosen profession (usually some variation of bootlegging or other prohibition-born crime). This take-charge approach is something to be commended in these classic movies; it is essentially just a corrupt version of American pluck and idealism that is on display, and as such, it must be rewarded with immediate success. Even the ethnicity of the pre-Code gangster, a man whose "accent frames his desire for success within a history of struggle over national identity" (Munby 44), presupposes his indomitable will to succeed within his own version of the American dream. Still, these gangsters are not professionals. The pre-Code gangster gets to his seat of power through the brazen acts of

a man who has never known the crushing sting of failure, a man who feels no need to temper his brash nature with a more reasoned approach. And, while this chutzpah is rewarded, it is far too wild and unrestrained to be considered a form of professionalism.

While there is a certain charisma to an individual so full of self-assurance that they can take whatever they want in life through sheer force of will, these characters were also all quite cruel—the kind of men who would smash a grapefruit in a woman’s face without provocation. Though they are the protagonists of their films, this is only because they possess such a commanding animal vitality that the viewer is unable to resist a certain amount of admiration. Discussing James Cagney’s (star of *Public Enemy*) illicit charisma, Richard Maltby explains how the studio was faced with the problem of “containing the specific commercial appeal of his rebellious, iconoclastic behavior—what *Variety* called his ‘you-be-damned personality’ and ‘roughneck character work’—within an acceptable narrative framework” (*Mob Culture* 55). However, because these pre-Code gangsters are unable to resist their more base and animal instincts they suffer as completely likeable characters. To put it another way, not even Cagney could make smashing a grapefruit in his girlfriend’s face a likeable action.

Because the pre-Code gangster is a pawn to his more animal emotions, he is also a man without a code. Loyalty is swallowed up in his own selfish drive for power. Eschewing honor, the only rule Tony Camonte in *Scarface* lives by is “do it first, do it yourself, and keep on doing it.” There are no rules in his business as far as the pre-Code gangster is concerned; everyone is expendable in the pre-Code gangster’s rise to power.

Again, the thirst for power, wealth, and respect that drives these pre-Code gangsters is essentially just a slightly twisted version of the American dream. It is the Horatio Alger formula:

the story of a boy from modest beginnings who raised himself up to wealth and respect through sheer pluck and determination, or, in the case of the pre-Code gangster, through murder and bootlegging as well. However, the pre-Code gangster is not content to stop with a modicum of wealth and respect; he wants nothing less than for the “world to be his.” Like Goethe’s Faust, the pre-Code gangster is never satisfied. He always wants the next territory over and the next bigger payday.

Though, unlike Goethe’s Faust, there is no last-minute redemption for the pre-Code gangster. He sells his soul and succumbs to his base instincts to get to his place of power, and thus, in the eyes of the censors, he has to pay for these transgressions with his life. These pre-Code films seem to suggest that had the gangsters just “wised up” a bit, perhaps stopped at their penultimate score, maybe they could have gotten away with it. On the other hand, the part of the pre-Code gangster’s nature that got him to his place of power is the same part of his nature that would never let him be content to rest upon his laurels. It is in his nature to reach beyond his grasp, and thus his doom is inevitable for reasons beyond the simple fact that the censors could not let characters based on real life bootlegging celebrities go unpunished for their crimes. Looked at this way, the death of the pre-Code gangster can become an integral part of the narrative itself rather simply being a societal demand upon such a portrayal of unrestrained criminal abandon. Though, often, in their attempt to didactically drive home a “crime doesn’t pay” message, these deaths could end up feeling artificial and manufactured. Jonathan Munby points out that all of the big three gangster films have “tacked-on endings that are glaringly discontinuous with the narrative trajectory” (63).

To sum up, the pre-Code gangster can be characterized by the following key character traits:

- Unprofessional hothead
- Mean-spirited
- Has no code
- Always wants more
- Doomed because they wanted too much

With these key traits in mind, I will now move on to my outline of the Doomed Criminal character archetype in order to see how he differs from the pre-Code gangster on each one of these points.

The Doomed Criminal Persona

Though the pre-Code gangster was also, without question, a “criminal” who was “doomed” to die at the end of his story, I have still chosen the appellation Doomed Criminal for the specific 1940s character that I will discuss in this thesis for a number of reasons. By broadening the nomenclature to criminal from gangster, and focusing on the “doom” I hope to draw attention to the most important elements of this character archetype. While this Doomed Criminal character was most often a “gangster” in the sense that he was a member of specific type of criminal underworld containing a loose brotherhood of criminals working together through shifting and opportunistic alliances, his specific criminal activities were not limited in the same way that those of the bootlegging kingpins of the pre-Code films were. For example, the Doomed Criminal could be a solitary assassin, with no connection to any kind of “gang” aside from those who choose to employ him, and still fit the definition of Doomed Criminal as I conceive of the character here. Additionally, by moving away from “gangster” specific

terminology, I will be able to further extricate this character from the generic pull of the pre-Code gangster films that have come to unduly influence generic perception of the Doomed Criminal. I will discuss the most important aspects of my conception of the Doomed Criminal character archetype here in order to clearly distinguish the Doomed Criminal from the pre-Code Gangster alongside whom he is so often imprecisely categorized.

The Doomed Criminal can be viewed as the future self of the pre-Code gangster—had the pre-Code gangster managed to survive his own wild lack of self-control. Or, to take his professionalism even further, there is a sense that the Doomed Criminal never had a “hothead” phase, as if, even as a child, rather than throwing a tantrum he stood quietly in a darkened corner of his pre-school classroom plotting a foolproof revenge on the teacher who had punished him. The Doomed Criminal always coolly and calmly performs their job as only a professional with unquestionable expertise might. Their professionalism is never in question, and these characters are always fully aware of and confident in the infallibility of their own expertise.

Thus, the Doomed Criminal is a more likeable and sympathetic character than the pre-Code gangster. The Doomed Criminal, as a criminal, still takes what he wants in an exhilarating display of freedom from societal rules—but he takes it in a logical and level-headed manner. There is no senseless cruelty, there are no wild swings of emotion, this character commands respect merely by existing, not by shouting their need for respect from the rooftops. The Doomed Criminal has negative qualities (especially in the instances in which his differences from normal human emotions are highlighted), but overall he is presented as an admirable and noble character, lost among a base and treacherous humanity. For example, both Jack Shadoian (79) and Carlos Clarens (169) (among many others) point to the essential goodness of the

character of Roy Earle in *High Sierra*, the first true portrayal of the Doomed Criminal character archetype.

In part because he is a professional, the Doomed Criminal follows a strict code that the pre-Code gangster does not have. “Snitching” is anathema in the Doomed Criminal’s world—it is even worse than the double-cross, which happens in their world, but never at the hand of the Doomed Criminal himself. Because the Doomed Criminal, as a professional, has evolved to sometimes work in teams (especially once the “heist” becomes an important central part of his stories), loyalty is of the utmost importance. Only the contract-killer Doomed Criminal (contract killing, along with the prison break, is merely a variation on the classic “heist”) worked alone, but even he values loyalty as a virtue of extreme importance. For the contract killer, it is the inevitable betrayal of that loyalty by the person who orders the contract killing that will start the contract killer down his own doomed path. In fact, for all examples of the Doomed Criminal, failure to adhere to this code by others is always the catalyst that precipitates their ultimate demise.

While the pre-Code gangster wants the world, the Doomed Criminal has much more modest goals. He doesn’t want to be “top of the world,” he simply wants one last “big score”—one last job to allow him to live comfortably in a place far away from the teeming masses of humanity that inhabit the city that has no place for him. His heist is usually from some nameless institution, a holding cell for anonymous gemstones, tantalizingly out of reach from normal people—but not the Doomed Criminal. As Fran Mason puts it, “unlike the big shot of the 1930s, however, the 1940s big shot is marginal to society” (64). The Doomed Criminal isn’t greedy, he isn’t trying to take more and more until it all blows up in his face like the pre-Code gangster. He

just wants this one score. It is a modest goal, and helps add to the viewer's positive conception of his character.

This leads to the most important difference from the pre-Code gangster. The Doomed Criminal is not doomed merely because he tries to reach beyond his grasp. What he reaches for is firmly within his grasp, as the ubiquitous success of the heists in these films shows. He is also not doomed because "crime must pay" or any other such strictures of the censors. Yes, production concerns would have unquestionably dictated such an outcome regardless of the character's subtleties, but there is a more organic explanation for the Doomed Criminal's inevitable demise.

Simply put, the Doomed Criminal does not belong in our world. At times it can seem as though he once inhabited a world which had a place for him, though at others it seems as if he has always been out of place, a dark presence lurking at the edges of society but never allowed to come in with the rest of humanity. He is an alienated individual, longing for that which is denied him: not money, but humanity. He might share a taste for "good girls" with the pre-Code gangster, but his preference arises out of a desire to be a part of what he sees around him every day instead of seeing the good girl as simply a "classier" status symbol than the usual women who inhabit his life. He wants to lower himself to the level of humanity rather than rise to a position where he might lord over it. And, it is because the Doomed Criminal inhabits a world that has no place for him that he must die. He is an abomination, an outcast who preys on society, a virus in a system that is far too extensive and healthy to allow him to survive to the end of the film. Tragically, the Doomed Criminal seems to sense this. There is a weary, nihilistic resignation to his actions. He carries out the heist, knowing it must succeed based on the simple fact that he is too competent a professional for it to fail, but also knowing full well the

inescapable nature of his fate. And yet, this noble acceptance of his doom only adds to his tragic appeal. Here is a man with no place in this world, yet he chooses to fight for his existence until the very end anyway.

To sum up, the Doomed Criminal character archetype can be characterized by the following key traits:

- Innate professionalism
- Likeable
- Has a strong code
- Modest goals
- Doomed because world has no place for him

I will be returning to these five main points throughout this thesis as I discuss this character.

I have spent a great deal of time outlining the character traits for these two specific types of criminal personas, first the pre-Code gangster, and then my own conception of the Doomed Criminal persona. I do so in the hope that beginning this study with a clear-cut definition of each character archetype might clear up the traditional instinct to subconsciously apply pre-Code gangster character traits to the 1940s Doomed Criminal character archetype with which I will concern myself in this thesis. I will return to these definitions (along with the textual evidence for these definitions) repeatedly in the coming chapters, so these distinctions will be key to fulfilling the purpose of this study.

Scope and Limitations

In this thesis I will focus on three films for my textual examples of the Doomed Criminal: *High Sierra* (1941), *This Gun for Hire* (1942), and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). While there were many other prototypical examples of the character archetype during this time period from 1941-1950, I have chosen these three films for a number of important reasons.

First, like *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface* in the 1930s, these three films made a significant impact upon the generic makeup of the crime film in the following decade. Rather than being cinematic outliers and obscurities, *High Sierra*, *This Gun for Hire*, and *The Asphalt Jungle* all feature prominently in any discussion of the crime films of the decade. In the 1940s, *film noir* was the overwhelming stylistic mode of the crime film, and both *High Sierra* and *This Gun for Hire* have been cited as some of the earliest examples of the style (with *The Asphalt Jungle* being thought of as quintessential *noir* filmmaking). Because of their importance to both *film noir* and the crime film in general, using these films as my primary texts will lend credibility to my discussion of their influence on the Doomed Criminal character archetype.

Second, these three films are all authorially influenced by W. R. Burnett and John Huston. As I will make clear in my third chapter, the Doomed Criminal is inextricably linked to Burnett and Huston, and using films in which they both had a hand is a natural requirement for my primary texts. *This Gun for Hire* has the most tenuous connection (being from a script by W. R. Burnett based on a book by Grahame Greene, and with no contribution from John Huston), but it is instructive to include it for its importance to the development of the character.

Finally, quite simply, these three films contain the most developed examples of the Doomed Criminal character archetype as I have defined him in the previous section. One can

see traces of the character throughout the forties, from the fatalism and early heist sequence of *The Killers* (1946), to the alienation of *The Gangster* (1947). However, in most cases, these other occurrences of the character are too poorly developed or tangential to the main plot to prove useful as a case study. More often than not, the fringe examples of the Doomed Criminal retain too much of the pre-Code gangster's mean-streak and unprofessionalism (or, in the case of a character like Cody Jarrett in *White Heat* (1950), they are simply insane).

Focusing in such detail on these three films along while also evaluating the contributions of W. R. Burnett and John Huston will provide focus and clarity to a complicated subject in genre studies. And, while this approach may be limited when moving on to discuss the larger influence and legacy of the Doomed Criminal, it will inform such a discussion in ways that were previously unattainable without first conducting this in-depth look at the origins and characteristics of the Doomed Criminal in the 1940s.

Review of Literature on the Hollywood Crime Film

Though a wide range of material has been written on the classic Hollywood gangster film, very little has been done to extricate the Doomed Criminal character archetype from either its more famous pre-Code gangster forbearers or the wide range of *film noir* anti-hero protagonists that surrounded the character during the 1940s. I have assimilated the most relevant material into three sections below: *Robert Warshow's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," Gangster Film Criticism*, and *The Criminal as Noir Character*.

Robert Warshow's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero"

It is useful, or, perhaps, unavoidable, to begin any discussion of scholarly writing on the gangster film with the influential popular culture writer Robert Warshow's famous 1948 essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." Though it is over half a century old, this essay has become one of the most influential pieces of writing on the gangster genre and it is liberally referenced in all manner of books and articles on the subject. In "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," Warshow claims that the gangster film eases the tension found in a modern American society that is full of contradictions. For Warshow, the gangster is both "what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become" (101).

And yet, by applying his broad thesis to all gangster films from 1931 to the time of his writing in 1948, this foundational essay illustrates the exact problem I am dealing with in this thesis: the failure to recognize a character like the Doomed Criminal as a unique and separate evolution of the pre-Code gangster—a character with which it is so often categorized. The films that Warshow was writing about as quintessential examples of the genre (namely the usual trio of *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*) were all almost two decades old by 1948, a year in which *film noir* was in its heyday. By writing an overarching essay about the concept of the cinematic gangster in 1948, and using only pre-Code 1930s films as his examples, Warshow perpetuated the idea that the "gangster" had remained essentially unchanged for two decades.

The introduction to *Mob Culture* points out that in "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," Warshow's attempt at a "concomitant formulation of a set of formal features that gangster films, to qualify as gangster films, must follow" was extremely flawed, especially given his selective examples (for instance, Warshow does not mention *The Public Enemy*, presumably because it

didn't mirror the rise and fall mold that he was attempting to establish) (2, 10). Warshow, much like I have done in this thesis, found a recurring character thread in gangster films. However, his primary error was that he attempted to use that thread to say something about the gangster genre as a whole, rather than evaluate it on its own terms. In order to avoid the same error, I will focus my generic discoveries to the micro rather than macro scale.

This is not to say that Warshow's point that "the Gangster is the 'no' to that great American 'yes' which is stamped so large over our official culture" is not still relevant to this day. In his essay Warshow sees in the gangster of the pre-Code American crime films of the 1930s an almost cathartic release from the impossible pressure of living up to the American dream. In his powerful conclusion he says:

At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is—ultimately—impossible. The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the person of the gangster and resolve it by his death. The dilemma is resolved because it is his death, not ours. We are safe; for the moment, we can acquiesce in our failure, we can choose to fail (104).

Warshow's essay has remained popular, and features prominently in many studies of the genre. It is with Warshow's essay that Carlos Clarens begins his book *Crime Movies*. While he

criticizes Warshow for stopping at the 1930s in his examination of the gangster genre (and thus ignoring many variations of “the gangster”), his entire book views the crime film as “an expression of America’s changing attitudes toward crime” which shows his indebtedness to Warshow’s sociological approach (13). This is also the approach taken by John McCarty’s book *Hollywood Gangland* where he calls the crime film the “cinematic intersection of Hollywood and one of the darker corners of the American landscape – a place whose signposts are fully recognizable and still with us” (xvi). It is rare to find a book on the crime film in America that does not attempt to draw a sociological connection, and yet the drawbacks of this approach are made clear in Warshow’s essay.

Gangster Film Criticism

Contemporary discussion of the classic gangster film as a whole is often centered on the cycle of early 1930s gangster films, followed by a nebulous grey area in the following decades where *film noir* complicates the discourse until the cycle of syndicate and mafia films that have dominated the gangster film in the second half of the 20th century take over. However, unlike Warshow, contemporary scholars do at least see the problematic nature of this simplistic approach.

While scholars like Elizabeth Cowie describe the “limited set of narrative themes and problematics” inherent in the “pure” gangster film (127), others, like Fran Mason, in his book *American Gangster Cinema*, point out how these “easily recognized iconographies and narrative conventions” are in stark “opposition to the variety and fracturing that characterizes *film noir*” (xiii-xiv). Mason illuminates the problematic nature of allowing the early 1930s films to “set the

domain within which the gangster genre has been studied,” specifically how doing so conditions scholars to use a defined set of parameters that refer to a specific and temporally narrow set of films rather than the genre as a whole. Mason therefore questions the idea that the gangster genre can be “understood as a set of conventions created in the early 1930s which are then replicated or slightly varied during the course of its 70-year history” (xiv). Throughout *American Gangster Cinema*, Mason argues that, too often, the discourse on the gangster film has been overtly reductive and restrictive with regards to genre. While Mason is by no means the only scholar to point out that over-privileging the pre-Code gangster films’ position within the genre can slant the discourse, his book keeps these considerations at the forefront of its narrative, and thus it is an excellent resource in a thesis such as this.

Jack Shadoian’s book *Dreams and Dead Ends* depends heavily on using a sociological approach to understand the gangster genre. In it, Shadoian writes that “How a gangster is conceived, or what he wants, varies from film to film and corresponds to what the culture needs to have expressed at a given time” (14). While this is an important concept within any study of genre, as stated above, this thesis is focused far too heavily on the granular level to depend entirely upon sociological approaches like Shadoian’s. That said, his individual film analyses are uniformly excellent, and contain a great deal of insight that discusses the Doomed Criminal protagonist in a focused, authorial-driven manner without completely abandoning sociological concerns.

Other sociological approaches to the gangster film show a much greater degree of nuance than exhibited by Warshow or Shadoian. Johnathan Munby’s revisionist account of the gangster film, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, notes, like Shadoian, how the genre adapted to historical change. However, he interweaves this approach with a sustained look at how the gangster genre

actually subverted the dominant ideology (which led to its heavy censorship) and how *film noir* was less a new style than a simple evolution of the gangster genre—an idea very much in line with the goals of this thesis. Munby prefers to examine these films as “cycles,” a term that “does justice to the idea that while these films shared generic conventions, they were also part of a socially volatile formula in flux.” Munby, compellingly, contrasts this with the more common approach which focuses on broad generic conceptions in which the “value of individual gangster films can be reduced to measuring only the degree they exemplify the attributes of a formula cinema and thus guarantee the stability and predictability of the Hollywood system” (4). This line of thinking is a valuable addition to the discourse on gangster films, and, like the books from Mason and Shadoian, Munby’s book proved very useful in developing my thesis.

The Criminal as Noir Character

Scholarship on the crime film in the 1940s positions the genre firmly within the confines of *film noir* (and it does so with increasing frequency as the decade moves on). Considering the 1940s criminal (and the Doomed Criminal specifically) as a *noir* character both positions the character within its appropriate historical context and helps to extricate the character from lines of thinking which only examine it in terms of the pre-Code gangster characters from the previous decade.

Considering the overwhelming influence of World War II on every facet of both American and global life, a sociological approach is the most common tactic taken when discussing the changing form of the crime film and the rise of *film noir* in the post-war years. In her book *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, Sheri Biesen explicitly draws the

connection between WWII and *film noir*. Her discussion goes farther than merely claiming a broad sense of existential angst as the basis for *film noir*, instead, she discusses a multi-front influence on the crime films of the 1940s, from the industrial to the sociological:

Wartime Hollywood fused several *noir* influences, including cultural disillusionment, German expressionism, trends in realism, and hard-boiled fiction traditions. The Second World War created a complex array of social, economic, cultural, political, technological, and creative circumstances that was, in effect, a catalyst for *film noir*. Merging essential elements –such as the growth of documentary realism, studio-bound production, urban blackouts in Hollywood, filmmaking restrictions, new talent and artistic experimentation, Production Code lapses, and technological advancement—the war contributed to *film noir*'s definitive style (5-6).

James Naremore, on the other hand, suggests that the rise of *film noir* was not a reflection of society's post-war existential despair, and was instead due to the growing disillusionment of Hollywood screenwriters with the American Dream. In his book *More Than Night*, Naremore writes “the atmosphere of death and disillusionment in *The Asphalt Jungle* and most of the other crime pictures of its day has relatively little to do with the nation as a whole, and a great deal to do with the specific community that could no longer maintain its depression-era faith that America would someday evolve into a socialist democracy” (130).

Whether the approach is broad and multifaceted like Biesen's, or narrower like Naremore's, the various attempts to position *film noir* into the sociological undercurrents of America in the 1940s are quite useful for understanding the context within which the Doomed

Criminal arose—even if they do not fully account for the character’s evolution with the larger framework of the crime film. While the character is inextricably connected to *film noir* aesthetics and narrative impulses, it is also a part of a lineage that both predates and outlasts *film noir*. To see the Doomed Criminal purely in terms of *film noir* would, once again, lose much potential detail in our understanding of the character’s origins and traits—especially when considered as an evolutionary branch of the pre-Code gangster.

Methodology

While the sociological approach that dominates most scholarship on classic crime films will provide a backdrop for this thesis, my methodology will move past broad statements about the state of society in the 1940s to look instead at smaller cycles and trends that affected 1940s Hollywood film output. The origins of these production cycles can be found, in part, by examining the factors within the industry itself that create these micro-generic aberrations. From the Hays Code in the 1930s, to specific post-war factors in the 1940s (such as those discussed by Biesen above), there are many elements that contribute to the various cycles that can be found when conducting any in-depth analysis of the crime film in the 1940s.

The primary contributing factor in the evolution of the Doomed Criminal films in this thesis will be the partnership between W. R. Burnett and director John Huston. Not only do director and screenwriter collaborations in classic Hollywood have a rich tradition, discussion of the specific collaboration of John Huston and W. R. Burnett is almost nonexistent in the discourse. On a larger scale, I will use the work of Rick Altman and Steve Neale to guide my methodological approach to genre throughout this thesis.

W. R. Burnett and John Huston

Perhaps the single greatest resource when it comes to W.R. Burnett is the 1983 dissertation by Phil Johnston Poulos titled *Benighted Eyes: W. R. Burnett and Film Noir*. Along with an in-depth and insightful discussion of Burnett's contribution to the *film noir* style, Poulos also fills his dissertation with extensive interviews that he personally conducted with W. R. Burnett for the dissertation—including Burnett's personal thoughts on John Huston. These personal insights proved invaluable in coming to understand Burnett's complex relationship with Hollywood. Mark Eaton, in an essay from *Screenwriting*, points to the very negative view of Hollywood and screenwriting in particular that was held by "serious" writers, with William Faulkner even going so far as to call the profession of screenwriting "prostitution" (47). Poulos includes many interviews where W. R. Burnett (who also most often looked on screenwriting as a way to make a quick payday) discusses his admiration for John Huston, and in many places the interviews suggest that the collaboration between the two was considered unusually fruitful by both parties. These interviews with W. R. Burnett make an excellent resource to use alongside the wealth of academic writing that exists on John Huston as I evaluate their collaborative contribution to the Doomed Criminal character archetype.

Genre Studies

In the introduction to *Mob Culture*, Lee Grieveson explains how "in the formulation of an idea of genre based on exclusionary principles, work on the gangster film falsifies the realities of Hollywood's production practices and the contexts in which films were received" (3). With this, Grieveson outlines the central generic issue that I will focus on correcting in this thesis. By

restricting discourse on the gangster film to an exclusionary definition of the genre that causes a small set of films in the early 1930s to dominate both the gangster genre, and, to a large extent much of the crime film genre in general, characters like the Doomed Criminal can become lost. As Grieveson goes on to say, “much of the critical work on the gangster genre simply ignores the great mass of films engaged with gangster narratives” (3). Genre theorist Rick Altman elaborates on this problem in his foundational book *Film/Genre* when he says that “film genre studies have too great a stake in generic purity to pay overmuch attention to history” (16). In *Film/Genre*, Altman points out how, under Aristotle’s influence, the Western world came to think of genre as an objectively stable phenomenon within which various texts simply needed to be classified depending on textual clues. It is this “classical categorization” that *Film/Genre* problematizes by showing how a complex and nuanced entity like genre defies such simple attempts at classification.

Steve Neale’s *Genre and Hollywood* takes a similar approach in identifying the over-privileging of the pre-Code gangster films. He takes issue with genre scholars like Thomas Shatz for whom “only three films qualify as classic gangster films, only three films adhere to the gangster formula. The rest are either ‘precursors,’ ‘watered down variations’ ...or ‘derivative strains’” (78-79). These efforts to move away from traditional methods of thinking about genre will provide an excellent background within which I might work as I explore the crime film in a way that leaves room for characters like the Doomed Criminal without simply relegating the crime film to the overcrowded discourse that surrounds the traditional gangster genre.

Significance of my Study

Not only will I bring this Doomed Criminal character archetype into firm focus in this thesis, but I will also use the discoveries I make about this specific character to gain a better understanding of how generic variations on character tropes arise in general. It is not enough to simply discuss the “classic Hollywood gangster film” when such wildly different variations on a character as seemingly simple as “a criminal” exist. Without work like this, the discourse gets muddied, character tropes get misidentified and confused for one another, and the richness inherent in the genre can become lost.

In addition to outlining the traits of a unique, little-discussed character archetype, I will also illuminate the authorial contributions that caused this Doomed Criminal character archetype to evolve from the previous decade’s gangster cycles. By looking at the authorial contributions to the Doomed Criminal character archetype, I will be able to bring to light the largely forgotten cinematic contributions from figures in literary history like W. R. Burnett (about whom there is very little scholarship), as well as the little-discussed collaborations between Burnett and the far more well-known John Huston.

Finally, by defining this character in greater detail than has been done before, I will provide new insight into the films that drew upon this character as their primary influence. This study will greatly benefit and inform future research into the French gangster films of the 1950s and 60s by directors such as Jean-Pierre Melville, Jacques Becker, and the American expatriate Jules Dassin. The impact of the Doomed Criminal on cinema has been profound and long-reaching, and it is my hope that this study will contribute towards showing not only where this

character came from and how he came to be, but also provide the basis for research into the character's influence upon future films.

Organization

This thesis will be divided into three main parts followed by a concluding discussion of my findings and areas for further research. By using a genre-based textual criticism through a historical lens, I will fully examine not just the defining aspects of this Doomed Criminal character, but also the significant factors that led to the development of this character in post-war American crime films.

I will begin with a socio-historical examination of the classic Hollywood crime film, with a focus on its roots in the gangster genre. I will incorporate elements such as the enforcement of the Hays Code, World War II, and outside stylistic changes (most notably with the influence of *film noir*) into the discussion on genre as I attempt to pinpoint the factors that led to the development of the Doomed Criminal character. Though this is not a reception study, I will also include in this section a discussion of the reception of key films (particularly the cornerstone, *High Sierra* [1941]) as the character changed and evolved.

I will follow this with a discussion of the two most important contributors to the development of this character: the director John Huston and the writer W. R. Burnett. Each man (often together) was involved in the development of almost every foundational film that I will discuss, and thus their contributions cannot be overlooked. I will examine both John Huston's full body of work as well as W. R. Burnett's trajectory in crime fiction in order to understand more fully how they shaped the characterization of the Doomed Criminal.

I will then look at three foundational films as case studies. I will start with 1941's *High Sierra*, the first example of the Doomed Criminal character archetype, written by John Huston and based on a book by W. R. Burnett. Then I will examine 1942's *This Gun for Hire*, another significant early example of the character (in his "contract killer" variation) from a screenplay written by W. R. Burnett. Finally, I will look at 1950's *The Asphalt Jungle*, the most fully-realized version of the character, written and directed by John Huston and based on a book by W. R. Burnett.

With the character fully defined, and the factors that contributed to its development clearly identified, I will move on to my final chapter where I will examine my findings and discuss possible areas for future research.

Chapter Two: Socio-historical Background of the Gangster Genre

“The first law of every being, is to preserve itself and live. You sow hemlock, and expect to see ears of corn ripen.”

- Macchiavelli, from the introduction to W. R. Burnett’s *Little Caesar* (1929)

When attempting to understand a genre in terms of the socio-historical background within which it existed, it can be difficult to avoid broadly characterizing a culture to suit one’s own needs. Robert Warshow might claim that the “normal condition of the citizen is a state of anxiety,” (98) but how can such a broad statement be taken seriously as an objective fact about the American people in the 30s and 40s? This is why I see a sociological approach in the manner in which Warshow (and so many others who have followed his example) takes to be a rather fraught methodological approach. As tempting as it might be to simply declare the Doomed Criminal a product of cynical post-War angst, it will be preferable to look at the character with a more focused and customized approach—an approach that leaves room for both broad historical factors like World War II, as well as industry-specific factors like Hollywood’s complex relationship with the Hays Code.

While the focus of the following chapter will be on the authorial contributions to the Doomed Criminal character archetype, before I am able to evaluate the creative forces within the genre that shaped the Doomed Criminal, I must first examine the complex socio-historical background of the genre itself. John Huston and W. R. Burnett did not work within a vacuum, and the ways in which the crime film grew and evolved around their contributions was a result of many factors, both from within the genre and from without.

Understanding the crime film as a coherent whole is a process that grows fractally more complex the closer one looks at the genre itself. As with any genre, the crime film is so bifurcated and complex as to make constructing any useful sense out of the phrase “the crime film” a daunting task in and of itself. This is perhaps why discourse surrounding the classic Hollywood crime film so predominantly focuses on the gangster genre, specifically the gangster genre as seen in the pre-Code gangster films.

However, over-privileging the gangster genre for the sake of simplicity does little to clarify a study on genre—even attempting to break the gangster genre down into its variations and subtypes does little to tame the generic branching. Take, for example, the way in which Steve Neale attempts a more sophisticated generic classification of the gangster genre by discussing the differences between the “urban” and the “rural” gangster film. He says, “From the 1920s on, urban gangster films tend to focus on racketeering...bootlegging, gambling, the provision of drugs and the like. Their criminal protagonists tend to acquire a great deal of wealth and power and this is displayed in ways which draw on contemporary iconographies of urban luxury” (211). This outline could easily describe any of the “big three” pre-Code gangster films. Neale then goes on to say, “Rural gangster films tend to focus on armed robbery. Their criminal protagonists acquire money, but rarely wealth or power...As a result, the cultural milieu differ in detail in a number of ways, and these differences have been associated with distinct generic attitudes and meanings” (211). This outline could describe any of the “crime spree” gangster films, from *Gun Crazy* (1950) to *Badlands* (1973). And yet, the films that feature the Doomed Criminal seem to fit both molds: they take the setting of the pre-Code film, and the characterization of the rural gangster film. And, even here, this attempt at generic classification falls apart as the rural gangster films (with the notable exception of *High Sierra*) so often involve

nonprofessional amateurs as the perpetrators of the crime spree, a very different characterization from the ultra-professional Doomed Criminal character archetype.

When confronted with this type of complexity, it might seem as though the answer would be to pull back and speak of the genre in broad terms. However, doing so can cause a specific character like the Doomed Criminal to get lost in the discourse. A more useful approach could lie in using Rick Altman's method of defining genres by both their form and their content. In his foundational essay "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," Altman describes how "the semantic approach thus stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged" (10). By contrasting these visual, iconographic semantic signifiers with the syntactic relationships and conflicts within the narrative I have attempted to extricate the various versions of the classic Hollywood crime film, and the gangster genre specifically from the usual historical thinking that tends to categorize crime films from 1930 to 1960 into a single large overarching genre full of a scattering of broad semantic signifiers. As Altman goes on to say, "while the semantic approach has little explanatory power, it is applicable to a larger number of films. Conversely, the syntactic approach surrenders broad applicability in return for the ability to isolate a genre's specific meaning-bearing structures" (11). Thus, throughout this thesis my definition of the Doomed Criminal in terms of his specific syntactic structures such as professionalism, having a code, etc is tempered with an examination of broader semantic elements like the heist, and a longing for the redemption offered by a "good" woman.

I am not attempting to extricate a concrete genre of Doomed Criminal films from out of the morass of crime film genres in the 1940s, I am instead pointing to the semantic and syntactic qualities shared by these films. This is especially true when the genre work of Tom Gunning is

brought into play. Gunning, starting with Altman's Semantic and Syntactic approach, explains a form of genre criticism called "Systematic genre criticism" which "attempts to define the structures of genre, mark out their boundaries and their forms of combination, largely through an exploration of iconography, narrative patterns and essential structural oppositions" (53).

Though I am eschewing the idea of a strict evolutionary progression of the crime film that leads to the Doomed Criminal, it will still be useful to understand the historical context within which the later Doomed Criminal films were working and within which audiences received them. Though I do not think that blanket statements about the cultural "mood" of a nation are helpful—historical context is still important. Many factors contributed to the branching and growth of the crime film, and, in order to get the whole picture of the evolving state of the classic Hollywood crime film, I will finish this chapter with a detailed look at the socio-historical context surrounding each stage in its evolution—with a focus on the progression from the pre-Code gangster films to the *films noir* within which the Doomed Criminal arose.

I am aware that, though I have continually brought up issues of the problematic nature of creating a strictly divided taxonomy of genre films, I will in a sense be creating a variation of that here. But I will approach this socio-historical background of the classic Hollywood crime film in a way that will address the problematic nature of the issues with which traditional methods of genre analysis have concerned themselves. I will begin with the gangster genre specifically, for that is the genre that had the most significant impact upon the origin of the Doomed Criminal. By using this brief history of the gangster genre itself as a starting point with which to problematize the Doomed Criminal films' placement as a continuation of the pre-Code gangster genre, I hope it will be clear that the same approach could be taken with any of the films I will discuss in this paper—from *Little Caesar* to *The Roaring Twenties*. Even a film as

seemingly generically straightforward as *Scarface* can be seen in a more nuanced light when viewed within the appropriate cultural contexts. As Janet Staiger points out in her essay “Hybrid or Inbreed,” the idea of “pure” genres in classical Hollywood is largely a myth (6).

The Roots of the Pre-Code Gangster Film

The “gangster” has been an important piece of cinematic capital from the beginning—a fact that is important to keep in mind when attempting to understand the origins of the pre-Code gangster film. Though the character can be broadly defined as any member of a criminal organization, the cinematic gangster typically aligns itself to a specific set of generic signifiers. Though these signifiers still allow for many variations on the gangster character, gangster films are typically forced into a dichotomy of “classic Hollywood” gangster films, and “contemporary mob” gangster films. While this simplistic genre split does not accommodate every variation of the character, it does allow for the evolution of the character to be understood in very broad terms by a wide range of academic audiences. However, as with any attempt to condense complex generic characteristics into an overly simplified taxonomy, a great deal of important granularity will be lost in the process. As the gangster genre transitioned from tales of prohibition big-shots to the pre-Mafia syndicate films that began to arise in the 1950s, the gangster changed and fragmented in ways that created a host of new character archetypes that differed greatly from those found in the crime films of the early 1930s. To make sense of this complex evolution of the gangster character, it is important to begin with the character’s cinematic origins. While the gangster had been an important (and popular) literary character long before the advent of cinema, understanding the ways in which the new art form of cinema

adapted the gangster as one of its central images will be key to fully understanding the gangster character.

The presence of a gangster by himself (and, in almost all cases, it was a specifically male-gendered character) is not enough to make up a film genre, and the earliest silent gangster films like D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) and Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration* (1915) were only tenuously generically linked. Such films could be said to be dramas in which crime creates the narrative conflict. And yet, the roots of the contemporary gangster film can still be found in these early films.

Edward Mitchell claims that the most significant overarching patterns in the Hollywood gangster genre are a secularized Puritanism, Social Darwinism, and the Horatio Alger myth (*Film Genre Reader* 160). Mitchell's first pattern, Puritanism was preoccupied with the idea that not only are we all born guilty, but we are also helpless to rise above this guilt except by the will of God. Mitchell's second pattern seems to be in direct opposition to his first due to the fact that social Darwinism starts with the idea that we are all subjugated to the environment rather than God's will, and then goes on to suggest that the more intelligent and adaptable subjects can rise above it. And Mitchell's third pattern, the Horatio Alger formula, extends this social Darwinism by focusing on a character starting from nothing to claim the wealth that is rightfully theirs. In a sense, the clash between Puritanism and social Darwinism provides the conflict and energy around which the genre revolves. Within a world of good and evil, the gangster is forced to turn to the side of evil to rise above his deadly environment and, in a perverted version of the Alger myth, rightfully claim what he sees as his by way of his social-Darwinist right.

The seeds of the pre-Code gangster portrayals can be found as far back as the silent era. Though the gangster is not the sole focus of *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, the focus on good and evil and the social-Darwinist necessity of the gangsters to fight for their survival is present. Walsh's *Regeneration* even quite explicitly follows the Horatio Alger myth as a dispossessed boy is forced to turn to a life of crime (though, in this early case, he is afforded redemption—unlike the fates of most all later gangsters—and even unlike other films of the time like *Alias Jimmy Valentine* [1915]).

Joseph Von Sternberg's 1927 film *Underworld* is often considered the first “true” gangster film of the silent era. And indeed, Ben Hecht's (cowriter, along with W. R. Burnett, of 1932's *Scarface*) script contains many of the elements audiences would come to expect in their crime films, including the bloody shootout ending. Ron Wilson, in his book *The Gangster Film: Fatal Success in American Cinema*, also points to late-period silent gangster films like *Underworld* as establishing the modern city (rather than focusing on tenement life) as “the central location in the gangster film” (23). While this focus on urban environments would be picked up again by the Doomed Criminal by the end of the 1940s, it was also a key element of the pre-Code gangster film. However, many of the basic elements of the 1930s gangster film were still absent from *Underworld*, most notably the focus on Prohibition-centered crime.

While some scholars, such as Carlos Clarens in his book *Crime Movies: From Griffith to the Godfather and Beyond*, privilege the arrival of sound with the origin of the true gangster film, historical factors are much more important to my socio-historical framework in this chapter. Granted, Clarens does not ignore other historical factors when he explains that the “three events that left a permanent imprint on the American consciousness of the 1920s were Prohibition, the onset of the Depression, and the arrival of sound in the motion picture. These revolutionized

American attitudes in morality, economics, and esthetics, respectively” (40). However, he then minimizes the first two when he goes on to claim that:

It is not an exaggeration to view the third event as the one with the most lasting repercussions. Prohibition seems nowadays an absurd chapter in the twentieth-century history, and the Second World War eclipsed the pain and misery of the Depression while allowing a romantic pentimento to emerge. But when pictures started to talk and sing and make noises, they altered forever the way we perceive reality, even the way we imagine ourselves to be (40).

Though Clarens is speaking broadly about the capacity of sound to change the very medium of film itself, it did have a very specific impact upon the gangster film. As Ron Wilson points out, the early gangster films created “an awareness of gangster speak as an attraction for consumers” (33). This gangster vernacular lent the early gangster films a certain authenticity which more theatrical styles of delivering dialog were unable to do—an attractive feature for audiences hungry to see realistic cinematic depictions of the real life gangsters that they saw in their newspapers every day.

However, the influence of prohibition and the depression cannot be discounted as easily as Clarens attempts—especially considering that Prohibition was a very recent memory, and the Depression very much a real thing to audiences of the time. To call Prohibition absurd does nothing to change the fact that it lasted for 13 years (from 1920-1933, the titular “Roaring Twenties” of the 1939 film) and was the cause of gangster celebrities like Al Capone (the inspiration for many of the pre-Code gangster films) coming to dominate headlines. As important as the talking picture revolution might have been, it was less important to the gangster

genre than a portrayal of the means (via the prohibition of alcohol) for criminals to achieve great wealth by working against a system which was, at the time, economically crushing more “honest” members of society.

Gerald Peary, a *Little Caesar* scholar, sums up the importance of both prohibition and the great depression when he says: “Without the advent of Prohibition, the saga of *Little Caesar* could not have existed. By the mid-1920s, organized crime had taken sufficient advantage of the Eighteenth Amendment, law since January 1920, to establish a bootlegging empire across America, and Al Capone had taken control in Chicago”. He then includes a quote from Judge John Lyle, Capone’s prosecutor, who wrote, “We might arbitrarily take the year 1926 as the dawn of the Great Awakening.” In other words, suddenly the media became aware of all the sordid details of the failure of Prohibition, including “the structure of the urban underworld... and noting the collusion among mobsters, politicians, and crooked law enforcers” (9). It was this environment that created the narrative potential for a new crop of influential gangster films at the beginning of the 1930s, and it was this “ripped from the headlines” nature of the stories that also contributed to the morbid appeal of the gangster film.

And, while David Ruth, in his book *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture, 1918-1934*, also points towards Prohibition as the primary societal cause for the rise in the popularity of the gangster film, he actually sees the Great Depression as one of the main causes for the gangster film’s decline. Ruth goes on to say that while the gangster might have seemed a viable fantasy in the early years of the Depression, “in the depth of the Great Depression audiences probably found that conventional elements of the gangster genre, developed a decade earlier, no longer addressed urgent cultural issues. Underworld imagery would remain compelling only to the extent it grappled with problems that mattered to millions

of Americans” (144). When those problems were emblazoned across the front of every newspaper in the country they would seem to matter much more than when the newspapers only had messages of hardship and economic depression. The larger than life antiheroes with which the readers had vicariously identified were gone with the end of Prohibition.

The Classic Cycle of Pre-Code Gangster Films

It was the prohibition years that gave film studios the kind of focused sensational crime stories that they could market to the disaffected depression audiences of the 1930s (just as it was the end of Prohibition that took the gangster heroes away from audiences). Starting with *Little Caesar* at the end of 1930 (along with *The Public Enemy* in 1931 and *Scarface* in 1932) all the elements that have come to characterize the pre-Code gangster genre had finally come together. The films were indeed Horatio Alger stories, but perverted in the sense that the “hard work” and “pluck” of the gangsters was rooted in decidedly antisocial behavior. The gangster in these three films was a decidedly vicious sort. The gangster from 1927’s *Underworld*, Bull Weed, might be shown feeding milk to a kitten, but Rico, Powers and Camonte from *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy* and *Scarface* were a different breed, more at home gunning their rivals down with automatic weapons and assaulting their girlfriends.

And yet, as so many scholars have pointed out, how much can really be learned about the 1930s gangster genre by focusing on three films only? Indeed, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* are the only pre-war gangster films to appear on the American Film Institute’s “Top ten crime films” list. This shows the pitfalls of establishing a canon. Eventually, the same films get discussed so many times that they end up excluding the contributions of all others.

To pick three films out of the hundreds of crime films made in the 1930s will obviously slant any attempted genre reading into becoming, not an analysis of the “gangster genre,” but rather “an analysis of films like *Little Caesar*.” Though *Little Caesar* may in fact be the prototypical 1930s gangster film, to ignore equally in-depth textual readings of other films of the era will obviously make one’s analysis of the genre incomplete. For example, *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia of The Gangster Film* lists 27 gangster films in the year 1930 alone. Does *Little Caesar*’s reputation as both a trailblazing and well-constructed film really justify the exclusion of films such as Mayo’s *The Doorway to Hell* from the genre discourse? Or, after reading through the plot descriptions of many of the gangster films from the early 1930s, one would not be remiss in suggesting that “old fashioned” fare (or even comedic films) were more typical of the genre, while bloody perversions of the Horatio Alger myth like *The Public Enemy* were the anomalies. I am not advocating one side or the other; I merely wish to show some of the drawbacks of traditional genre analysis based on such a small sample of “representative” pre-Code gangster films. Rather than think of these films as indicative of the genre, it is perhaps easier to think of them in the manner for which Lee Greiveson (and many others working within the genre) advocates: production cycles (groups of smaller films) and trends (broader movements in the genre) (3). By situating the pre-Code gangster films within their historical era this way, it becomes easier to evaluate the many nuances of a genre as it mutates and evolves.

The Production Code and the Hays Office

While the possible morally deleterious effect of the cinematic experience was a cause of concern from the very beginning of the art form, the censors were especially worried about the

gangster film by the beginning of the sound era. In 1930 and 1931, nearly half of all cuts in films were made for “showing disrespect for law enforcement and glorification of the gangster or outlaw” (Bergman 4). As Andrew Bergman says in his book *We’re in the Money: Depression America and Its Films*, “Despite all the clamor and warnings, the simple fact was that a great many people, and not just the young, were going to see the gangsters” (5). Richard Maltby, in “The Spectacle of Criminality,” explains how the standard fear was that the gangster was an uncommonly alluring character to depression era audiences, and that it was specifically this potential to be imitated that made the PCA view the gangster so fearfully (132). Thus, in 1935, Will Hays, created a moratorium on all gangster films. This was in part an attempt to show that the previous year’s Production Code Association was to be taken seriously, and in part to quell the worries of those who feared the growing public fascination with Dillinger (Munby 84). The old gangster might be languishing in Alcatraz, but Dillinger’s dangerous charisma threatened to push the public’s appetite for gangster films to new levels.

Jonathan Munby points out that even though the 1935 moratorium on new gangster films seems to have been effective, previous censor battles had already largely tamed the gangster film by 1935 (110). Still, Will Hays was pleased, and in his 1936 MPPDA *President’s Report* he heaped praise on the new film *G-Men* (1935), which placed Cagney in the role of a lawman rather than a gangster, calling it “a treatment which placed healthy and helpful emphasis on law enforcement” (Bergman 84). And yet, *G-Men* was essentially a gangster film (and an uncommonly violent one at that—much to the delight of the movie-going public) masquerading as lawman film. Examples like *G-Men* show the impact of the production code on making the gangster a more likeable character by establishing a gangster analog as the unqualified hero of the film.

Also, despite the explicit ban on gangster films by the Hays Code, sensationalized portrayals of gangsters did not completely disappear either. One important example of an early post-moratorium gangster is the character of Bogart's Duke Mantee in *The Petrified Forest* (1936). Though Leslie Howard's poet character is the ostensible protagonist, it is rare to find a review that does not comment on the audience's desire to cheer when Duke guns the poet down at the end of the film. Additionally, 1939's *The Roaring Twenties*, a film that even a decade later seemed to return to the gangster roots of films like 1931's *The Public Enemy*, showed just how quickly the Hays Code ban on gangster films had begun to be circumvented.

Of course, despite differences in characterization or plot, and despite the changing influence of production concerns, there are certainly elements that are shared by the many gangster (and gangster-related) films of the 1930s. I am by no means trying to say that a genre analysis is impossible, but rather that it is fraught with such difficulties that make creating a strict evolutionary timeline a nearly impossible task. Thus, examining small cycles like the G-Men films in order to determine their effect on larger trends within the genre (specifically, for the G-Men films, elements like more sympathetic gangster characters) is a more fruitful approach for conducting an historical genre analysis.

Pre-war Developments in the Crime Film

Though it is best to avoid making broad statements about the American "collective unconscious," there were a great many cultural upheavals that effected change at all levels of society as the 1930s drew to a close. Kenneth Alley outlines the common way of thinking about the gangster in depression-ravaged America when he explains how resentful and frustrated

Americans “could assuage their feelings only through vicarious experience, and they found one such experience in the exploits of the motion picture gangster” (249). However, with the gangster’s long hiatus, and the slow economic recovery of the nation, this vicarious escape became less important as the decade wore on and the gangster faded from prominence within the classic American crime film. Morris Dickstein, in his book *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*, describes one possible societal influence on the decline of the traditional gangster film in the waning years of the 1930s: “What undid the gangster was less the influence of morality than the new atmosphere of enlightened social improvement fostered by the New Deal....when crime becomes a social problem, optimism breaks out and the classic gangster, a mythic and tragic figure, cannot survive” (242). In short, as American slowly pulled itself out of the Great Depression (a process that was not fully complete until World War II jumpstarted the American economy), the “gangster” was seen less as a vicarious fantasy solution, and more as part of the problem.

In this optimistic environment, new cycles of films came to replace the violence and selfishness of the gangster film, most notably with social consciousness films like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Speaking of this transition, Stephen Karpf notes that “As the 1930s came to an end the all-important elements—stories placed in the context of an era, characters who drew their motivations from the demands of their times, social comment, commentary quality—were passed on to a genre which did not include the gangster film” (252).

This is not to say that the gangster disappeared completely. One notable late-period gangster film was Michael Curtiz’ *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). While the central character, Rocky Sullivan, shared some of the elements which would come to identify the Doomed Criminal (especially with regards to a slightly wiser gangster having the benefit of his prison

time to temper his youthful unrestrained ambition), its focus on turning the gangster's final death into a morality lesson fits neither the Icarus flying too close to the sun doom of the pre-Code gangster nor the system purging a virus doom of the Doomed Criminal. As I have stated before, all criminal characters in classic Hollywood crime films were doomed in a larger sense because the censors demanded capital punishment for their crimes, but it is the secondary, narrative reasons for their doom with which I am more concerned here, and using the main character's death to drive home a didactic morality lesson is not at all in keeping with the principles I have identified as integral to the Doomed Criminal character archetype.

Raoul Walsh's *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) from the following year was an even more important film for the purposes of this thesis. It was a classic gangster film by most respects, and yet it was also aware of its place at the end of the classic cycle. Fran Mason calls it "The final major film of the 1930s...which, as a summation of previous gangster motifs and narratives, provides both an Epic and an elegiac full stop to the 1930s gangster film" (47). Carlos Clarens, in his book *Crime Movies*, referred to it as the "twilight of the gangster," a term which he used in relation to *High Sierra* (1941) as well (168). Dickstein also points to these two films as a new cycle within the trajectory of the gangster genre: "The decade's soured romance with the gangster ended with two elegiac films directed by Raoul Walsh, *The Roaring Twenties* and Bogart's last and best gangster film, *High Sierra* (1941). Both portray the gangster as a disappearing species, the almost extinct artifact of an earlier era" (242).

However, this tendency to group *The Roaring Twenties* and *High Sierra* into the same cycle begins the process by which the Doomed Criminal becomes viewed as simply a continuation of the pre-Code gangster character rather than a unique criminal character archetype. For, while *The Roaring Twenties* was in many ways a classic rise and fall story of

one man reaching for too much in his pursuit of power and fortune, it was lacking many of the characteristics which would come to uniquely characterize the Doomed Criminal, most notably the professionalism with which the Doomed Criminal carried out all of his actions. Thus, by grouping it in the same “cycle” as *High Sierra*, *High Sierra* becomes inadvertently generically linked with the pre-Code films that were so influential on *The Roaring Twenties*.

Upon its release, the marketing campaign for *High Sierra* also situated the film firmly within the classic cycle of pre-code gangster films. A *New York Times* ad for the film from February, 1941 proclaims: “This is the Story of “MAD-DOG EARLE” Enemy of the people! By the author of *Little Caesar*.” While a Photoplay ad from the next month states: “Warner Brothers, Producers of ‘Little Caesar’ and ‘Angels with Dirty Faces,’ now present the drama that towers mightily beside both...” and goes on to discuss the stars by stating: “Ida Lupino as Marie, the dancer and killer’s companion deep down just another woman whose hungry heart yearned for one man. Humphrey Bogart as ‘Mad Dog’ Earle, enemy of all that is decent and good, defiant of every law on earth—except the High Sierras!”

Such sensational statements do not at all sum up a film where it must have been obvious to all who watched it that Roy Earle was one of the most decent and good characters in the film—something that reviews of the time managed to pick up on despite the marketing of the character as another bloodthirsty menace. For instance, Bosley Crowther points out in his *New York Times* review of the film, “[Earle] dies gallantly. It’s a wonder the American Flag wasn’t wrapped around his broken corpse” (11). This much more sympathetic take on the gangster character already shows how far the strictures of the Hays Code had fallen off when it came to the gangster film.

Of course, distributing *High Sierra* as “A film about a good gangster that the world has no place for,” would have been problematic on a number of levels. Even the title itself told one nothing of what the film was really about. Thus Warner Brothers stuck with “from the makers of *Little Caesar*” advertisements that attempted to fill theaters by drawing upon pre-Code genre tropes. The marketing of *High Sierra* as “more of the same” is important when one considers how different it was from the films that came before it. It is not a rise and fall story, rather a fall and fall further story. It contains one of the first examples of a heist, an element that would become very important to the Doomed Criminal as the decade went on. And finally, the professionalism of the main character positions him in marked contrast to the majority of the gangsters from the previous decade’s classic cycle. From the Warner’s advertisements it becomes clear that genre becomes a marketing tool in order to convince audiences to see a picture that might otherwise have been a marketing puzzle. Audiences going to *High Sierra* expecting to see the next *Little Caesar* would not have actually seen the next *Little Caesar*. But they would not have been disappointed either. After all, “coppers” get slapped, shootouts happen, and the criminal dies a bloody death, all of which semantically tie *High Sierra* to the pre-Code gangster films even though the film is, syntactically, a much different kind of movie.

In a sense, *High Sierra* is an *ex post facto* revisionist account of the earlier gangster films. Audiences had rarely seen what would have happened to a gangster that escaped (temporarily) his bloody comeuppance. And now, in *High Sierra*, they were treated to the spectacle of “that lion of yesteryear” released amongst the unworthy public. *High Sierra* positioned the gangster character of the 1930s into the 1940s—complete with a decade’s worth of experience to temper his brasher impulses—and in doing so ensured something brand new for the later films in this trend to follow.

It is, of course, problematic to assign too great of an importance on the influence of a single film (which is why this study points to the authorial influences upon the Doomed Criminal film cycle as the most important). For example, a critic like Crowther refers to *High Sierra* in his review by saying: “We wouldn’t know for certain whether the twilight of the American gangster is here. But the Warner Brothers, who should know if anybody does, have apparently taken it for granted and, in a solemn Wagnerian mood, are giving that titanic figure a send-off befitting a first-string god in the film called “High Sierra,” which arrived yesterday at the Strand.” One would think that, for Crowther at least, *High Sierra* was a significant event in the gangster genre. However, a mere three months later in Crowther’s first quarter summary of films, he says “And certainly ‘Virginia,’ ‘Arizona,’ ‘Western Union,’ ‘High Sierra’ and ‘Tobacco Road’ will not live long in the memory of any one.” This shows how problematic it can be to attempt to establish the influence and importance of a film on those to follow by basing one’s assumptions on something as imprecise as box office figures and reviews. These reviews show how, even though the basic elements for a new character archetype have been laid out within the text of the film, it is not immediately obvious how to distinguish this new type of character from those that came before.

Nevertheless, with hindsight, *High Sierra* rises to great generic prominence. Fran Mason points out how many (Frank Krutnik, Marylin Yaquinto and Jack Shadoian to name a few) have regarded the film as “fundamental to the later development of *film noir* because of its focus on the romantic alienation of the individual as it is refracted through the gangster hero” (54-55). This coming of *film noir* was undoubtedly important to the rise of the Doomed Criminal protagonist during the 1940s, as *film noir* infused the previous decade’s gangster characters with its much darker sense of fatalism. Finally, the “tacked on” “comeuppance” endings took on a

much darker tone than the cautionary tales of reaching beyond one's grasp of the pre-Code films. However, the advent of World War II temporarily put on hold most immediate follow-ups to the generic developments in begun by *High Sierra*.

Intra/post-war Developments in the Crime Film

Though World War II started on September 1st, 1939, with Germany's invasion of Poland, the United States did not enter the war until December 11th, 1941, 5 days after the invasion of Pearl Harbor. America's delayed entry to the war meant that there was essentially a two-year grey period where anti-Axis themes only fitfully crept into America's film output of the time. This was first seen in the social consciousness films that had come to supplant the gangster film. Roger Manvell, in his book *Films and the Second World War* points to how the "Warners, who had become the producers of many social films with some conscience during the 1930s (such as *I am a Fugitive from the Chain Gang*, *They Won't Forget*, *Black Legion*, *Massacre*, *Heroes for Sale*) allowed Lloyd Bacon to make *Espionage Agent* and Anatole Litvak to make *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, both released in 1939 and made before the outbreak of war in Europe" (30). *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in particular was a notable example of Jack Warner using his studio to take a definite stand against Nazism (partially due to the 1936 murder of Joe Kaufman, Warner's representative in Berlin) when Hollywood was otherwise disinclined to break its neutrality to the war for fear of alienating audiences (Doherty 14).

With the outbreak of war itself, the criminal protagonist found other ways into the cinematic output of the American film industry. In Sheri Biesen's book *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, she explains how "By late 1941 the temporary lapse in PCA

enforcement with Breen's departure and the attack on Pearl Harbor enabled Paramount to justify a violent story and patriotic criminal with a war-related sabotage plot to attack America...the war enable[d] patriotic violence to be adapted and approved by PCA censors" (50). Biesen is referring here to *This Gun for Hire* (1942), the second of the three films I will position as most important to the development of the Doomed Criminal. Based on a novel by Graham Greene, and rewritten for the screen by W. R. Burnett, *This Gun for Hire* easily establishes the detached antihero persona, though it resorts to psychosis to explain away his nihilistic life outlook. In addition to being an important early example of the Doomed Criminal, *This Gun for Hire* is an example of how the war relaxed the strictures of the production code with regards to the violence and supposed immorality inherent in the previous decade's gangster films.

This effect of the war on the Hollywood film industry was immediate and profound. Biesen describes how, in a "savvy strategy," the script for *This Gun For Hire* was first submitted "with two patriotic war films, *True to the Army*, and *The Fleet's In*...three days later the PCA—in the absence of Breen—stated the basic story for *This Gun for Hire* met the requirements of the Production Code, yet a two-page list of objectionable details needing correction was appended to the letter" (53-54). However, two months later "as Roosevelt addressed the nation on December 8," (with the majority of the principle photography finished) "Paramount finally sent a revised script" which was approved "the very next day although most of the PCA's requested revisions had not been made" (55). An assassin protagonist like *This Gun for Hire*'s Raven would have been unthinkable prior to the war.

Unlike *High Sierra*, the marketing of *This Gun for Hire* was more in-line with the character as portrayed in the film, though they did still tend overplay the potential for violence in the film. Biesen points out how tag lines like "Wary with a woman...Tender with a kitten...But

a terror with a trigger,” “A lone wolf...dynamite with a girl or a gun,” and Lake “finds a guy too tough to take!” all appealed to a “distinctly masculine, psychological ethos and ‘combat mentality’ that vicariously tapped into the war effort” (55-56).

The Doomed Criminal “war-time hero” character, as seen in *This Gun for Hire*, was not typical of Hollywood’s war-time output. Other instances of the character during the war years were relatively rare. The most notable example can be found in *The Big Shot* (1942), Bogart’s last gangster film, and a film without a connection to the war. Though the character is not fully developed in *The Big Shot* (primarily in his refusal to accept his doom, as well as his lack of a code when it comes to “the job”), the sense of alienation is strongly developed. When told “you’ll rot in jail the rest of your life,” Bogart snarls, “I’m rotting out here, ain’t I?”

As World War II drew to a close, *film noir* became increasingly popular as a style. Though the term “film noir” was not in use in America during the 1940s, the cinematic trend of darkly fatalistic psychological melodramas was acknowledged at the time (Porfirio 213). According to Biesen, though *film noir* did not explicitly reference the Second World War, “its cynical tone, brutal violence, and shadowy visual style all suggest the bleak realities of a world at war” (1). Paul Schrader, in his famous ex post facto essay “Notes on *Film Noir*,” calls attention to the “mood of cynicism, pessimism and darkness” found in *film noir* (278). These stylistic accoutrements naturally lent themselves to the Doomed Criminal.

As the fatalism of *film noir* flourished, new examples of the Doomed Criminal began to surface with increasing frequency. The characters in *Dillinger* (1945) are an interesting combination of pre-Code big-shot with its non-professional title character, and Doomed Criminal with the character of Specs, the professional bank man. *The Killers* (1946), with uncredited

script work by John Huston, is thoroughly infused with a sense of doomed fatalism while also continuing to include heist elements into the narrative. In *The Gangster* (1947), while the central character displays an uncharacteristic panic and desperation upon realizing his doom, he has a very firm grasp on his lack of a place in society when he says “What do you want me to do, worry about the whole world? Let ‘em rot, they don’t mean a thing to me.”

Finally, in 1950, all the elements of the character come together in *The Asphalt Jungle*, the film that most influenced all further portrayals of the Doomed Criminal. Born of a “semidocumentary” undercurrent in *film noir*, *The Asphalt Jungle* develops a “more forceful image of the everyday, which results in an at least equally involving sense of the real” (Telotte, 168). In a sense, the “ripped from the headlines” thinly-veiled Capone homages of the early 1930s had come full circle with films like *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Panic in the Streets*, and *Union Station* (all 1950). Instead of using headlines to present a monstrous antihero through which the public might attempt to vicariously escape the economic hardships of their times, this new batch of semidocumentary films used headlines to present the social and psychological hardships of the current time period to an audience that was otherwise thriving in a period of post-war economic prosperity.

I have included this brief trajectory of the socio-historical background of the classic Hollywood crime film in order to create a picture of the broad societal and historical issues that existed during the 1930s and 1940s. However, before I take a closer textual look at the Doomed Criminal character as seen in *High Sierra*, *This Gun for Hire* and *The Asphalt Jungle* in my fourth chapter, I will first examine the most important influence on the creation of the character archetype. Moving on from the larger societal trends that surrounded the character, my next

chapter will focus on the influence and contributions of W. R. Burnett and John Huston in the development of the Doomed Gangster character archetype during the 1940s.

CHAPTER 3: W. R. BURNETT AND JOHN HUSTON

“I prefer to think that God is not dead, just drunk.”

- John Huston

The making of a motion picture is a collaborative artistic endeavor, and pinpointing the contributions of any one individual is a naturally fraught process. However, it would be just as problematic to deny the contributions of the screenwriter and director in shaping the characters and ideological worldview of a film. Specifically, the Doomed Criminal character that arises in the 1940s is a character that originated in book and screenplay, brought to life by the writer/screenwriter W. R. Burnett and the director/screenwriter John Huston. Each of these creators made such significant contributions to the development of the Doomed Criminal character archetype from 1941 to 1950 that they must be evaluated in greater detail in this chapter.

Both Huston and Burnett were instrumental in the creation of the three films that I will use as case studies in the next chapter. The first two, *High Sierra* (1941), and *This Gun for Hire* (1942) introduced the Doomed Criminal character archetype that would crop up again and again in post-war *noir* films of the 1940s until the character reached its apotheosis with the final film, *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). *High Sierra* was based on a novel by W. R. Burnett, and both Burnett and Huston wrote the screenplay. While John Huston was not involved with *This Gun for Hire*, W.R. Burnett cowrote the screenplay (from a Grahame Greene novel), and the film contains many elements that were foundational to the development of the character. Finally, *The Asphalt Jungle* was cowritten and directed by John Huston from the book by W. R. Burnett.

Though *High Sierra*, *This Gun for Hire* and *The Asphalt Jungle* were all from different studios (Warner Brothers, Paramount and MGM respectively) and, in the cases of *High Sierra* and *This Gun for Hire*, directed by different directors (Raoul Walsh and Frank Tuttle respectively), the influence of Huston and/or Burnett is the common thread that ties the films together. For instance, *High Sierra* was directed by Raoul Walsh, one of the most important directors of gangster films, and yet it marks a noted departure from his earlier work. Though Walsh directed one of the first silent gangster films, *Regeneration* (1915), as well as the film that capped off the 1930s cycle, *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), and finally one of the last of the classic gangster films, *White Heat* (1950), *High Sierra* was his only crime film that featured the Doomed Criminal character archetype as I have defined it here. One explanation for *High Sierra*'s anomalous criminal characterization in Walsh's directorial output is to look to the contributions of W. R. Burnett and John Huston on the film's screenplay.

Evaluating the precise impact and contribution of a screenwriter (or, indeed, any member of the cinematic creative process) is a task doomed to failure. For instance, John Huston, when discussing his screenplay for *The Maltese Falcon*, said "during the filming not one line of dialogue was changed. One short scene was dropped when I realized I could substitute a telephone call for it without loss to the story" (Huston 89-90). However, considering the final shooting script ran 147 pages, and the finished film ran only 100 minutes, it becomes obvious that considerable changes to the script were made during the shooting and editing process (Stempel 133). In the face of such an incongruity from the single person most heavily involved in the film's creative process, the reasoning behind the changes made to the script for *The Maltese Falcon* may be impossible to determine.

Thus, rather than looking at the minutia of small variations in script details, I will instead be looking at Burnett and Huston in terms of the larger trends and common themes found in their creative output. In this way, the importance of Burnett and Huston's contributions to the *Doomed Criminal*, as well as the nature of their collaborative and adaptive process, will be evaluated in this chapter before I move on to a more detailed examination of each of the three films I have chosen from their careers as case studies in the next chapter.

W. R. Burnett

William Riley Burnett was born in Springfield, Ohio in 1899. At the age of 28 he moved to Chicago, the same city in which Ben Hecht (who Burnett would not meet until he moved to Hollywood) cut his writing teeth. In Chicago, while working at the front desk of a hotel, Burnett was exposed to many of the underworld characters (such as Al Capone) that would come to dominate his writing. Burnett focused on his writing during his time in Chicago, already having five unpublished novels (along with over a hundred short stories) by the time his thinly veiled Al Capone story *Little Caesar* was published in 1929—with the Warners offering Burnett a screenwriting contract a year later (Irwin 97-98). Not only did W. R. Burnett write the books that the films *Little Caesar* (1931), *High Sierra* (1941), and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) were based on, he also contributed to the screenplays for *Scarface* (1932), *High Sierra* (1941), *This Gun for Hire* (1942), and *The Great Escape* (1963). Few either inside or outside the film industry could boast a more qualified resume when it came to working with the classic Hollywood crime film.

Burnett's writing style was most often associated with the hard-boiled crime fiction of his time, though his reputation was better than many of his contemporaries. He was one of the few crime writers who was being published directly to hardback and aimed at a popular market, thus earning a certain amount of prestige when compared to other crime writers who still published in the cheaply printed "pulp" (Horsley 337). And though his bleakly realistic cityscapes and crime stories often drew parallels to Raymond Chandler, Burnett claimed he was never a "detective story author," and that instead he tried to capture "the social texture of American urban life, and to show the mechanism of corruption. [he was] never content to show felons or evildoers, but rather the infrastructure of the city's politics--which makes all criminal activities possible" (Poulos 141). In fact, Robert Porfirio suggests that Burnett's writing style may have influenced far more than just the gangster genre when he points out that, rather than the French existentialists, *film noir's* "existential bias was drawn from a source much nearer at hand—the hard-boiled school of fiction without which quite possibly there would have been no *noir*" (214).

Little Caesar, Burnett's first published novel, was released in June, 1929 only 4 months before the stock market crash on October 29th, making it one of the few texts discussed here that was produced without the context of the great depression to influence the story. The cinematic version of the book (released a little over a year after the stock market crash) was still a thinly-veiled story about the rise of Al Capone in the Chicago bootlegging underworld, though efforts were made to reflect, as director Meryn LeRoy put it, "that era of gloom and desperation that was the world of 1930" (Peary 13). As was discussed earlier, *Little Caesar's* Rico was a pre-Code gangster, that type of corrupted Horatio Alger story that so many of the early gangster films adhered to. In fact, in a phone interview, "when asked if Burnett had originally intended *Little Caesar* as an inversion of the Alger stories of the American Dream, Burnett replied that

such inversion was exactly his intention” (Poulos, 120). This type of characterization informed Burnett’s next screenplay, 1932’s *Scarface*, an even more obvious Al Capone story, and yet still the pre-Code gangster mold remains the same as seen in his first novel, *Little Caesar*.

Burnett was active as a scenarist, screenwriter and novelist throughout the 1930s, writing the scenarios for, among others, the gangster films *Beast of the City* (1932), *The Whole Town is Talking* (1935), *Dr. Socrates* (1935), and *King of the Underworld* (1939). However, it was not until 1941 that he contributed to the first fully realized cinematic version of the Doomed Criminal with his novel (and subsequent screenplay for) *High Sierra*. As I have discussed, *High Sierra* finally gives us the type of professional outsider that I have identified as a significant character in the classic Hollywood crime film. *High Sierra*’s central “protagonist,” Roy Earle is a man bound by a code, and yet he is considered an immoral outcast by “normal” society and thus has no place within it. This kind of alienation and “outcast professional” status ensures Roy Earle’s doom in a different way than *Little Caesar*’s Rico’s unchecked ambition ensures his own doom.

Burnett continued writing in this vein throughout the 1940s, peaking with the classic *The Asphalt Jungle* in 1949. In fact, prior to 1953, twelve of his sixteen novels were crime stories. Starting in 1953 onward, concurrent with the decline of the Doomed Criminal in American films, Burnett began to phase out his crime fiction, instead writing Westerns and adventure tales--even nonfiction (Poulos, 237).

And yet, even in Burnett’s film work, elements of the Doomed Criminal character can be seen all the way into the 1960s. For example, his academy award nominated screenplay for *The Great Escape* (1963) is the story of a prison break, a scenario that, like the contract killing or the

heist, is naturally suited for the Doomed Criminal character archetype. Only professionals can pull off a prison break, contract killing or a heist, and it is always in the aftermath that the operation will fall apart. Also, by definition, prisoners are removed from society, and thus it is their desire to return that so often leads to their demise just like W. R. Burnett's gangster character's longing for those pastoral utopias that seem so far removed from the teeming dens of corruption that are the cities they inhabit.

This longing to escape one's lot, to return to some out of reach conception of normalcy (so often represented by the pastoral for Burnett—rather than the city that made “all criminal activities possible”) can be found throughout Burnett's work, especially in the 1940s (Poulos 141). And yet a deep sense of fatalism also ran through Burnett's work in the 1940s. When Roy Earle is trapped in the High Sierras in Burnett's book, the following exchange takes place:

“You, up there!” someone shouted. “You got no chance. We don't want to kill you. Come down. We won't do no shooting.”

“Come get me, buddy. Come get me.”

Roy pushed his hat back and leaned forward to ease the pain which was still shooting in all directions from his wounded side. Why had he said that? Why didn't he give up? He was like old Mac. He'd just keep going till he run down like a kid's toy. There was no sense to it. But, hell, what was there sense to? (289-290)

Roy realizes the absurdity of the human condition, the senselessness of a world to which he feels no connection. The characters Burnett created in his later novels could not escape their fate, and thus, they were as doomed as the pre-Code gangsters, only their doom, as I have discussed, was for entirely different reasons.

John Huston

John Huston, like W. R. Burnett, was born in the Midwest around the turn of the century. After a teenage career as a professional boxer followed by a stint in art school as a painter, Huston ended up in Hollywood where he worked as a screenwriter throughout the 1930s (Long viii-ix). In 1941 Huston was given the chance to direct his own screenplay for *The Maltese Falcon*, a movie considered by some to be one of the first *films noirs*.

From there Huston went on to become one of Hollywood's most respected directors, especially when it came to literary adaptation. Throughout his career, the majority of John Huston's films, from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) to *The Dead* (1987), were, with few exceptions, adaptations. Karel Reisz writes that once Huston "has chosen a novel for adaptation, he treats it with the greatest respect. *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Asphalt Jungle* ('Burnett seems almost to write for me,' [Huston] says) are among the most faithful adaptations ever filmed" (Long 5). Indeed, his adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* was so faithful to the book that much of the dialog (which was of the utmost importance to a John Huston film) was lifted straight from the novel.

However, this penchant for adaptation has occasionally earned him a certain degree of skepticism from auteurs. Huston's apparent ability to change his style to suit whatever adaptation of another's work he decided to film has caused some to question if he should even be considered a true auteur. In Leslie Brill's book *John Huston's Filmmaking* she summarizes these common complaints by pointing out how others call him a "chameleon, taking on the coloration of whatever subject he decided to film, usually someone's novel about some man's screw-up. Nothing more consistent or characteristic, no personal theme beyond masculine failure, no

recognizable visual style. A director without direction” (1). While this does not take away from his enormous talent, it might make my claim that he was a driving creative force behind an important criminal character archetype during the 1940s seem a bit suspect.

However, there is a certain undeniably pessimistic streak that runs through John Huston’s films, which, as many have noticed, so often involved “some man’s screw-up.” The aesthetic style of a director will be of secondary importance to the thematic concerns of a director when it comes to examining potential influence on the Doomed Criminal, and it is easy to see what appealed to Huston about this character. Stylistic chameleon or not, John Huston picked his projects with care, and the common themes shared between his films are no accident. And, because John Huston’s two most important contributions to the character of the Doomed Criminal were also two of the most famous and important films in the cycle, his influence cannot be ignored.

First, in 1941, John Huston collaborated on the screenplay to *High Sierra* with W. R. Burnett, an author who, along with Dashiell Hammett, Huston felt was always underrated by his peers. Ron Wilson refers to the “masculine and aggressive style of writing” utilized by authors like Burnett and Hammett (33), and it is easy to see what was appealing to John Huston about their work considering the masculine and aggressive nature of Huston’s films. In his biography, *Open Book*, Huston says “I have always admired Burnett, who seems to me one of the most neglected American writers: *Iron Man*, *Dark Hazard*, *Little Caesar*, *The Asphalt Jungle* and *The Giant Swing*—considerable novels all. There are moments of reality in all those books that are quite overpowering. More than once they’ve had me breaking into a sweat.” (77-78). In fact, when asked as to whether or not he thought *Little Caesar* was the first *film noir*, and *The Asphalt Jungle* the last great *film noir*, Huston suggested putting *High Sierra* “into the middle [to] give

Burnett a clean sweep”—a statement which shows how important he felt Burnett was to the fatalism inherent in *film noir* (101). Writing about the novel *High Sierra*, Huston emphasized his desire to keep “the strange sense of inevitability that comes with our deepening understanding of the characters and the forces that motivate them” (Brill, 11). Huston knew that with *High Sierra*, something new was happening to the gangster character, and with W. R. Burnett, he created a screenplay for *High Sierra* that embraced this “inevitable” fatalism and set the character on a new trajectory of alienation and doom throughout the 1940s.

Then, in 1950, Huston both co-wrote and directed *The Asphalt Jungle*. With Huston’s film of Burnett’s book, both creators had progressed to the point where they had refined the Doomed Criminal character archetype to its most perfectly realized form. *The Asphalt Jungle* was the film that more than any other ensured the character of the Doomed Criminal would have its own unique place in crime film history.

The rest of Huston’s body of work was as varied as his detractors (and admirers) claim, though, throughout the 1940s, Huston’s many forays into *film noir* proved that aspects of the Doomed Criminal character remained relevant to his work. His uncredited screenplay work on *The Killers* (1946) showed the influence of both fatalism and “the heist” to the Doomed Criminal character. J. P. Telotte writes of *The Killers* how “the Swede lives with a terrible realization, the knowledge of what must happen to him simply because, as he says, “I did something wrong—once” (164). And, in 1948, *Key Largo* once again showed a gangster character unable to escape his own doom by refusing to abandon his lifestyle while at the same time searching for a way out.

One final contribution to the Doomed Criminal persona by John Huston was his use of Humphrey Bogart. As Bogart was the star of Huston's first feature, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and then a frequent Huston collaborator from then on, Huston had a significant impact on the development of Bogart's screen persona. And though Bogart quit playing gangsters with 1942's *The Big Shot*, his stoic, laconic, tough-guy screen persona has remained indelibly linked to the Doomed Criminal character through his portrayal of the first example of the archetype in *High Sierra*.

Harry Izmirlan discusses a recurring "cerebral" aspect of Bogart's films, specifically the "frequency with which his characters exhibit a resourcefulness and capability that inspires confidence and impressiveness, if not trust" (24). This natural projection of competence was a perfect fit with the Doomed Criminal's unparalleled professionalism. Couple this with the Bogart screen persona's "individual personal integrity," and the way in which Bogart's "private morality and integrity prevail over his involvement in inappropriate and in some cases illegal actions" and you have another important element of the Doomed Criminal persona (27). Not only was he naturally resourceful, but his personal integrity and code made him much more likeable than other gangster characterizations.

However, the Doomed Criminal was still an outsider, a man of violence and crime. And while, as one of the great leading men, Bogart was undeniably likeable, he also had a certain quiet menace that served him well in his gangster films of the late thirties and early forties. This is all too clear when comparing Bogart's performance in *High Sierra* with that of Joel McCrea in *Colorado Territory* (1949). *Colorado Territory* was a straight *High Sierra* remake, but, while McCrea was quite sympathetic, he possessed none of Bogart's barely hidden dark edge that made his Roy Earle so unique.

Bogart's screen persona became a kind of benchmark for the Doomed Criminal character archetype, influencing countless actors around the world (French actor Jean Gabin, who himself played many Doomed Criminal characters in the following decade, was obviously indebted to Bogart's screen persona). And while Bogart's star had been on the rise since *The Petrified Forest* (1936), it was John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (along with Walsh's *High Sierra*) that truly catapulted him to fame in the 1940s.

The Huston/Burnett Partnership

Both Huston and Burnett had a deep respect for each other's abilities and ideological sensibilities. Just as Huston constantly professed his admiration for Burnett's novels, Burnett considered himself to be a kindred spirit to Huston. In addition to their Midwest origins, Scottish/Irish descent, and love of alcohol, when Burnett was asked by Ken Mate what Huston's politics were during the height of the red scare, Burnett replied, "He's just like me, a rebel" (Poulos, 16). This suggests that there was a deep level of understanding between Burnett and Huston that would amplify the visions of each creator rather than mute their respective voices. This respect would have been especially important when it came to someone like Burnett who was otherwise quite skeptical of the Hollywood process.

Poulos writes that Burnett downplayed the importance of screenwriting, calling the screenplay "a pushover" and declaring that "Anyone can learn to write a script"; the art of screenwriting consisted of getting the project "through the front office," while writing for movies amounted to "rewriting," a "menial job, a hack job" Burnett performed "to make money" (16). For someone with a mindset like this, only a creator whom he admired like John Huston would

bring out his best work. And, in fact, Burnett thought John Huston's *Maltese Falcon* was superior to Hammett's novel (Poulos 203), high praise coming from an author who privileged the literary over the cinematic in most other cases.

It was actually quite common in classic Hollywood for there to be more than one screenwriter on a picture. Edward Dmytryk, in his biography, writes in defense of this "much-criticized Hollywood practice" of teaming up writers. He claims it was done in order to balance out individual writers' "natural weaknesses," and goes on to say that this is also why "all good directors collaborate on the scripts they eventually direct, even though, more often than not, they take no credit" (232). Of course, this does suggest that the ones who would criticize this practice were the screenwriters themselves, seeing an attempt to seize authorial control rather than to shore up any supposed "natural weaknesses." Burnett himself shared screenwriting credits on most of his screenplays, so sharing the credit with a creator he respected as much as John Huston would have been of the utmost importance to him.

By taking two like-minded creators and giving them two opportunities to collaborate (on *High Sierra* at the beginning of the 1940s, and indirectly on *The Asphalt Jungle* at the end of the 1940s), John Huston and W. R. Burnett were able to forge a new character in gangster films that was able to transcend studio influence in order to leave a lasting, creator-driven impact both on contemporary and future crime films. Working alone, each creator has dabbled with the Doomed Criminal character archetype, John Huston with his screenplay contributions to *The Killing* (1946) as well as his film *Key Largo* (1948), W. R. Burnett with his war-time screenplay work on *This Gun for Hire* as well as his many other post *Little Caesar* crime novels. However, in their two collaborations, their visions were able to meld into a unique and influential gangster

character archetype that rose above their individual contributions to create a powerful new character within the crime film genre.

Chapter 4: Film Analysis

“Man, biologically considered...is the most formidable of all beasts of prey, and, indeed, the only one that preys systematically on its own species.”

- William James, from the introduction to W. R. Burnett's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1949)

Though I have already discussed many films that contributed to the development of the Doomed Criminal in the 1940s, it is essential to take a close textual look at the three most important films of the era in order to determine their contributions to the character archetype. First I will look at *High Sierra*, the film that started the cycle of Doomed Criminal films. I will then move on to *This Gun for Hire*, another early example of the character, before moving on to the decade-ending *The Asphalt Jungle*, the most refined example of the character.

The discussion of each of these movies will begin with a short examination of the most notable differences from the literary source material before moving on to look at the elements that made it into the final screen versions of the films. Pinpointing individual contributions as well as specific authorial statements on the creative process itself will be included in these opening sections, but the bulk of the discussion will be concerned with the final cinematic texts themselves as statements of creators about their own work should by no means be considered the final word on the subject.

High Sierra

W. R. Burnett published his novel *High Sierra* in 1940, at a time when America was both coming out of the Great Depression and on the brink of entering a second world war. *High Sierra* was a crime story that seemed to pick up where *Little Caesar* had left off. By becoming incarcerated rather than dying in a gunfight, *High Sierra*'s Roy Earle survived his youth and came out the other end wiser for it. And yet, he finds himself oppressively alienated by a world that has no place for him anymore. The days when a criminal's unrestrained ambition could conquer the world are gone, and we are left with a wise criminal that is inextricably doomed because of the simple fact that the world has passed him by.

As was the case with many of Burnett's books, the film came only a year after the novel's release. Burnett himself was given co-screenwriting duties (in his first collaboration with John Huston) in adapting his own story. Huston and Burnett created a screenplay for director Raoul Walsh that preserved most of the plot and even the dialog exactly as written on the page. The film's most notable departure from the book is the excision of Roy's periodic socialist lectures—as seen in this example from the book where Roy attempts to explain the state of the country to his girlfriend:

Look. A few guys have got all the dough in this country. Millions of people ain't got enough to eat. Not because there ain't any food, but because they got no money. Somebody else has got it all. O.K. Why don't all them people who haven't got any dough get together and take the dough? It's a cinch. A bank looks pretty tough, don't it? O.K. Give me a chopper and a couple of guys and I'll loot the biggest bank in the U.S.A. I'm just one guy. What could ten million do? (252).

What is most notable about Huston and Burnett's decision to drop these socialist elements from Earle's character is the way in which it desituates Roy Earle from the historical background of the 1930s gangster film to which a solitary character like Roy barely belongs in the first place. *High Sierra* still takes place within a world for which the depression was a very real thing, but Roy Earle is now so far removed from society that his goals have turned inward.

The film version begins with Roy Earle's (played by Humphrey Bogart) pardon from prison. He soon finds out that the pardon was the result of his friend Big Mac's bribe (establishing the importance of money in the world of *High Sierra*). Big Mac wants Earle out to do one last heist for him. However, the world has changed since Earle has been away, and the friend is working with a crooked cop and two hothead youths (Babe and Red), all of which make Earle wary of the operation. Despite his misgivings, Roy goes through with the heist—only to have things go wrong in the aftermath as the two hotheads get themselves killed in the escape while their inside man rats Earle out to the police.

During the planning stages of the heist, Roy meets two women, one, a "good girl" with a lame foot called Velma, the other, a "bad girl" called Marie—the girlfriend of one of the hothead kids. Roy initially tries to make good and leave the life of a criminal to live with the "good girl," only to be rejected. Thus he returns to Marie, setting in motion events which lead to his being besieged in the High Sierras, with his inevitable death as his only way out.

Jack Shadoian's book *Dreams and Dead Ends* contains one of the most in depth critical analyses of *High Sierra*. In it, Shadoian summarizes the film by saying "*High Sierra* is the culmination of the first phase of the gangster film, and it was made by the studio that pioneered the genre a decade before. Its basic structure sticks close to the classic pattern—the rise and fall

of a big shot—with this difference: the pattern is inverted. Here it is no rise and all fall, but by falling the hero rises” (79). This is important; it shows how *High Sierra* works directly against the rise and fall trajectory laid out by Warshaw and others. As Shadoian goes on to say, “he does not die squalidly, in a gutter, but nobly, at the foot of a mountain, and his death is equated with freedom. Having transcended the world and the judgments of morality, the classic gangster has achieved the best he could have hoped for. In what was to come, he had no place” (79). The old pre-Code gangsters too would eventually have no place in their own world, but Roy Earle had somehow escaped their fate to actually find himself living in the new world in which he was never meant to live. Thus, in the end, his fate finds him after all.

And yet, Roy Earle, as the first example of the Doomed Criminal, is a noble character. As Shadoian correctly identifies, his death is not the execution of a rabid dog, but the last stand of an older, nobler form of humanity (79). This nobility was quite unusual for a crime film, especially one where the criminal is not a corrupted youth, but rather a “non-functioning” member of society from the get go. Even his name, Roy “Earle” denotes nobility as an “earl” homonym. Roy shoots two people in the film (one a security guard, another a dirty cop), and in both cases, as is proper in the long tradition of noble, heroic, lawmen of the American West, the other man shoots at Roy first. While the dirty cop, by all rules of cinema, “had it coming,” it is true that the security guard who shoots at Roy during the holdup was merely doing his job. However, even in his case it is implied that Roy does not kill him (and indeed, only the dirty cop’s death is mentioned in subsequent diegetic newspaper articles about the heist) when he tells the inside man “He won’t croak, I shot low.” Even in acts of traditional gangster violence, Roy shows mercy and compassion.

In fact, Earle may be one of the few decent characters to be found in the film. The cops and government are corrupt, and Roy's fellow criminals are young hotheads. It is telling that the "bad luck" dog that Roy adopts while planning the heist only likes good people. And in the world of *High Sierra*, good people (like the dog's previous owners) must die—which explains the bad luck of being liked by the dog. If anyone, Ida Lupino's bad-girl character Marie is the closest analog to the noble Roy Earle. Fran Mason points out how she "becomes a better gang member than any of the others because she shows exactly the same characteristics as Roy in that she is loyal, reliable and obedient and is therefore more like an old-time gangster and a better 'man' than either Babe or Red [the two hot headed kids Earle is forced to work with]" (58). Meanwhile, the sweet country girl Velma turns out to be anything but sweet—even her vampish name suggests that she is more of a "bad girl" than the innocently named Marie.

While Mason's quote from the previous paragraph seems to conflate "old-time" gangsters with professionalism, he is essentially pointing out that *High Sierra* is itself a revisionist account of what it means to be an old-time gangster. In *High Sierra*, the new Doomed Criminal character archetype is now identified as an "old-time" gangster even though Babe and Red act more like Tom Powers/Little Rico/Tony Camonte than Roy Earle ever does. When Earle gets his Tommy Gun, an explicit semantic symbol of the pre-Code gangster era, Babe and Red look at it like it is an artifact from another time. *High Sierra* consistently subverts and reuses the semantic symbols of the previous decade's gangster films for its own Doomed Criminal purposes.

Ostensibly, Roy Earle was another *Dillinger* analog (like Bogart's earlier character Duke Mantee in *The Petrified Forest* [1936]) right down to his haircut. If you look carefully at Roy Earle's pardon at the beginning of the film you can see that he was imprisoned in the fall of 1932. Dillinger died only a year and a half later on July 22, 1934. Thus, if Roy Earle really was

a Dillinger analog, he was not the early wild Dillinger that was fatefully rushing towards a hail of police bullets in 1934. That Dillinger was a man who ran from one bank to the next; like the pre-Code gangsters, he was never satisfied, always wanting more, and full of the wildness of youth. Roy Earle seems to embody none of those qualities. Even his likeability is of a much different sort than the heady charisma of Dillinger. Roy is weary, he knows where his old ways were leading him, and now he has tempered his wild ambition with a streak of pragmatic realism. He will do Big Mac's job, because, fair is fair and Big Mac got him out of prison. Earle is a professional with a code. As he tells Mac, "I never let nobody down Mac, you know that."

But Earle doesn't have any plans for an out of control and escalating crime spree this time; he just wants to quietly live out his life in peace—only from the other side of a set of prison bars. Unfortunately for Earle, this world has no place for him, a fact that he does not fully realize in the opening scene when he is cast out like from the prison that has held him for over 8 years. Earle first just wants to watch the grass and the trees, not yet realizing that these things are not for him. However, as the film goes on, it slowly becomes clear to both the viewer and Roy that it is only a matter of time until Roy must meet the fate that he avoided in 1932. Roy should have died when Dillinger died, but instead he lived on into the 1940s, and now his fate can be avoided no longer.

One essential element of the Doomed Criminal is that his modest goals will do nothing to protect him from his doom—which gives a tragic dimension to the character that was missing with the Icarus-like surety of the pre-Code gangster's doom. Shadoian astutely points to one scene during the holdup of a building that Roy has already cased (where he had been forced to pay far more for a pack of cigarettes than he used to in the "good old days.") During the robbery Roy nonchalantly smashes the cigarette case and takes a pack for himself. Shadoian says, "The

smashing of the glass is satisfying because it is the act of a free man. It appeals more to *our* memory of the earlier scene, not the character's. Earle's gesture is precise, unfrustrated, unvengeful. He's not mad, or vicious, and he takes one pack, what he needs, and no more" (80). This is exactly the way a Doomed Criminal would behave. Just imagine Tony Camonte in the same situation; he would probably attempt to take the whole case's worth of cigarettes just to revel in his own power. Shadoian goes on to say, "it is a reflex of the days when the world used to be his, a gesture of independence that is modified by what we already know from the previous scene, that he has been in prison a long time, that cigarettes are now a quarter, and he must pay exactly that to get them like any other person" (80). Many of the same visceral thrills that can be found in the pre-Code gangster films can also be found in *High Sierra*, only this time they are filtered through a very different character. Shadoian finishes by saying, "The method of the film is here seen in miniature. If the world boxes Earle in it is still possible, even to the end, for Earle to act in positive opposition to it. Earle is not conscious of the meaning of what he does, but the audience is" (80-81). For Shadoian too, the Doomed Criminal's opposition to the world is a noble quality: "Through the gangster Earle, *High Sierra* examines the issue of freedom in a country that supposedly stands for freedom. As the last of the old gangsters, he puts into perspective what his predecessors might actually have been up to. He establishes a subtext for preceding gangster films" (81). Earle's alienation and opposition to the world are thus unified with his nobility as a character. We want Earle to succeed, but, like Earle, know that he is most certainly doomed anyway.

This overwhelming sense of fatalistic doom is present throughout *High Sierra*. From the "bad luck dog," to the famous quote with which I opened this thesis: "Remember what Johnnie Dillinger said about guys like us? [He said] that we were just rushing towards death," a

pervading sense of fatalistic doom dominates the mood and tone of the film. It is obvious why *High Sierra* has so often been called one of the first movies of the *film noir* style. The world of *High Sierra* is a bleak world where all the great warriors are dead or dying. As Big Mac laments to Earle: "I've been dealing with such a lot of screwballs lately, young twerps, soda-jerks and jitterbugs. Why it's a relief to talk to a guy like you. Yeah, all the A-1 guys are gone. Dead or in Alcatraz. If I only had four guys like you Roy, this knock-off would be a waltz. Yup, times have sure changed." Even the young hotheads that botch the heist and ensure Earle's doom seem to understand this when they play a game of poker and comment: "There's that dumb luck again, I cannot beat it." Blind luck is the unavoidable downfall of the Doomed Criminal. Robert Porfirio makes special note of this in his essay "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in *Film Noir*" when he says "look at the plot of almost any *film noir* and you become aware of the significant role played by blind chance" (216). All Doomed Criminals eventually come to accept the fact that there really is no way to beat the vagaries of fate.

And yet, this unavoidable fate is, in some ways, not entirely a negative. As a member of a cold, twisted world that has no place for him, the Doomed Criminal could see his ultimate doom as a release from the alienation that faces him at every turn. There is no better place to which he might move, but at least he moves away from a bad place. With no purpose in the world, it is a mercy to succumb to fate, a release from an existence that constantly reminds him that things are not what they once were.

In the final line of the book *High Sierra*, the newspaper man Vince Healy looks at Roy's broken body and says "Big-shot Earle! Well, well. Look at him lying there. Ain't much, is he? His pants are torn and he's got on a dirty undershirt. Let me down out of here. I need a drink. Sic transit gloria mundi, or something" (292). This, like Earle's socialist speeches, ties the

protagonist's fate in with the suffering of the common man during the Great Depression.

Contrast this with the final lines of the film version, where, after the newspaper man gives that speech, Marie, kneeling next to Earle's dead body, asks, "Mister, what does it mean when a man crashes out" (a reference to Roy's term for breaking out of prison). The reply is indicative of the film's cynically-noble attitude towards Roy's fate: "Crashes out? That's a funny question for you to ask now sister. It means he's free."

This Gun for Hire

1942's *This Gun for Hire* is the case study in this chapter most tenuously linked to the authorial contributions of Burnett and Huston. Not only did John Huston have no part in the production of the film, but Burnett only cowrote the script (along with Albert Maltz) based on Graham Greene's 1939 novel *A Gun for Sale*. Though Burnett laughed at the final result of his work on *This Gun for Hire* (Poulos 132), and the film shows obvious wartime propaganda influence, it is still one of the most important Doomed Criminal films of the 1940s and should be evaluated as such.

Both the book and the movie largely follow the same plot, which is surprising given the many surface changes included to incorporate the film into America's war effort. *A Gun for Sale* is set in Britain during the interwar years and *This Gun for Hire* has been updated to wartime California, but both follow a sociopathic hit man, Raven, who is used as a pawn for others involved in wartime conspiracies (engineering a European war in the book, and smuggling poison gas for the Japanese in the movie). In both, Raven is double-crossed after carrying out a contract killing for the conspirators—causing him to go on a quest for revenge. This brings

Raven into contact with the fiancé of a policeman (in the book, she has no connection to the larger conspiracy; while in the film she has been assigned an undercover job by the FBI to uncover the conspiracy—a change of which Greene did not approve [Biesen 50]). Then, after the woman is kidnapped by the conspirators, Raven helps her escape—a development which causes them to form a tenuous alliance in order to end the conspiracy. At the end of the book and film, Raven is gunned down by the police in his final confrontation with the conspirators. However, despite these similarities, the book version contains many plot points which actually serve to make Raven a much purer example of the Doomed Criminal than the film version.

Most notably, in *A Gun for Sale*, the woman Raven considered a friend could barely bring herself to view the killer with anything more than pitying disgust. In her descriptions of Raven, she seems to feel only overwhelming “contempt” as well as “repulsion” for the contract killer (Greene 171). And Raven himself, rather than being redeemed by the love of a “good woman,” instead is shot dead (due to her double-cross) in one of the book’s most nihilistically bleak passages:

Raven watched him with bemused eyes, trying to take aim. It wasn’t a difficult shot, but it was almost as if he had lost interest in killing. He was only aware of a pain and despair which was more like a complete weariness than anything else. He couldn’t work up any sourness, any bitterness, at his betrayal. The dark Weevil under the storm of frozen rain flowed between him and any human enemy. “Ah, Christ! That it were possible,” but he had been marked from his birth for this end, to be betrayed in turn by everyone until every avenue in life was safely closed...How could he have expected to have escaped the commonest betrayal of all: to go soft on a skirt...He took aim slowly, absent-mindedly, with a curious humility, with almost a sense of companionship in his loneliness...The

only problem when you were once born was to get out of life more neatly and expeditiously than you had entered it. For the first time the idea of his mother's suicide came to him without bitterness, as he fixed his aim at the long reluctant last and Saunders shot him in the back through the opening door. Death came to him in the form of unbearable pain. It was as if he had to deliver this pain as a woman delivers a child, and he sobbed and moaned in the effort. At last it came out of him and he followed his only child into a vast desolation (221).

This is a far more fitting description of the Doomed Criminal than the watered-down version that ended up in the final cut of the film. There, Alan Ladd's Raven is given redemption when, as he lies dying from gunshots, the woman assures him (truthfully) that she did not tell the police where to find him. As he asks "Did I do alright for ya?" she nods her head with genuine affection and Raven dies with a smile on his face.

This is a major bit of character growth when compared to the beginning of the film where the only thing that causes a faint excited smile cross Raven's lips is a cold-blooded murder. Rather than simply being portrayed as a cold and professional killer—as the character might be portrayed in later films—*This Gun for Hire*, in an attempt to tone down the character's more nihilistic traits, explains away his sociopathic tendencies with a childhood-trauma induced mental illness. Mental illness, as seen in films such as *White Heat* (1949), has no place in the world of a Doomed Criminal who depends on a logical adherence to a code. Such a joy at killing simply does not belong in the professional world of the Doomed Criminal. A Doomed Criminal kills because it is his job, not because he enjoys it.

This childhood trauma explanation for Raven's sociopathy is especially problematic because the cause of a Doomed Criminal's outsider status should never be brought up—for all intents and purposes, he must be considered to have always been that way. And though he might desire retribution and change, especially at the hands of a woman, he must never actually attain it. Though a desire to be “normal” is always present in the Doomed Criminal, for the movie to end with Raven both having a “friend” and refraining from killing a policeman is to suggest that he actually did become normal in some way, and thus the outsider status of his character is undercut.

However, in other areas, the film's portrayal of Raven's sociopathy fits the Doomed Criminal character archetype quite well. Raven has a strong affinity for animals—petting cats while treating humanity with contempt when he only reluctantly returns a missing ball to a child. This helps clarify his antisocial loner tendencies when he points out that he identifies with cats because “they are on their own, they do not need anybody.” And while, as the heist became a more central element to the Doomed Criminal film, this idea of “not needing anybody” relaxed, at his heart the Doomed Criminal is always a solitary individual. The characters involved in a heist depend on each other's professionalism and adherence to similar codes. However, actual friendship is another thing entirely. Friendship, and the emotion it brings with it, has no place in the professional world of the Doomed Criminal, and thus Raven's antisocial admiration of those who do not need anybody is pertinent and justified.

Finally, the job that Raven carries out in the beginning of the film was not an extremely lucrative job. Raven adheres to the modest goals which are an important part of the Doomed Criminal character archetype. One only has to look around Raven's room/apartment building to know that this was not a man who lived a life of plenty and luxury. Carlos Clarens has pointed to

Raven as “a joyless, efficient assassin whose profits were almost negligible, whose acts only perpetuated a monotonous, squalid existence” (180). If Roy Earle’s goals were modest, they were nothing compared to Raven’s goals. After all, it was a jewel heist in *High Sierra*, while it appears that Raven’s contract killings barely allow him to live above the poverty line. *This Gun for Hire* takes the Doomed Criminal’s modest goals to an extreme. A heist will, if successful, set the criminal up for a life of ease. It will mean that he will not have to be a part of a society that has no place for him by working as “a member” of that society. Raven, on the other hand, lives the life of a criminal with no end in sight—he doesn’t have an escape from the drudgery and squalid existence of the rest of society to which he might look forward as other examples of the Doomed Criminal have.

In many ways, *This Gun for Hire* is a problematic movie to evaluate, coming as it did with the escalation of America’s involvement in World War II. While a fascinating look at how historical events can shape and mutate industry influences on the development of a genre, the patriotic events shoehorned into the story attempt to make the character fight for something much larger than the modest goals for which a Doomed Criminal should fight. For the Doomed Criminal, there is no sense to Bogart’s final speech in *Casablanca*: “it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people do not amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.” The problems of one person are all that would matter to the Doomed Criminal, what would he care about a world of which he was not a part of anyway? For this reason, *This Gun for Hire*’s patriotic propaganda subplot, and the retribution it affords Raven, is perhaps the most glaring incongruity with my definition of the Doomed Criminal.

It is, of course, questionable the extent to which Burnett could have made his voice heard in co-adapting another author’s novel for what was basically a wartime propaganda film. And

yet, Burnett chose this screenplay, and, no matter his thoughts on the final film, it is easy to see what appealed to him about the original story. It is quite probable that the exact elements which fail to conform to my definition of the Doomed Criminal are the same elements forced upon the movie by wartime studio pressure. *This Gun for Hire* was undeniably important as an early example of an alienated Doomed Criminal character archetype despite the ways in which it differs from my definition.

The Asphalt Jungle

By 1950, almost a decade of bleak *film noir* stylistics and refinement of the Doomed Criminal character archetype culminated in the most clearly defined example of the character in *The Asphalt Jungle*. Jonathan Munby points to how the film extends “author W.R. Burnett’s jeremiad vision of a culture in declension, which was first realized on screen in *High Sierra*” (135). Every character in the movie either embodies the ideals of the Doomed Criminal, or is the character’s direct opposite, and thus an object of scorn and derision. It was also the first movie to take the heist that was tangentially important to many of the Doomed Criminal films of the 1940s, and make it the overwhelming central element of the film.

Once again, as was the case with most Huston adaptations, *The Asphalt Jungle* followed the plot of Burnett’s book with an exceptional degree of fidelity to the source material. Aside from excising most of the source novel’s mild xenophobia, the main changes to the film script were an increased focus on the police (in an effort to appease the censors—who still wielded considerable power—with what Alistair Rolls and Deborah Walker call a “sermonizing, Code-imposed police peroration” [153]) and a more poetically nihilistic ending.

In the film, Doc Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe), an accomplished professional criminal, is released from prison with a plan for a major heist. He assembles a team of like-minded professionals, including the simple but unwaveringly loyal Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden) as the muscle, aka “hooligan.” The robbery goes perfectly (in a bravura sequence), but the aftermath is filled with double crosses and fatalistic bad luck as the man who financed the operation, Alonso Emmerich, turns out not to share the strict code of Doc and Dix. Thus, each man involved eventually dies or is incarcerated. Even Dix, the hooligan who just wanted to return to his farm, only gets within sight of his old home before he dies with the crime of the city still upon his shoes.

The title “The Asphalt Jungle” is very important. With it, *The Asphalt Jungle* establishes the last piece (along with the importance of the heist) of the Doomed Criminal puzzle, the importance of the urban setting. Cities, as hubs of humanity, are ideal locations for those who prey upon humanity to operate. With the exception of *High Sierra*, whenever a gangster would take to rural locations for his crimes, it was usually a sign that he was a nonprofessional “crime spree” gangster, of the mold seen in films like *Gun Crazy* (1950). Rural locations were easy targets; those who live in the country do not even lock their doors—for a gangster to truly prove his worth, the city offered the best test of his unparalleled abilities.

And yet this urban setting is also something to be overcome for the Doomed Criminal. The city is where they prey on society, but the Doomed Criminal doesn’t want to rise to the top like one of the pre-Code gangsters. Fran Mason has pointed to the “representation of Dix as a hobo with a battered hat” as evidence that these characters were “more serfs than workers” (101). Instead of rising to the top, the Doomed Criminal just wants out of the parasitic cycle through which he interacts with society. Society has no place for him, so the Doomed Criminal wants no

part of it, not even as a parasite, he just wants to do his one last big score and then leave. Thus Burnett's idealization of the pastoral represents an escape, a "crash out" from the cityscape. In *The Asphalt Jungle* this longing for the pastoral and the escape it must provide from the alienation and doom of the city is seen in many places. Dix claims of the country that the "first thing I do when I get there, I'll take a bath in the crick...get this city dirt off me." Of course, when he does finally get there he discovers that the pastoral is not an escape from his fate, but rather his ultimate deathbed. Robert Porfirio has even gone as far as to claim that in many films of this era, "there is no country left, only the modern wasteland of such cities as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles," (217) a claim that fits quite well within the dream-like unreality of the pastoral in *The Asphalt Jungle*'s final scene.

The Asphalt Jungle clearly spells out the ways in which this fatalism was inherent to the Doomed Criminal character. Doc, looking at the circumstances that led to his bleak fate says, in a call-back to the poker game in *High Sierra*, "Blind accidents, what can you do against blind accidents?" He is doomed, but he does not lose his professional demeanor, rather he shrugs his shoulders and carries on without regret in his mind. It is not his fault, it is blind accident and fate that has marked him, so why let it bother him? Only an amateur would let something over which they have no control cause them to lose their professional demeanor.

The Asphalt Jungle emphasizes the importance of professionalism for the Doomed Criminal in its earliest scenes. While the "hooligan," Dix Handley, is referred to as simple "muscle," he immediately establishes himself as a practiced professional nonetheless. On the run from the police in the film's opening scene, Dix hands his gun off to an accomplice who owns a diner in a practiced, professional manner that does not betray the slightest bit of panic. The same can be said of the lineup scene where Dix calmly stares out as the witness looks over

the lineup. Dix knows the witness will succumb to fear and fail to identify him, and thus, he does not display a trace of amateurish nervousness. Despite his often fearsome demeanor, Dix is also one of the most sympathetic characters in *The Asphalt Jungle*, though he is just a foot soldier as opposed to Earle's leader in *High Sierra* (Munby, 136). While Dix seems to have little compassion for the woman who loves him, towards other professionals it is obvious that Dix was a man to trust, which in turn earns the audience's trust in Dix as well.

The other central character, Doc Riedenschneider, is the brains of the heist. And yet, his professionalism demands that he reject an offer to simply sell his foolproof plan for a heist. His professionalism demands that he carry out his plan himself. Doc and Dix immediately recognize each other as kindred spirits. They are not only both operating outside of society, but they also recognize the professional expertise of the other. Mason points out how Dix's professionalism and loyalty to Doc is opposed with Emmerich's betrayal and "thereby locates authenticity and integrity in the gangster and treachery in 'respectable' legitimate society which becomes 'other' to itself in the process" (102). This makes the criminals in *The Asphalt Jungle* even more noble characters, despite their choice of profession.

Meanwhile, Doomed Criminals like Dix and Doc immediately recognize characters like Cobby, the low level middleman between them and the powerful Alonso Emmerich, as someone who is not worthy of their respect. Dix, enraged that Cobby would hold a gambling debt over him in front of Doc, later says, "you cannot owe money to a guy like him...I just cannot owe money to a guy like that." They both share the same outsider status when it comes to society, but Cobby, doomed though he may be, is not a Doomed Criminal in the sense that I have discussed it.

There is a strict dichotomy in *The Asphalt Jungle* between the strong-willed outsiders who are the protagonists, and the weak-willed outsiders who ensure their doom. It would be easy to put Cobby on the same side as Doc and Dix, but his incompetence (he even gets so nervous using his own money to finance the heist that he is unable to control his sweating, an obvious sign of his lack of professionalism) marks him as an outsider to the Doomed Criminal's competent inner circle. Meanwhile, a character like Gus, the owner of the diner where Dix stashes his gun, is elevated to noble status simply because he follows the code of the Doomed Criminal. As Dix says, "Gus will take the heat and never flap his lip." Such adherence to the strict code of the Doomed Criminal is of ultimate importance, and anyone who doesn't follow the code is to be condemned for their weakness. Upon finding out that the man who put up the money for their heist has betrayed them, Dix says "are you a man or what? Trying to gyp and double cross with no guts for it?" To gyp and double cross is one thing, to not have the guts to stand behind a betrayal, itself a part of the crime world, is even worse.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that *The Asphalt Jungle* made to the Doomed Criminal character archetype was to make the "heist" the focal point of the film. As I have discussed, the heist had been an important part of many earlier films (most notably in *High Sierra*), but *The Asphalt Jungle* was one of the first films to deal completely with the planning, execution and aftermath of a heist. As an alienated outsider to society, the Doomed Criminal must walk a solitary path. But by becoming involved in a heist, something that must be done in a group, many of these solitary characters can be brought together, and thus make a sort of microcosm of society within their insular community of criminals. Perhaps, in some ways, this micro-society can serve as a surrogate for the real-world society that has no place for them. This group dynamic highlights the professionalism of the Doomed Criminal more than anything else. Carlos

Clarens points to the “respect that takes place between them: the way the bookie defers to Doc, and the exquisite politesse exhibited by the older men, one an amateur criminal in a society of professionals, the other a wise man of the underworld, both familiar with human nature and resigned to the basic flaws of the social system” (205). These men, who have no place in society, work within their own society, and yet each one is still doomed despite their attempts to find a place where they can exist as themselves.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

“Chief of police: And don't forget: All guilty.

Commissaire Mattei: Even policemen?

Chief of police: All men, Mr. Mattei”

- From Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970)

Genres and the character tropes that define them are constantly evolving as they adapt to the changing world within which they are received. The crime film evolved in many complex ways from the twisted Horatio Alger stories of the pre-Code gangster films of the early 1930s to the fatalism of *film noir* and the syndicate films that eventually led to the mafia stories that became so popular in the aftermath of *The Godfather* (1972). What I have attempted to do in this thesis is to draw out a unique version of the criminal character, specifically my conception of the Doomed Criminal, and show how this character has often been subsumed by a gangster genre that has been oversimplified to the point where it loses its granularity. Too often when one refers to a cinematic criminal as “doomed,” it is merely assumed to be an overarching statement about how cinematic crime must be punished, while little is said about the implications of the doom. By separating out a selection of the criminal figures of the 1940s into a new category that I call the Doomed Criminal, I have attempted to bring attention to a character that has often been overlooked in crime film discourse. Thus, my ultimate goal was to focus on a neglected cycle in the crime films of the 1940s and determine what significant factors led to the development of the character archetype represented within that cycle. It is my hope that by clearly defining such a

little-discussed character archetype that I have been able to not just bring to light a neglected character in 1940s crime films, but also to show how such generic character tropes evolve (in this case though both generic change and through the involvement of influential creators).

I started by defining the exact characteristics of my Doomed Criminal character archetype, and how these characteristics differed from previous criminal incarnations—specifically with regards to the pre-Code gangster character with which the Doomed Criminal is so often grouped. With these definitions established, I examined the character with respect to the complex socio-historical evolution of the crime film through the 1940s. With this generic basis for the character in mind, I looked for more specific causes for the evolution of the character, particularly the contributions of W. R. Burnett and John Huston. These two creators, who considered each other kindred spirits, were involved with the most important films that defined the character during the 1940s, specifically *High Sierra* in 1941, *This Gun for Hire* in 1942 and *The Asphalt Jungle* in 1950. I then applied a close textual examination to each of these films in order to draw out the most important tropes of the Doomed Criminal character archetype.

Findings

As a result of this research, I developed a much more complex and nuanced picture of the crime film than I had started with. Genre is not a simple category within which to neatly file away films according to what Altman referred to (and problematized) as Aristotelian “classical categorization.” Instead, I have tried to approach genre not as a static, Aristotelian construct, but rather as an experientially varied idea that is constructed on both sides (marketing and reception) of a film production as well as after the fact by critics attempting to understand historical generic

trends. Looking at genre this way, I was able to escape narrow, overarching conceptions of characters like “the gangster” in order to make a space for a character archetype that occurred many times throughout the 1940s.

This conception of genre also allowed me to avoid explaining the character purely in terms of its societal influences. By examining genre on the granular level, I was able to bring the contributions of creators like W.R. Burnett and John Huston to the forefront without assigning excessive importance to either creator with regards to the crime film as a whole—while at the same time not discounting their considerable influence within the genre.

All of this informed my examination of my three case study films *High Sierra*, *This Gun for Hire*, and *The Asphalt Jungle*. While I found some elements that did not fit the definition that I created for my conception of the Doomed Criminal protagonist in these films (such as the psychosis of Raven in *This Gun for Hire*), I was also able to discover many new elements to add to the definition, for instance, the focus on the heist as a way of underlining the importance of professionalism and the code, both of which were integral to the Doomed Criminal.

Further Study: The Doomed Criminal’s Legacy in France

The cycle of French films featuring the Doomed Criminal in the decades following *The Asphalt Jungle* is perhaps the most pressing area for further study. Typically discussed in terms of “a new booming [France] and coded representations of German occupation,” (Vincindeau, 37) the crime films of directors like Jules Dassin, Jaques Becker, and, especially, Jean-Pierre Melville used the exact character model employed by Burnett and Huston as they refined the Doomed Criminal throughout the 1940s. Writing of *Rififi* (1955) in 1957, Jacques Guicharnaud

and Cynthia Goldman point to how the director Jules Dassin, with no mention of his influences, was able to create within the gangster genre a “fundamentally moral theme, namely, the greatness, the dignity of man’s intelligence and labor,” even when applied to a heist (12). In addition to Dassin’s *Rififi*, within the context of Jean Pierre Melville’s crime films (*Le Deuxième Souffle* (1966), *Le Samourai* [1967], and *Le Cercle Rouge* [1970] to name just a few), Melville’s criminal protagonists were exact copies of the Doomed Criminal as presented in this thesis. The “heist” (here broadly viewed as robbery/contract killing/prison break) becomes key to the professionalism of the Melvillian criminal, who, in a world of post-occupation blurred lines between police and criminal is a very different protagonist from the 1930s pre-Code Hollywood gangster. By examining Melville’s key crime films one can see how fundamental the Doomed Criminal is in understanding his films. Most current scholarship on the French cycle of Doomed Criminal films tends to take the approach used by Alistair Rolls and Deborah Walker in their book *French and American Noir: Dark Crossings*, which, while acknowledging the influence of *The Asphalt Jungle*, again positions *Rififi* as the primary influence on these films, without even mentioning earlier examples like *High Sierra* (153). Melville and his contemporaries used this character archetype quite heavily in their films, and the logical follow-up to this project would be an examination of how the French embraced this character archetype so wholeheartedly. The connection goes far beyond a simple affinity for the *film noir* style, which Vincendeau positions as the primary influence on these French films (46). For, while their influences were many and varied (from poetic realism to German Expressionism [Rolls and Walker 124]), the considerable influence of the Doomed Criminal films that I have brought into focus in this thesis (especially when films like *Le Samourai*, and *Le Cercle Rouge* were almost direct remakes of *This Gun for Hire* and *The Asphalt Jungle* respectively) should now be obvious. This area is especially ripe

for further study considering statements by Melville himself that attempt to downplay the importance of the American forebears to his crime film output: “I make gangster films...but I don’t make American films, even though I like American *films noirs* better than anything” (Paulson 101). Even the creators of these films seem reluctant to acknowledge the debt they owe to the Doomed Criminal of American films in the 1940s.

The Doomed Criminal Character Archetype

Though the textual variations that distinguish the films that feature my conception of the Doomed Criminal character archetype are plain to see, I have seen the same blanket statements that apply to some of the pre-Code gangster characters applied to *High Sierra* and even *The Asphalt Jungle* over and over again. By focusing on exactly what separates this specific Doomed Criminal character from various earlier permutations, I have attempted to clarify this discourse. The gangster genre is complex and varied, and studies like this help to enhance our understandings of the genre while at the same time extricating the discourse from oversimplified definitions of the classic Hollywood crime film (Warshow, for example) that have existed from the very beginning.

The Doomed Criminal character archetype is not, by any means a mold that all crime films of the 1940s will follow. The reasons for its development are many and varied, and its importance in understanding the full picture of the crime films of the 1940s cannot be overstated. While it is one of many character archetypes that have arisen within the crime film genre, its complex characterization is such that it should not be overshadowed by the “big three” pre-Code gangster films *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*. It is a character with enduring

appeal that did not end with the 1940s (1999's *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai* can be viewed as yet another version of *This Gun for Hire*, while 2011's *Drive* contains a particularly faithful example of the Doomed Criminal). The modern conception of the "anti-hero," from Clint Eastwood's *Man with No Name* to television's *Dexter* owes a great debt to the American cycle of Doomed Criminal films from the 1940s. By conducting a study such as this, I hope to both increase the understanding of the crime films of the 1940s as well as extricate the lineage of our modern day criminals and anti-heroes from the very dense fabric of the classic Hollywood crime film.

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