

Leave Her to Heaven

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Keywords: cinema, film noir, film adaptation

キーワード: 映画、フィルム・ノワール、映画化

Introduction

Based on Ben Ames William's 1944 best-selling novel and released on December 20, 1945, *Leave Her to Heaven* received the 1946 Academy Award for Best Color Cinematography for Leon Shamroy's brilliant Technicolor photography.¹⁾ Shot at eight different locations, principally in the American Southwest, it offered up breath-taking desert vistas and scenes of lakes and rustic living. There were no dark cities, no rain-drenched detectives, no gangster argot, and no knives or guns. In other words, on the surface, *Leave Her to Heaven* seems to be the antithesis of what one would expect from film noir. However, it cannot be denied that this film is thematically one of the quintessential film noirs of the 1940s, offering one of the most extreme examples of a femme fatale within the film noir canon.

Over the years, the film's reputation has grown. Currently (as of September 2013), it is rated 7.6/10 by The Internet Movie Database. Since its release, it has been praised on multiple levels over the years. For example, Pauline Kael, the influential critic of *The New Yorker* magazine, found its over-the-top story to be, "Gothic psychologizing melodrama, so preposterously full-blown and straight-faced that it's juicy entertainment." (Kael 415) Others have praised it for those aspects mentioned above—its seemingly incongruous setting and the use of Technicolor in a film noir:

The country settings of *Leave Her to Heaven* do not suit the urbane locale usually associated with film noir. . . . This is the precise source of the extraordinary power and tension of *Leave Her to Heaven*; that the noir theme of a woman obsessed,

whose love is so all-consuming that she must murder to retain exclusive possession of her beloved, is enacted under the sunniest of skies in the most beautiful of country settings. (Silver 170)

And yet, when *Leave Her to Heaven* was first released in 1945, it met with mixed reviews. *Variety* magazine praised the use of Technicolor but found the acting to be wanting:

Sumptuous Technicolor mounting and a highly exploitable story lend considerable importance to *Leave Her to Heaven* that it might not have had otherwise. Script based on Ben Ames Williams' bestseller has emotional power in the jealousy theme but it hasn't been as forcefully interpreted by the leads as it could have been in more histrionically capable hands. (Variety Staff)

The New York Time's critic Bosley Crowther, in his review of December 25, 1945, was particularly critical of the character development and plot:

Assuming that there are such women as the one Gene Tierney plays in this film—a thoroughly ornery creature who is so jealous of her author-husband's love that she permits his adored younger brother to drown, kills her own unborn child and finally destroys herself by trickery when she finds that her husband and her sister are in love—the description of such in this picture is far from skillful or acute. The reason for the lady's disposition is never convincingly revealed, and the whole plot—especially a court-room climax—is arbitrary, artificial and mean. (Crowther)

Bosley Crowther's criticism that “the lady's disposition is never convincingly revealed, and the whole plot—especially a court-room climax—is arbitrary, artificial and mean” raises some interesting issues, which provides an opportunity to examine certain aspects of *Leave Her to Heaven* in detail. In this paper, I will first outline the story as presented in the film. Then I'll list the major parallels and differences between the novel and film, showing that they are quite similar when viewed from a macro level. Next, I will discuss the two major issues that Crowther raises—“the lady's disposition” and the “court-room climax”. I'll suggest that Crowther's criticism is only partially correct. First, I'll disagree with him and suggest that the disposition of Gene Tierney's character in the film can be viewed as a highly exaggerated version of a widely known popular theory of developmental psychology, the

Electra complex. In support of this, I'll point out that both the novel and film clearly hint at the roots of Ellen's "disposition". On the other hand, I'll agree in part with him about the courtroom climax. I'll contrast the differences between the novel and film with regard to that climax and suggest that the novel's climax seems reasonably possible; however, the film's seems implausible on the surface. I'll explain the reasoning behind these conclusions. Finally, I'll consider reasons that the film may have included the courtroom climax, in spite of its apparent logical shortcomings.

The Story in the Film

Typical of many film noirs, the narrative of *Leave Her to Heaven* is revealed in a long flashback. The set-up for the flashback is the arrival of Richard Harland at a dock at Deer Lake, Maine. The chatter of onlookers tells us that he has just been released after a two-year prison term, although they fail to reveal the reason he has been in prison. After he gets into a canoe and begins to paddle his way across the lake, two of the onlookers sit down, and one of them reveals to us that he is Richard's lawyer. "Well, of all the seven deadly sins, jealousy is the most deadly," he mysteriously intones. When his companion says that, in spite of reading the newspaper accounts, he never could "make heads or tails" of the court case that put Richard in prison, the lawyer replies, "There were some things that couldn't be told in the courtroom." He further suggests, "Yet, of all the people involved, I suppose I'm the only one who knew the whole story." With that, he launches into the flashback that defines the bulk of the film.

The highly successful lawyer, Glen Robie, has invited some guests to stay with him at his vast New Mexico ranch, Rancho Jacinto. Among the guests are Richard Harland, a successful young author whom Glen met on a fishing trip, and the Berents, old friends from Boston. The Berents consist of Mrs. Berent, twenty-two-year-old daughter Ellen, and twenty-year-old adopted daughter Ruth. By chance, Ellen and Richard meet in the club car on the train en route to New Mexico. They strike up a flirtatious conversation fueled by the coincidence that the beautiful Ellen is reading Richard's latest book but doesn't realize that she is actually talking with the author. Ellen remarks that Richard reminds her of a young version of her father, a seemingly innocent comment that in fact portends much to follow. When they arrive in Jacinto, New Mexico, they realize that they'll both be staying at Glen Robie's ranch. Neither seems disappointed.

At the ranch, we learn that the Berents have come to New Mexico to scatter the ashes

of the recently deceased Mr. Berent. We also begin to learn something about Ellen's nature. It turns out that she was obsessively devoted to her father and, by some accounts, smothered him with her strong-willed attentions and jealousy. It soon becomes clear that she has transferred her attentions to Richard, the young version of her father. In spite of the fact that Ellen is engaged to marry Russell Quinton, a Maine lawyer whom she met through her father, she continually contrives to be with Richard. By the third day at the ranch, the once-conspicuous engagement ring has disappeared from her hand. She tells Richard, "I took it off an hour ago. Forever." She immediately telegraphs Quinton telling him that their engagement is off, and when he arrives at the ranch to ask for an explanation, she impetuously tells him that she is going to marry Richard the next day. This is the first time that Richard has heard of this, but when she proposes to him on the spot, he bends to her will, and they are married.

After their marriage, Ellen and Richard go to Warm Springs, Georgia, where Richard's younger brother Danny is undergoing treatment for infantile paralysis. While Richard is busy writing his next novel, Ellen falls into her role as an attentive caretaker for Danny. We sense, however, that underneath the surface she is jealous of Danny and resents him for taking Richard's time and attention away from her. She does, in fact, find Danny's crippled body "revolting". Occasionally, her true feelings slip out, such as when she refers to Danny as "a cripple", but, for the most part, she plays her role extremely well.

When Ellen, Richard, and Danny go to spend time at Richard's cabin by a picturesque Maine lake he has dubbed Back of the Moon, however, Ellen seizes the opportunity to get rid of Danny. Accompanied by Ellen in a rowboat, Danny takes daily swims in the lake. One day Ellen challenges him to swim all the way across the lake, and when he tires and begins to get cramps, she calmly watches as he sinks beneath the surface and drowns. Richard, of course, is devastated by Danny's death, but he considers it an accident. Although he doesn't actually know the true cause, he does have vague misgivings.

Richard vows never to return to Back of the Moon and goes with Ellen to visit Mrs. Berent and Ruth at their summer home at Bar Harbor on the coast of Maine. Richard continues in his depression and pays little attention to those around him. This, of course, upsets Ellen, for she, as always, wishes to be the center of his world. In an attempt to bring Richard out of his depression and to get him to focus on her, Ellen becomes pregnant. Richards does rally, but unfortunately Ellen finds pregnancy an uncomfortable and

unflattering condition. She further begins to be jealous of the unborn child for taking Richard's attention away from her. As a result, she stages an accident, throwing herself down the stairs. This causes her to have a miscarriage, which effectively eliminates a potential rival for Richard's affection.

While Ellen is in the hospital recovering from her fall, Richard continues to stay with Mrs. Berent and Ruth at Bar Harbor. Since Richard and Ruth are in daily contact, Ellen transfers her jealousy to her adopted sister. Although at this point nothing romantic has developed, Ruth and Richard do become good friends. When Ellen finds out that Richard has dedicated his latest novel to Ruth because she helped him on the final draft, Ellen quarrels with Richard and lets slip out the truth about Danny's death and her miscarriage. Richards declares he is leaving Ellen. Ellen, in turn, plans her final act of revenge—an act from beyond the grave.

Ellen contrives to poison herself with arsenic and lay the blame on Ruth. She writes a letter to her old fiancé, Russell Quinton, who is now a district attorney in Maine. The letter is to be opened in the event of her death. In it, she writes of her suspicions that Ruth is trying to poison her. As a result of the letter, after Ellen's death Ruth is brought to trial for murder. When, during the trial, however, it comes out that Ellen had been responsible both for Danny's death and her own miscarriage, the jury acquits Ruth on the grounds that Ellen's death was a likely suicide. Unfortunately, Richard is considered to have been an accessory after the fact in Danny's death and is thereby sentenced to two years in prison. Over the course of the trial, Ruth and Richard's friendship has grown into something more, and so it is understood that she will be waiting for him when he is released from prison.

At this point the flashback ends, and we see Richard's canoe pull up to a dock. He gets out and embraces Ruth.

The Parallels and Differences

On the whole, the novel and the film are quite close. There are, however, a few differences.

Characters. All the major characters are basically the same. They have the same names and relationships, with one minor exception: in the novel, Glen Robie is a rich oilman; however, in the film, he is Richard's attorney. In both the film and novel, it is Glen Robie's New Mexico

ranch that is the scene of many of the early events in the narrative. In addition, the novel mentions more minor characters, such as the small-town reporter who talks to Richard during the trial and various local people who live near Back of the Moon.

Locations. New Mexico, Warm Springs, Maine, Back of the Moon, Boston, and Bar Harbor all appear in roughly the same order in the novel and the film. The major differences in locations involve additional plot elements in the novel as mentioned below. These involve events in both Canada and multiple points overseas.

Major Plot Developments. The overall plot development is the same in both novel and film:

- Ellen and Richard meet in New Mexico.
- Ellen breaks off her engagement with Russell Quinton and marries Richard.
- Richard and Ellen go to Warm Springs.
- Ellen cares for Danny while Richard works on a new novel.
- Ellen, Richard, and Danny go to Back of the Moon where Ellen lets Danny drown.
- Ellen becomes pregnant to distract Richard from his depression after Danny's death.
- Ellen throws herself down the stairs to force a miscarriage.
- Ellen becomes jealous of Ruth and frames her for Ellen's death by poison.
- Ruth is acquitted of Ellen's death.
- Richard goes to prison as an accessory after the fact in Danny's drowning.
- When Richard is released from prison, he and Ruth are reunited.

There are, however, two additional plot lines in the novel that aren't included in the film. First, Ellen, Ruth, and Richard go on a fishing trip to Canada. During the trip there is a wildfire that separates Richard and Ruth from Ellen. It is at this point that Ellen first becomes jealous of Ruth, although there are actually no grounds for the jealousy at this time. Second, in the novel, significant time passes after Ellen's death before Ruth is charged with her murder. During this time Richard goes on an extended overseas trip, returns to Boston, begins to date Ruth, and finally marries her. Their marriage is the trigger for Russell Quinton to receive Ellen's posthumous letter accusing Ruth of being her murderess.

At first blush, then, the novel and the film are quite close to each other. Considering both the novel and film, though, what can we say about Crowther's original objections to the film:

“the lady’s [Ellen’s] disposition is never convincingly revealed, and the whole plot—especially a court-room climax—is arbitrary, artificial and mean?”

The Lady’s Disposition

The gist of Crowther’s objections to “the lady’s disposition” is that the film never actually reveals the cause and mechanism of Ellen’s actions. Time and again, she seems to act irrationally, often on what appears to be a whim:

- She suddenly breaks off her engagement with Quinton and marries Richard.
- She allows Danny to drown.
- She gets herself pregnant and then forces a miscarriage.
- She commits suicide so as to frame Ruth for her murder.

Certainly Ellen’s actions are, in fact, irrational in the sense that she does suffer from a psychosis, but her irrationality—“her disposition”—does not consist of a series of completely random, irrational acts, as Crowther would lead us to think. Upon closer examination, her actions and irrationality are explained by a theory that movie viewers of the 1940s and 1950s would surely recognize. All of Ellen’s seemingly irrational behavior can be summed up in the colloquial expression “Daddy’s Girl” or the more formal “Electra Complex”: “In Neo-Freudian psychology, the **Electra complex**, as proposed by Carl Gustav Jung, is a child’s psychosexual competition with her mother for possession of her father.” (“Electra Complex”) In fact, during the 1940s and 1950s, Freudian/Jungian ideas were well known and heavily influenced the arts. Films, in particular, incorporated them. Among film genres, however, film noir went the farthest in incorporating these ideas, and, on a certain level, film noir was defined and differentiated from other genres by its inclusion of them. *Leave Her to Heaven* was no exception:

The rich texture of Freudian motifs distinguished noir from earlier crime fiction and informs the sexual melodramas of Gothic noir such as *Rebecca* and other romantic thrillers such as *Leave Her to Heaven* (1946) where the narrative wavers between condemnation of the actions of the over-possessive wife Ellen (Gene Tierney) which culminate in her deliberate suicide designed to destroy the happiness of her husband and her adopted sister, and an understanding of its roots in her obsessive devotion to her father, an incestuous longing that has left her psychologically crippled. (Spicer 68-69)

Since most people reading or viewing *Leave Her to Heaven* in the 1940s would have been quite familiar with Freudian ideas such as the Electra complex, Ellen's "irrational" actions would have been understandable to the extent that people could get the cues that indicated she was an example of a variation of the Electra complex.ⁱⁱ⁾ While it's true that many of the cues that are present in the four-hundred-twenty-nine-page novel never make their way into the film, there are still enough present—especially at the beginning of the film—to indicate the nature of Ellen's malady.

The key to Ellen's actions in the film is that she equates Richard with her father. This point is initially made clear both in the novel and the film when Ellen and Richard meet for the first time on the train. In the novel, Ellen stares pointedly at Richard and, by way of explanation, apologizes for staring by saying, "Oh, I'm sorry! Forgive me! You see—you look exactly like me father!" (27) In an identical vein, the film version offers, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, really. It's only because . . . because you look so much like my father!" After they arrive at Glen Robie's ranch, in both the novel and film there are numerous allusions to Ellen's devoted, possessive relationship with her late father and comments on how much Richard resembles the late Mr. Berent. The crux, then, to understanding Ellen's irrational behavior throughout the film is that she identifies Richard with her father and tries to possess him to the absolute exclusion of anyone else, just as she had done before with her real father. In other words, Ellen suffers from an Electra complex transferred from her actual father to Richard. The concomitant jealousy provides the impetus for Ellen's unusual behavior. To repeat Glen Robie's words, "Well, of all the seven deadly sins, jealousy is the most deadly." This provides a recognizable explanation for all of Ellen's seemingly bizarre actions, such as her desire to marry Richard so quickly in order to possess him or her forcing a miscarriage so she wouldn't have to share Richard's affections with a baby. From the beginning, therefore, both the novel and film present us with a clear picture of Ellen's perception of her relationship with Richard. This perception is the basis of her irrational behavior.

The Climax of the Trial

The climax of the trial comes when Ruth is found innocent of murdering Ellen, but, in an unexpected—or as Crowther might term it, "arbitrary, artificial and mean"—turn of events, Richard is charged with, and convicted of, abetting Ellen in Danny's drowning. In the film, Richard has vague suspicions about the truth of Danny's death at the time of his drowning, but he doesn't learn the truth for a fact until much later when, in a heated argument, Ellen

confesses to him. There is never an accusation that Richard in any way participated in Ellen's crime. He is simply guilty of not reporting it when he found out much later. Sending Richard to prison for this does, in fact, seem quite a stretch. First of all, as mentioned, he finds out the truth about Danny's death long after the fact so he could not have prevented a crime, but, more importantly, the alleged crime is committed by Ellen, his wife. In the United States and other countries, there is the legal concept of "spousal privilege", which "protects the contents of confidential communications between spouses during their marriage from testimonial disclosure" and "protects the individual holding the privilege from being called to testify by the prosecution against his spouse/the defendant." ("Spousal Privilege") In other words, Richard could not be forced to reveal that Ellen had confessed a crime to him and could not be questioned about it in court. As a result, he would not have been legally required to report Ellen's crime when he learned of it. Because of this, Richard's conviction as an accessory after the fact does seem hard to justify logically since his conviction is based solely on the knowledge he gained through conversation with his legal spouse.

The novel presents quite a different picture of Richard's involvement in Danny's death. In the novel, Richard actually witnesses Danny's drowning from the shore, rushes to try to help him, but is too late. Richard's anger at Ellen and desire for justice is immediately blunted when she invents, on the spot, the false story of her pregnancy. For the sake of their unborn child and its mother's health, Richard consciously decides to cover up Ellen's involvement in Danny's drowning. He even goes so far as to tamper with the 'accident' scene to make it less likely that Ellen would be suspected of involvement. The fact that Richard knows of Ellen's crime when it happens and actually acts to cover it up makes his conviction as an accessory much more understandable in the novel than in the film version.

The fact that the court-room climax comes across as believable in the novel but as quite illogical in the film raises two questions. Why wasn't the climax made believable in the film? If not made believable, why was this climax included at all? There are several possible answers to these questions. As to the first question, making the film climax more believable would have necessarily entailed including scenes showing Richard's complicity in Danny's drowning. Economically, this would have involved the expense of shooting those scenes, but, perhaps more importantly, extra scenes would threaten to bloat a film that was already one-hundred-ten minutes long.ⁱⁱⁱ Thematically, making Richard complicit in Danny's death might have lessened the perception of Richard as a wronged man. From the beginning of the film, Richard is shown to be a good man—the innocent victim of the jealous machinations of

Ellen, an extreme example of a femme fatale driven by insane jealousy to commit crimes and sins. More importantly, as a femme fatale, Ellen's ultimate role is to make Richard suffer. The purer and more innocent Richard appears to be, the more extreme and unjustified his suffering becomes.

Why then was the courtroom climax included in the film? I can suggest two reasons for this. The first relates to a reason discussed above—the theme of Richard's suffering at Ellen's hands. Richard's being sent to prison can be seen as Ellen's last act against Richard. Even from beyond the grave, this femme fatale has the power to make him suffer. The second reason is both stylistic and thematic. Richard's going to prison provides a framework so that the story can be told in a flashback, a style of narration very common in film noir. Telling events in a flashback serves to underscore the inevitability of events that lead to Richard's suffering.

Conclusion

Bosley Crowther's early criticism of the 1945 film *Leave Her to Heaven* offers an opportunity to examine both the film and the novel that the film was based on. Crowther's criticism concerning Ellen's "disposition" allows us to examine the prevalence of Freudian and Jungian influence in the arts in the 1940s and 1950s. Specifically, we can find the theoretically underpinnings of the actions of Ellen, the maniacally jealous femme fatale, in the Electra complex. Crowther's criticism about the courtroom climax allows us to consider both some issues involved in adapting a long novel to the screen and some stylistic/thematic concerns of film noir.

[Notes]

- i) *Leave Her to Heaven* is one of a handful of film noirs shot in color during the so-called golden age of film noir (1941–1959). Others include *Rope* (1948), *Niagara* (1953), *House of Bamboo* (1955), *A Kiss Before Dying* (1956), and *Vertigo* (1958).
- ii) Ellen's case is a variation in several senses. First of all, in the standard view, a child's jealousy would normally be directed solely toward her mother. Ellen extends her jealousy to anyone who might compete for her father's (or Richard's) affection or attention. Second, the Electra complex is normally considered to be a phase that a female child passes through on her way to sexual maturity. Ellen is stuck in this stage even though she is an adult. Finally, Ellen's case is certainly an exaggeration of the condition in that it leads to murder and suicide.
- iii) This, of course, just underscores the difficulty in adapting a four-hundred-twenty-nine-page novel into a reasonable length film.

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