Cathy Ames as a *Femme Fatale* in *East of Eden*: Steinbeck and Kazan

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Abstract: Through the lens of the *femme fatale* trope, this article compares the portrayal of Cathy Ames from John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* in the novel and the 1955 film adaptation directed by Elia Kazan. The text explores the perception of the *femme fatale* framework through the history of literary criticism and showcases how frequently it can be observed in a variety of texts. The character of Cathy Ames displays many characteristics typical for the framework, such as the fluidity of identity and class. She is an established villain of the book's story, and her actions greatly influence the narrative. The validity of her character and her purpose in the book have been greatly debated by literary critics. Elia Kazan's 1955 film adaptation changes her portrayal substantially; she is no longer a straightforward antagonist. The film problematizes her role and challenges the classic understanding of the *femme fatale* trope. This article exemplifies the changes made to her character through the analysis of specific scenes in relation to cinematography, acting, and alterations in the plot. It also analyzes how the medium of film influences characterization and transposition of information. The aim of the article is to explore the attributes of the *femme fatale* trope, as it is a term used frequently in relation to cultural texts, yet elusive in definition. The nature of film adaptations is also considered in the article, as it might help understand why filmmakers frequently make changes to the source material, which consequently result in works vastly different from the adapted material.

Keywords: John Steinbeck, Elia Kazan, *femme fatale*, adaptation, Cathy Ames

The *femme fatale* is a trope assigned to female characters who, through what is perceived as their beauty and cunning nature, cause the downfall of others.[1]

1 This article develops some of the ideas included in my diploma paper presented at Kazimierz Wielki University in 2024.

Their relationships are frequently of romantic or sexual nature and are seen as instigated by the *femme fatale*'s seduction and ambition. The term itself comes from French and translates as "fatal woman" (Ostberg 2024). The origins of the *femme fatale* can be traced back to some of the oldest texts in human history. Eve is often regarded as the blueprint for the trope, though the validity of this assumption has been debated throughout the history of feminist literary criticism. At first, scholars claimed that relating the biblical story to sexuality is reductive and, in actuality, puts the man at fault, because Eve is tempted by the snake – a male figure. Later, it was argued that seeing Eve as an archetypal *femme fatale* is due to the readings of texts being influenced by the patriarchal system (Edwards 2010, 35). The *femme fatale* has also frequently been viewed as a manifestation of the male understanding of female sexuality and a "symptom of male fears about feminism" (Doane qtd. in Hanson and O'Rawe 2010, 2). The *femme fatale* is not always perceived as a negative character, however. Critics are drawn to *femmes fatales* due to them being focal points of many texts, often acting as a driving force in the narrative and representing "a mode of feminist agency" (Hanson and O'Rawe 2010, 2). The relevance of the *femme fatale* persists especially in contemporary film criticism. Katherine Farrimond argues that although the character does have a general framework, the *femme* is far more complex than the characteristics of manipulation and seduction. She states that the trope "holds a vexed but significant position in the history of film criticism, as well as in wider discourses about women and evil" (2018, 2). Furthermore, the *femme* is significant in feminist criticism as a tool for the "understanding of contemporary popular culture because her complex relationship with patriarchal and feminist understandings of female power forces to the surface broader concerns about the representation of women" (2018, 2). As an inherently mysterious character, the *femme fatale* is notoriously difficult to define – yet her pervasive presence across various forms of media continues to provoke discussion. The abundant presence of the *femme* in diverse texts indicates that the term is "evocative rather than descriptive" (2018, 3-4).

This article aims to analyze Cathy Ames from John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (*EoE*) with reference to the *femme fatale* trope and to examine how this character is portrayed in the 1955 film adaptation directed by Elia Kazan. *East of Eden*, published in 1952, is one of Steinbeck's most ambitious works, functioning as a modern retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. The novel's narrative spans multiple decades and three generations of characters. The central theme of the story is the

role of free will in the binary struggle between good and evil, exemplified by the Hebrew word *timshel*, which translates to "thou mayest" (*EoE* 2017, 369). This word is uttered by Adam to Cal in the final moments of the novel as a way to argue the importance of free will in opposition to determinism. Cathy Ames is one of the driving forces behind the book's narrative, and her overtly established villainous role seemingly fits the *femme fatale* framework. Over the course of the novel's plot her actions cause numerous tragedies and the downfall of many people.

There are parallels between her and the character of Curley's wife from one of Steinbeck's previous works – *Of Mice and Men* (*OMaM*). The portrayal of Curley's wife in the novel is largely negative, and she too exhibits characteristics typical of a *femme fatale*. Steinbeck first introduces Curley's wife in the farm's bunkhouse as George and Lennie, the two protagonists, are settling in. George seems to instantaneously be aware it might be unwise to engage with the woman, as he acts disinterested and avoids looking at her. She displays what is seen as her flirtatious nature right away by leaning "against the door frame so that her body was thrown forward" (*OMaM* 2017, 32). Lennie is fascinated by her and calls her "purty" after she leaves the room, which causes George to scold him. His choice of words about the woman is harsh and shows disdain. That he should be calling her a "bitch" and a "tramp" is surprising due to the fact that George has just met her, but he explains that he has seen that type of woman before. The men in the story keep warning each other that interacting with her in any way will certainly bring trouble. The interaction also foreshadows the tragic events of the novel, as George's foreboding approach later turns out to be valid. The men's extreme opinion of Curley's wife reflects their preconceptions about female sexuality and is also evident of women's societal position at the time. Similarly to Cathy in *East of Eden*, Curley's wife plays a pivotal role in *Of Mice and Men*, as her being inadvertently killed by Lennie is the turning point of the narrative.

Mimi Reisel Gladstein has analyzed how Curley's wife was portrayed in the original text and its numerous adaptations. Curley's wife is the only female character truly present in the story, and although her appearances are infrequent, she plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Her characterization in the original text is very laconic; the reader does not know her backstory or motivations. She is not even given an actual name and only referred to by her marital status. When Steinbeck was adapting *Of Mice and Men* for Broadway, the play's director suggested that the character of Curley's wife should be more fleshed out. For the purpose of the stage production, Steinbeck gave Curley's wife "a troubled background of battling parents and an alcoholic and lost father" (Gladstein 2009, 203). The

1939 and 1992 film adaptations of *Of Mice and Men* also make changes to the character. While the book is told entirely through either George's or Lennie's perspective, the film shifts the focus to the woman at various points. Gladstein exemplifies a scene in the 1939 film which allows the viewer to glance into the woman's family life. The scene shows Curley's wife eating dinner at the ranch house with her husband and father-in-law. The woman is visibly bored as neither of the men engages in conversation. She tries to plead with Curley to take her out to see a movie; however, Curley acts disinterested and says that he has already seen the film with his friends. This allows the viewer to understand the motivation behind the woman's need for company (Gladstein 2009, 209). The 1992 adaptation does not switch the perspective to Curley's wife, but it does attempt to make the viewer empathize with the woman in different ways. By exemplifying Curley's violent nature in the scene where he can be seen practicing boxing on a punching bag, the movie makes a point about the wife's isolation and Curley's shortcomings as a life partner. The woman is present in this scene, yet she does not have any dialogue; she simply sits solemnly and passively, with no one paying attention to her. Her mean-spiritedness is also reduced, as this version omits the plot point in which Curley's wife makes fun of Crooks – the black ranch hand. What is more, the picture subtly makes the viewer consider the issue of domestic abuse. In another scene, George and Lennie see the woman crying in the yard. She explains that Curley destroyed all of her records – her only source of entertainment. Lastly, one short interaction between George and the woman in the barn is indicative of a potential romantic connection (Gladstein 2009, 209-211). These three scenes are not present in the novel; they are additions, whose purpose is to develop and humanize the female character. In the case of both adaptations, filmmakers made the decision to depart from the novel's negative understanding of the *femme fatale* trope in favor of a more nuanced portrayal. Gladstein's argument about the representations of Curley's wife is an informative context for the following analysis of *East of Eden*'s Cathy, whose character also varies significantly between the novel and the film adaptation.

Steinbeck's *East of Eden* portrays Cathy Ames as an irredeemable character capable of sacrificing everything and everyone for personal gain. She justifies her actions by stating that the world is full of evil, and, therefore, one is allowed to go to any means necessary for survival. Not being able to form a genuine connection with anyone, Cathy masterfully manipulates people who surround her (Cologne-Brookes 2013, 184-86). Steinbeck depicts her with absolutely

no sympathy, and her ruthless malevolence seems perplexing and unexplainable. Steinbeck's portrayal of Cathy, her way of seeing the world and awareness of the ability to influence others fit the *femme fatale* framework in a straightforward manner, as the character does not exhibit any nuance or positive aspects of the trope. The chapter where her character is introduced begins with the narrator pondering the source of her evil. He argues that "as a child may be born without an arm, so one may be born without kindness or the potential of conscience" (*EoE* 2017, 89). This passage suggests that no event caused Cathy to be the way she is – it is simply her nature. This is further reinforced by the fact that Cathy's appearance stands in opposition to her malevolence – as a child, she is described to have "a face of innocence" (*EoE* 2017, 90). As she grows older, she uses what is seen as her beauty and charm to exploit various men for her own personal gain. In the same chapter, the narrator states that at the age of ten, Cathy became aware of the power that sexual desire holds over people. She knew that she could use it as a way to manipulate others. The first major display of this manipulation comes when her mother finds her in a barn hand-tied, "naked to the waist" with two older boys. The mother instantly assumes that Cathy is being sexually assaulted; however, a doctor's examination does not find any physical trauma. Everyone assumes that Cathy's mother found her before a tragedy occurred. Cathy refuses to talk about the incident, and the two boys claim their innocence. Regardless of this, they are whipped by their fathers and sent to a correctional facility. Although never explicitly said, the vivid introduction of Cathy's malevolent nature perversely suggests that the whole incident might have been in some way orchestrated by the girl. A similar idea appears in her father's mind, but he keeps it to himself and decides not to confront his daughter out of fear.

Rosie White argues that the *femme fatale* is "less distinct in her class identity, often moving up the social scale through her immoral activities. Like the cities she inhabit[s], the modern *femme fatale* present[s] a fluid identity" (2010, 74). Cathy exhibits said fluidity throughout the novel. She designs her plots to improve her situation and live more and more comfortably, unbothered by anyone. The first example comes when, after killing her parents, she escapes her hometown and meets a pimp whom she manipulates into supporting her financially. After the pimp almost beats her to death one night, she manages to escape and finds herself at the Trask farm. Adam falls hopelessly in love with her, and Cathy agrees to marry him despite the fact that such an arrangement makes her dependent on another person. This type of captivity is her biggest fear; however, she decides

to go along with Adam's plans, as she knows she has nowhere else to go. When Cathy leaves Adam, having given birth to Cal and Aron, she goes to Monterey and assumes a new identity – she changes her name to Kate and starts working in a local brothel. After gaining the sympathy of the brothel's owner, Cathy employs another long-term plot which results in her poisoning the owner and inheriting the business. Cathy constantly changes her social status and seamlessly assumes new roles. As a young teenager she studies to become a school teacher, then becomes a trophy girlfriend of a pimp, a wife and a mother, to finally being a sex worker and a brothel owner. Her relentless plans to improve her life situation and gain control are examples of the female agency often associated with the *femme fatale* trope; however, in the case of the novel, the agency is always negative, as Cathy does not have any regard for other people's lives, health or safety.

Cathy's introduction in *East of Eden* strongly suggests how the reader should feel about her. It carries a similar sentiment to George's opinion of Curley's wife after he and Lennie meet her for the first time. The validity and purpose of Cathy's character have been heavily debated since the novel's release. Some critics have scrutinized Stenbeck's approach to morality, with one reviewer calling the book "naive" (qtd. in Ouderkirk 2013, 231). It might seem that Cathy exemplifies the *femme fatale* trope in an evidently negative manner only as a way to reinforce the novel's theme of the struggle between good and evil. Her moral bankruptcy functions as a binary opposite to the virtue of Samuel Hamilton or Lee. The book does not show much sympathy or nuance to her character, and the behavior she displays might even seem overly exaggerated at times. The only exception comes at the end of the novel; feeling that the truth about her past actions might come to light, she decides to commit suicide and writes Aron into her will as the sole benefactor. Simultaneously, out of sheer spite, she reveals the evidence of various prominent local figures frequenting her brothel. Bruce Ouderkirk argues that at this moment Cathy "acts as monster and vulnerable human simultaneously, blindly following both cruel and benevolent impulses" (2013, 238). These final acts suggest that even she, a seemingly irredeemable character, is capable of choosing between good and evil, which is meant to further reinforce the novel's main theme. Some critics, however, view Cathy as an antithesis to the novel's dichotomous theme. Carol L. Hansen argues that the character stands in opposition to *East of Eden*'s moral system, which operates on the basis of free will. Cathy exhibits amoral behavior as a way to question the validity of the *timshel* theme, which is one of the core elements of the novel's story (2002, 221-22). Kyoko Ariki

views Cathy as the central-most figure of the entire novel, a figure which stands at the crux of all pivotal events, facilitating the development of other characters (2002, 230-31). The ambiguity and problematic placement of Cathy's role in the story parallels the difficulty critics encounter while attempting to define the *femme fatale*, thus making Cathy function as a *femme fatale* on a metatextual level.

Elia Kazan's 1955 adaptation of *East of Eden* makes a significant departure from the novel in many regards. In a manner similar to how Curley's wife in the film adaptations of *Of Mice and Men* is transformed, Kazan changes the female character substantially. Steinbeck was, in fact, enthusiastic about the adaptation: he gave Kazan creative freedom and did not oppose the director's intention to omit a considerable part of the novel, only using the later chapters (Neve 2009, 94). During the production, Kazan was obligated to abide by the Motion Picture Production Code, whose censors were alarmed by Cathy's profession and the fact that some scenes were to take place in a brothel. Kazan, however, managed to convince them that these elements were indispensable and crucial to the film's plot. He also argued that it would be better to depict the brothel as "grim and unattractive" as any embellishment would prove counterproductive (Neve 2009, 98). When 20th Century Fox first started considering adapting the novel, Joseph Breen, a censor for the Motion Picture Association of America, deemed the source material "unacceptable" (qtd. in Neve 2009, 98). The requirements of the censors might have contributed to Cathy being rid of much of her brutality and villainy. In the film, Cathy's role is significantly less pronounced, as the film focalizes Cal's perspective and his relationship with Adam. Initially, Kazan was supposed to make *East of Eden* for 20th Century Fox; however, he decided to work with Warner Bros., because the executives at Fox were more interested in the first chapters of the novel instead of the later ones (Neve 2009, 94-95). The reason for Kazan being drawn to the final sections seem to stem from the director's personal life; he also had a tumultuous relationship with his father, who urged Kazan to participate in the "family rug business," whilst Kazan "conspir[ed] with his mother to discover other options for his life by going to college instead" (Neve 2009, 98).

Linda Hutcheon calls the process of adapting from a textual to visual medium a "move from [...] telling to [...] showing mode, usually from print to performance" (2013, 38). Novels provide the reader with a significant amount of information which has to be dramatized in a "performance adaptation." Elements such as "description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images. Conflicts and

ideological differences between characters must be made visible and audible" (Lodge qtd. in Hutcheon 2013, 40). In most cases, film does not allow the viewer to have access to characters' inner monologue, which hugely complicates characterization. Film usually does not employ an omniscient narrator, who in novels provides the reader with necessary exposition. In the case of *East of Eden*, Cathy is introduced in Chapter 8, with the narrator telling the reader about her nature and establishing her role in the novel. Moreover, the passages which focalize her character allow access to Cathy's thoughts, which gives a glimpse into her reasoning and how she justifies her actions. Kazan's film solely relies on cinematic language and mise-en-scène to characterize Cathy. One example which illustrates how an element of characterization is transposed to the film relates to Cathy's arthritic hands – she is very embarrassed of them, and every time she goes outside she puts on gloves to make sure that no one sees her affliction. In the novel, the reader is given this information by the narrator, whereas the film relays the fact through its cinematography. At the beginning of the film, a close-up shot depicts Cathy's gloved hand; this shot is later paralleled by another close-up which depicts her hands ungloved and severely affected by arthritis. The juxtaposition of these two shots communicates to the viewer that Cathy is attempting to hide the symptoms of her disorder.

The film portrays Cathy (Jo Van Fleet) in a more nuanced manner, negotiating the classic understanding of the *femme fatale* trope. After the film's overture and piece of expository text, which informs about the setting, the viewer sees Cathy walking through the streets of Monterey. The film's wide aspect ratio, achieved through the use of the CinemaScope lens, permits the audience to view the character's surroundings in great detail. The first scene utilizes multiple wide shots, consequently allowing the viewer to notice how other pedestrians react to Cathy's presence. The camera is stationary and slowly pans following Cathy, thus mimicking the townspeople turning their heads as she walks by. The viewer first sees Cal (James Dean) sitting on the curb as Cathy passes on the sidewalk behind him. The moment she walks past, Cal gets up and begins to follow the woman, suggesting that he was waiting for her. At that point the viewer does not know who the woman is; however, it seems that the boy does suspect her identity. It is also apparent that Cathy attempts to hide herself using her clothing – she is wearing a long dark jacket and dress, a black hat with a black veil, and brown gloves. Despite her clothes, the town's inhabitants know her and her profession, as evident by a group of men greeting her by name and catcalling

her. Cathy walks into a bank in order to deposit some money. Her interaction with the bank clerk begins to reveal information about her character; she waits impatiently while the clerk counts the money, and when he attempts to engage in small talk, Cathy ends the conversation by saying "I'm in a hurry, please" (Kazan 1955, 00:06:04-00:06:07), rips out her bankbook form the clerk's hand and quickly walks out of the bank. This scene might suggest that Cathy is simply rude, especially to a viewer familiar with the novel; however, it might also be interpreted as Cathy being headstrong and determined. Although Kazan's films are most often associated with androcentric stories and performances by male actors, such as Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* (1954), Savannah Lee states that the director also made movies with "actresses in stories about women;" however, the role of women in these is often overlooked. Lee further argues:

> *Pinky* (1949) is usually thought of as a movie about racial issues. *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) tends to be seen as a Marlon Brando film. *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) is remembered as the outstanding debut of Warren Beatty. But in fact, a case can be made that these films are equally about the pain of women. Kazan was every bit as interested in the characters of Blanche (Vivien Leigh) and Stella (Kim Hunter) as he was in the character of Stanley Kowalski (Brando). He was just as interested in the character of Deanie (Natalie Wood) as he was in the character of Bud (Beatty). And in the controversial and often-overlooked *Pinky*, the story is entirely that of the conflicted, racially stranded title heroine (Jeanne Crain). (2011, 116)

In a sense, this appears to be true about *East of Eden*. The film focalizes Cal's perspective and is most frequently associated with James Dean's performance, but Cathy's character also carries much nuance, especially when one considers how her portrayal differs from the novel.

The first time Cal sneaks into the brothel, he sees Cathy sleeping in an armchair in her room. He kneels in front of her and softly says that he would like to speak with her. Woken up, Cathy is obviously startled, begins yelling and covers her face, ultimately retreating to the back of the room to hide behind a curtain. This is the scene which employs the aforementioned close-up of Cathy's arthritic hands. It also further characterizes Cathy through Jo Van Fleet's acting. In the novel, it is explained that as Cathy ages and gains weight, she becomes

paranoid about losing her beauty, which prompts her to hide as much of her physical appearance as possible. The film does not overtly state that at any point. In turn, when Kazan's Cathy displays embarrassment at being seen by Cal, the viewer understands that she is ashamed of her looks, thus explaining the reason for her conservative clothing in the film's previous scenes. Cal, however, does not seem to be in any way shocked or appalled by his mother – on the contrary. With a slight smile, James Dean perfectly conveys the child-like hope Cal is feeling at the perspective of establishing a relationship with his mother and learning about his family's past. The male gaze plays a role in the scene, as Cathy is dressed much more revealingly compared to the previous scenes – she is only wearing a nightgown and a robe. Cal's longing expression and the fact that he is kneeling before Cathy indicate submission.

After Cathy orders for Cal to be thrown out, the boy struggles with the brothel's bodyguard and yells out "Talk to me, please! Mother!" (Kazan 1955, 00:30:58-00:31:02). Through a crack in the door, Cathy observes him being dragged out of the building. At first, her face is visibly angry, but as the boy keeps pleading for a conversation, the expression changes into fear and even pity. This scene marks a departure from the source text. The first proper interaction the two have in the novel is when Cathy confronts Cal having noticed that he keeps following her around the city. When she takes him to the brothel and they start speaking, she purposely tries to corrupt Cal, but the boy manages to oppose her:

> Kate, as she had always, drove in the smart but senseless knife of her cruelty. She laughed softly. "I may have given you some interesting things, like this—" She held up her crooked hands. "But if it's epilepsy—fits—you didn't get it from me." She glanced brightly up at him, anticipating the shock and beginning worry in him.
> Cal spoke happily. "I'm going," he said. "I'm going now. It's all right. What Lee said was true."
> "What did Lee say?"
> Cal said, "I was afraid I had you in me."
> "You have," said Kate.
> "No, I haven't. I'm my own. I don't have to be you." (*EoE* 2017, 563-64)

In the book, there is no display of sympathy during the whole conversation. Cathy's only purpose is to hurt Cal and make him doubt his character and

motivations. Furthermore, Steinbeck's Cal does not intend to meet with Cathy in order to establish a relationship; he goes to speak with the woman to find out about her evil nature, as he is afraid that he might have inherited her character.

In cinema, the *femme fatale* has been widely associated with the *film noir*. In films belonging to this genre, it is the troubled male character who is usually focalized with the *femme fatale* only being a meaningful addition. It can be argued, however, that in *film noir* the *femme fatale* shares many characteristics with the male protagonists. One such trait is transgression, which, in the case of the *femme fatale*, is frequently realized through role-playing. The *femme fatale* is inherently performative and finds herself constantly adjusting her behavior in accordance to the situation (Grossman 2020, 1-4). In Steinbeck's text, Cathy performs constantly as a way to manipulate people, gain their trust and ultimately use them for her own benefit. She has perfect control over her facial expressions, body language and speech cadence. Her physical appearance likewise functions as an effective instrument of seduction, especially in her interactions with men. In the scheme to gain legal ownership of the brothel she has been working at, she develops a relationship with Faye, the establishment's founder. When Cathy (at this point having changed her name to Kate) begins to sense that Faye deeply desires to assume a maternal role over her, she starts calling Faye her mother and even proclaims love for her. Cathy is able to perfectly sense how Faye would like her to behave and what words she would like to hear her say:

> Kate got up, gently pulled the table aside, and sat down on the floor. She put her cheek on Faye's knee. Her slender fingers traced a gold thread on the skirt through its intricate leaf pattern. And Faye stroked Kate's cheek and hair and touched her strange ears. Shyly Faye's fingers explored to the borders of the scar.
> "I think I've never been so happy before," said Kate.
> "My darling. You make me happy too. Happier than I have ever been. Now I don't feel alone. Now I feel safe." (*EoE* 2017, 284)

The only moments when Cathy is unable to maintain her performance is when she is under the influence of alcohol. This firstly becomes apparent when, having escaped her hometown, she manipulates the pimp into supporting her financially. One evening, he brings a bottle of champagne to a house where he allowed Cathy to reside. At first, Cathy is reluctant to have a drink but finally drinks

a number of glasses. She begins to call the man names and admits to having manipulated him. The situation results in the pimp nearly beating Cathy to death; however, she manages to survive by finding her way to the Trask farm where she is nursed back to health by Adam.

The second time Cathy loses control over her behavior comes right after the passage previously quoted. Having decided to write Cathy into her will as the only benefactor, Faye proposes that the two should celebrate by having a glass of wine. Remembering almost losing her life when she drank previously, Cathy is again hesitant but agrees so as not to upset Faye. They end up drinking the entire bottle, which once again unveils Cathy's true nature:

> The transition came to Kate almost immediately after the second glass. Her fear evaporated, her fear of anything disappeared. This was what she had been afraid of, and now it was too late. The wine had forced a passage through all the carefully built barriers and defenses and deceptions, and she didn't care. The thing she had learned to cover and control was lost. Her voice became chill and her mouth was thin. Her wide-set eyes slitted and grew watchful and sardonic. (*EoE* 2017, 285)

The contrast in Cathy's behavior between the two passages is stark. Faye realizes that she has been tricked and begins to scream. Cathy manages to forcefully drug her and later convince that the entire conversation was a dream.

Cathy in Kazan's picture does not appear to be performing, at least not as overtly. Her behavior throughout the film seems consistent and earnest. During the first actual conversation she has with Cal, at first, the woman mostly asks him questions about his family and explains that she threw him out before because she did not know who he was. It is Cal who goes into the interaction with a pre-meditated motivation – he wants to borrow $5,000 to invest into a beans business venture with Will Hamilton, to which the woman surprisingly agrees. In the novel, Cal borrows the money from Lee, the Trask family's Chinese domestic worker who assumes a parental role over Caleb and Aron, especially at the beginning of their lives during Adam's depression. He also acts as a confidant and advisor to both Adam and the two boys. Making Cathy assume some of Lee's positive traits complicates her character. Because the film does not include Cathy's backstory, the audience does not know how she got

to her present position. In the picture, she justifies shooting Adam – she says that it was because he tried to keep her on the ranch, not able to see other people. It puts into question Cathy's motivation for abandoning her family, and that her leaving Adam was not as unambiguous as in the book. Furthermore, she argues that she got to own the brothel through hard work and dedication, which stands in contrast to the book's elaborate plot of manipulating and murdering the previous owner. With the viewer having no reasons to doubt Cathy's words, they are likely to believe her, and one might even feel inclined to sympathize with her. This choice turns the female agency displayed by Cathy in the novel into a positive character trait. Later in the scene, Cal and Cathy bond over their dislike for Adam's self-righteousness. When the woman suggests that maybe Cal is more like her, because she thinks he too is very pragmatic, the boy nods his head. At the end of the scene, the woman shows sympathy for her son by stating that he is a "likable kid" (Kazan 1955, 01:03:24-01:03:29). The earnestness of the compliment is surprising when one considers Cathy's interactions with Cal in the novel. Their conversations in the book are mostly hostile, and even when the woman does appear to be saying something positive, it is always sardonic.

The alterations discussed in this article result in significantly different experiences of reading Steinbeck's novel and watching Kazan's film, especially in relation to Cathy's portrayal. The movie does not make her out to be a villain overcome with mean-spiritedness. It humanizes her and problematizes the understanding of the *femme fatale* trope. The film Cathy is shown in a less overtly negative light, helps Cal financially and even develops a kinship with him. She also seems to somewhat regret the fact that she does not have a proper relationship with her son, as when Cal leaves her room with the borrowed money, she appears to be devastated. These changes result from the fact that the film omits about two-thirds of the novel's plot and shifts focus to Cal's relationship with his father. From Cal's perspective it is Adam who assumes the role of the villain, whereas Cathy takes on the traits of Lee. The film employs the *femme fatale* trope as a way to underline the agency of the female character, whose motivations do not appear to be inherently evil. Kazan characterizes Cathy through the purposeful use of film language and Jo Van Fleet's acting. In Steinbeck's novel, Cathy embodies the classic understanding of the trope; she is indicative of the fears patriarchal society has about women and their sexuality. Conversely, Kazan's Cathy comes across as an independent, strong woman, who regrets some of the choices she made in her past but ultimately is very proud of her position. The fact that both *East of Eden* and *Of Mice*

and Men feature women who exhibit the traits of a *femme fatale* points to Steinbeck's tendency to employ this particular stock character. The book versions of Cathy and Curley's wife do carry some nuance; however, the film adaptations seem to take the nuance much further, resulting in the characters being more fleshed out and not simply serving as devices to reinforce the theme or push the narrative forward.

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