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Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

Week 3

LANA TURNER: TRAGIC ATTRACTIONS

From “sweater girl” to glamour girl Julia Jean ‘Lana’ Turner (February 8, 1921 – June 29, 1995) *lit up* the screen. Often the epitome of the Hollywood blonde, Turner’s roles were also associated with this tragic and beautiful figure that smouldered on screen; her personal filled with tragedy – from the murder of her father to the ‘justifiable homicide’ surrounding the death of one of her partners at the hands of her daughter. She was her *own* movie, full of all the trappings and conventions of Hollywood; a star whose sexual allure held up what most criticised as a limited acting ability. Here was a figure of platinum perfection, an MGM star for 17 years who became the quintessential product of the Hollywood studio system.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Main

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)

Director(s): Tay Garnett

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

The Three Musketeers (1948)

Director(s): George Sidney

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Imitation of Life (1959)

Director(s): Douglas Sirk

Studio(s): Universal International Pictures

References to

They Won’t Forget (1937)

Director(s): Mervyn LeRoy

Studio(s): Warner Bros.



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Ziegfeld Girl (1941)

Director(s): Robert Z. Leonard

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1941)

Director(s): Victor Fleming

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

The Bad and the Beautiful (1952)

Director(s): Vincente Minnelli

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Madame X (1966)

Director(s): David Lowell Rich

Studio(s): Ross Hunter Productions

Notes:

“A successful man is one who makes more money than his wife can spend. A successful woman is one who can find such a man.” — Lana Turner

“The most important tool of my trade was a mirror.” — Lana Turner

Young Julia

Arriving four days before her mother's 17th birthday, Julia Jean ‘Lana’ Turner was born on February 8th 1921 in Wallace, Idaho, Lana Turner went on to find success as both a pin-up model and a film actress. Although not the strongest of actresses – her films often bolstered by stronger leads and material – as with any ‘star’, there was no doubting her magnetism. But, it was her highly publicised personal life that would often overshadow her Hollywood career.

An only child, Lana Turner was of Irish and Scottish ancestry on her mother’s side and Dutch on her father’s. Her parents met when her mother was 14 and father was 24, the latter working as a miner. Her parents separated when she was six after relocating to San Francisco. On December 14, 1930, the first tragedy in her life struck, having a profound influence on her life. After winning money at a traveling craps game, John Virgil Turner collected his winnings and while heading home was bludgeoned to death. His robbery and homicide were never solved.

Following her father's death, while her mother took on an 80 hour a week job as a beautician to support herself and her daughter, Lana lived with a family who treated her like a servant, physically abusing her. Around this time she became a devout Roman Catholic.

How Turner was discovered is Hollywood legend. Although one account has her discovered at a pharmacy which (by Turner’s account the result of a reporting error that began circulating in articles published by columnist Sidney Skolsky), Turner would often go on to correct the story,



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highlighting she skipped her junior class at Hollywood High School to buy a Coca-Cola at the Top Hat Malt Shop located on the southeast corner of Sunset Boulevard and McCadden Place. There she was spotted a publisher of The Hollywood Reporter, William R. Wilkerson, asking her if she was interested in appearing in films. Her answer was gold: "I'll have to ask my mother first." Soon after, with her mother's permission, she was signed to a \$50 weekly contract with Warner Bros.

First appearance

Turner made her feature film debut in LeRoy's *They Won't Forget* (1937), a crime drama in which she played a teenage murder victim.

The 'Sweater Girl'

The film earned her the nickname of the "Sweater Girl" for her form-fitting attire.

Early roles went on to include *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941) with Heddy Lemarr and Judy Garland

And Victor Fleming's version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941) starring Spencer Tracy in the famous dual role.

Glamour girl

As mentioned, Turner also found success as a pin-up model during the war and by the mid-1940s, she was one of the highest-paid Hollywood actresses and biggest MGM's biggest stars, working for the studio for 18 years. Her films earned more than \$50 million – the equivalent to approximately \$852 million today) for the studio during her 18-year contract with them.

In late 1937, Turner relocated to Warner Bros., Jack Warner took her on, but believed Turner would not amount to anything and when she returned to sign a contract with MGM managed to secure a \$100 a week – over \$2,000 a week in today's money. She was now on the way to being 'shaped' into a movie star, her appearance a defining look of the 1940s and 1950s.

Although not discussed as a main film – sorry, it was covered via Kirk Douglas in the previous Old Hollywood course – Vincente Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) could be considered her best movie; a lavish and surprisingly cutting observation of the studios and the sharks who inhabit them.

Marriage(s)

Married even times. Artie Shaw (m. 1940; div. 1940), Joseph Stephen Crane (m. 1943; div. 1944), Bob Topping (m. 1948; div. 1952), Lex Barker (m. 1953; div. 1957), Fred May (m. 1960; div. 1962), Robert Eaton (m. 1965; div. 1969) and Ronald Pellar (m. 1969; div. 1972).

She met her second husband Joseph Stephen Crane in 1942. In the same way she eloped to Las Vegas with her first husband, Artie Shaw, she did the same a week after her and Crane began dating in July 1942. But the marriage had to be annulled by Lana four months later after she discovered



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that Crane's previous divorce had not yet been finalized. Falling pregnant that November, they remarried in March 1943 divorcing in 1944 due to his gambling addictions. They had a daughter together and Lana's only child.

As she was Rh-negative blood, which caused fetal anemia and made it difficult to carry a child to term, her daughter Cheryl Crane was somewhat of a miracle child as she refused doctor's orders to have an abortion.

"My birth was a life and death struggle that swayed in the balance for nearly two months. That was me all over." [Vanity Fair](#)

For Cheryl, growing up as 'the baby' (as she was nicknamed), their relationship was tense. She had a lonely childhood as the daughter of a Hollywood star and would often fall victim to sexual abuse via the male party guests Lana would have at their home. More on where these tragic events lead to later.

"I want to make something of this place..." — Cora Smith

The story follows a drifter, Frank Chambers (John Garfield) who is hired to work in a diner by its middle-aged owner, Nick Smith (Cecil Kellaway). It's not long before Frank begins an affair with Nick's young wife, Cora (Lana Turner) and the two conspire to kill her husband and acquire his money. It is a story of suspicion and misdeeds that never truly go unpunished.

One of the posters – another illustrated classic of its era – captures the lust and tension perfectly.

'Love, when you get fear in it, it's not love any more. It's hate. Stealing a man's wife, that's nothing, but stealing his car, that's larceny.' — James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934)
Based on the notorious novel by James M. Cain, it is considered one of the most outstanding crime novels of the 20th century, the story's The novel's intoxicating brew of sex and violence setting somewhat of a template amongst crime fiction. It would seem it was too much for some Americans, banned in Boston upon its release. much so

Turner is her most alluring and perfectly cast in a role that continued to define and cement the 'sex bomb' image MGM would play, exploiting her own personal life and relations off set.

On the performances and skirting around the more carnal scenes of the novel, shackled by the Hays code, an original New York Times review stated that "... the authors, actors and director have suggested sensual tensions thoroughly. Too much cannot be said for the principals. Mr. Garfield reflects to the life the crude and confused young hobo who stumbles aimlessly into a fatal trap. And Miss Turner is remarkably effective as the cheap and uncertain blonde who has a pathetic ambition to "be somebody" and a pitiful notion that she can realize it through crime." [The New York Time](#)

Although there is an erotically charged 1981 version of the novel by New Hollywood director Bob Rafelson, there are in fact four versions, the other two including the French film *Le Dernier Tournant* (*The Last Turning*) from 1939 and the Italian *Ossessione* (*Obsession*) from 1943.



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There is something reminiscent of Cameron Diaz's entrance (and debut) in *The Mask* (1994), although a glide and position of the camera used in thousands of films when viewing the female form. This prime example of the 'male gaze' is an analysis that can be applied to most cinema and is only accentuated through film noir, a genre rife with voyeurism. Take Alfred Hitchcock, whose films a full of such techniques that build on the desires and psychology of the antagonists.

Bad and beautiful

"But, your grace, how can you trust me with such a confidence?" — Lady de Winter

In this classic swashbuckling ensemble, Lana Turner plays the evil Lady de Winter. The aspiring swordsman D'Artagnan – in this version played by the deft Gene Kelly - arrives in Paris with hopes of joining the royal guard. Here he falls in love with the beautiful Constance (June Allyson) and, after clashing with three of the king's musketeers, Athos (Van Heflin), Porthos (Gig Young) and Aramis, he joins them in fighting the forces of the corrupt Cardinal Richelieu, deliciously played by pre-horror-era Vincent Price. When Richelieu attempts to undermine the throne and fan the flames of war, D'Artagnan and the musketeers must thwart his plans.

This was the first Hollywood movie to adapt the whole storyline of Alexandre Dumas' novel. The previous, and many of the later, movie adaptations only adapted the first half of the novel, "The Queens Diamonds".

"Never fear quarrels, but seek hazardous adventures. All for one and one for all. All for one and one for all, united we stand divided we fall." — Alexandre Dumas, The Three Musketeers (1844)
Based on Alexandre Dumas' timeless classic, this lavish MGM production by director George Sidney perfectly captures the spirit of the material, delivering an early Technicolor marvel in which Lana Turner lights up the screen for those moments she appears.

Of course, it's about the Musketeers but it is a prime example of how Lana Turner was utilised within the studio system and bolstered by fellow cast.

Vincent Price repeated the role of Cardinal Richelieu in the 1960 TV movie version.

Her first appearance in a colour movie, you only need to see a still from the film to see how well Turner converts from monochrome; her lavish costume designs and demeanor all part and parcel of her delivery.

Apparently, while filming, Gene Kelly flung Lana Turner onto a bed with such force that she fell to the ground and suffered a broken elbow.

"I want more. Maybe too much." — Lora Meredith

Moving forward over ten years to the end of the 1950s, Lana Turner was now making films with Universal. *Imitation of Life* (1959) tells the story of actress Lora Meredith and her black maid Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore) whose lives begin to change when they start living together. As Lora's career flourishes, Annie struggles to bond with her daughter, Sarah Jane who is assumed to be



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white, due to her lighter skin colour. Much more happens on top of this, but would be giving too much away – only to say it's a melodrama that delivers on most levels.

Turner took a much smaller salary, than her usual \$25,000 per week and worked for 50% of the film's profits, which earned her over \$2 million (setting a record for an actress at the time).

'Time after time, her defeats, her snubs, her humiliations, her failures, were to descend upon her from the women executives of hospital diet kitchens, hotels, and from the women along the Boardwalk who conducted eating establishments, who would have thrown their patronage to the male had the alternative presented itself.' — Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (1933)

Based on the 1933 novel by Fannie Hurst it is actually the second version filmed, the first also from Universal Pictures and directed by John M. Stahl, starring Claudette Colbert (right) and Louise Beavers (left).

The '59 version was director Douglas Sirk's final Hollywood movie and has been greatly admired over the years in how it dealt with issues of race, class *and* gender. Typically, although she had the second largest role in the film, Juanita Moore was billed seventh, behind actors with much smaller roles. This was made worse when, as some form of compensation, her on-screen billing read: "presenting Juanita Moore as Annie Johnson," but that credit didn't make it into the film's advertising.

The film is dangerously close to Lana Turner's life, exploring the taught relationships between mothers and their daughters.

Hollywood homicide...

This photo shows Lana Turner, mobster boyfriend Johnny Stompanato and Cheryl Crane at Los Angeles International Airport in March, 1958, just over two weeks before Crane fatally stabbed Stompanato after she intervened when Stompanato had been beating Turner.

Stompanato was part of an infamous gang led by Meyer Harris "Mickey" Cohen, a 'legendary' Hollywood mobster who was seen as "a dangerous and weirdly charismatic thug." *Life Magazine* <https://www.life.com/people/mickey-cohen-photos-of-a-legendary-los-angeles-mobster-1949/>

The court ruled that her actions were 'justifiable homicide'.

There were a number of recorded incidents prior to the incident. One of which involved Sean Connery while filming with Turner.

Stompanato became so jealous and enraged of Connery's on-screen presence with Turner it led to Connery scuffling with him, disarming and overpowering Stompanato. Afterwards, Connery received threats from the criminal underworld, prompting him to lay low and relocate to avoid any potential danger.



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Turner channeled the pain from her experience into *Imitation of Life* proving a financial and critically successful film and served as a comeback vehicle for the actress.

The fallout of the incident and surrounding case obviously had a lasting impact and created a rift between Turner and her daughter as it threatened to end Turner's film career. *Imitation of Life* was the first film since the scandal involving Turner and her daughter. As mentioned, Cheryl Crane had, up to that point, claimed to have been sexually abused by numerous houseguests and men acquainted with her mother and, if (more than likely) true, fuelled Cheryl.

Some overlooked classics include: *Slightly Dangerous* (1943), *Betrayed* (1954), *Flame and the Flesh* (1954), *Peyton Place* (1957) and *Madame X* (1966).

Final years...

Turner insisted she was never a recluse in her latter years, having retired from big screen roles.

Her final film work came in the acclaimed TV series *Falcon Crest* (1981) in which she played Jacqueline Perrault from 1982-1983

Lana Turner passed away on the 29th June 1995 from complications of cancer. Although her daughter Cheryl inherited some of Turner's personal effects and \$50,000, her estate – estimated in court to be worth \$1.7 million at the time – was left to her maid, Carmen Lopez Cruz, who had been her companion for 45 years and caregiver during her illness. Cheryl challenged the will, and Cruz said that the majority of the estate was consumed by probate costs, legal fees and medical expenses.

“A successful man is one who makes more money than his wife can spend. A successful woman is one who can find such a man.” — Lana Turner