Sometimes the Truth is Wicked: Fashion, Violence and Obsession in *Leave Her to Heaven*
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*Leave Her to Heaven*, directed by John M. Stahl in 1945 and adapted from a best-selling novel by Ben Ames Williams, was a huge commercial success in its day. A generic hybrid, its fusion of melodrama and film noir tropes is realised in vivid Technicolor, lending a stylised hyper-real quality to the action. In characteristic 1940s style, a layer of pathology intensifies the frustrated emotions and domestic tensions of a classic family melodrama narrative. The autonomous heroine becomes a fearful and destructive figure, an agent of violence and death.

The film’s protagonist, Ellen (Gene Tierney), is presented as an obsessive character, acting out an unresolved father complex on the hapless Richard (Cornel Wilde), who is overwhelmed by her driven, perfectionist nature. “There’s nothing wrong with Ellen, she just loves too much,” Richard is counselled by her mother, but this excessive love – always contrasted with the conventionally nurturing affection promised by Ellen's sister Ruth – is shown as threatening and consuming, and leads to the death of both Richard's brother and the couple's unborn child.

Theme and mise-en-scène identify the film as melodrama, primarily a non-realism, heightened genre in which the repressed feelings of the characters are manifested in stylistic and visual excess. Stahl is now best known for a number of 1930s films, including *Imitation of Life* (1934), which were to be remade in the 1950s by Douglas Sirk. Indeed, the production values, “adult” themes and use of colour in *Leave Her to Heaven* strongly anticipate the more intense style of 1950s melodrama.

The film’s narrative simultaneously follows a classic noir trajectory, with Richard’s fateful encounter with Ellen precipitating a descent into a disordered world of disease and crime, and Ellen herself embodying many characteristics of a film noir archetype. This is elucidated by what Janet Peter describes as “the combination of sensuality with activity and ambition”, identified with the femme fatale, and contrasted with “the general passivity and impotence which characterizes the film noir male”. Crucially, Kay Nelson’s costuming of Ellen gives her authority, while simultaneously masking her alienation and providing clues to her fractured psychology.

Ellen’s disconcerting power is made apparent in the couple’s first meeting; as Mary Ann Doane notes, her “relation to an excessive, wild desire is signalled from the very beginning of the film by her appropriation of the gaze, by the fact that she stares intently at Richard”. Despite its comic tone, this scene clearly establishes the nature of the couple’s relationship, with Ellen drawn by Richard’s resemblance to her dead father, then undermining both his romantic and literary efforts.

For this first encounter Ellen wears a deceptively simple greige dress. Both its soft colour and subtle cut, emphasising her elegant figure, denote her social status as a woman of fashion. The dress acts as a backdrop to her gold jewellery – contemporary fashion shoots also favoured this sophisticated combination, which emphasised the glow of precious metals against matte, fine wool neutrals. It also serves to emphasise Ellen’s face, her perfect make-up and glossy hair. When she dons an oversized fur-collared coat to leave the train, her alliance to fashion, luxury and grooming is complete.

The elegant, soft folds of later outfits serve to reinforce this image further, and to contrast her reliance on fashion with the other female characters in the film. While her mother and Ruth both wear costumes that are in line with the fashion of the time, neither is particularly stylish, and they are certainly not wearing the high fashion outfits that Ellen favours. Hollywood often used fashion unproblematically as part of the overall glamorous representational styles that dominated many films of the period. However, in *Leave Her to Heaven*, Ellen’s style signals her otherness. Her obsessive attention to her appearance is cast as a symptom of her obsessive love, her glamour as an intimidating threat to those around her. It is a means for her to seek control of her self-image, and to gain influence over the people she encounters.

Even when she adopts more “homely” styles during her time at “Back of the Moon”, her plaid cotton shirts and sleek trouser ensembles retain an air of studied perfection. Ellen seems too aware of how to use these garments performatively. She is presenting a mask of domesticity, just as she presented a mask of upper-class fashionability earlier in the film. In each case, Ellen’s costumes provide clues to her psychological state, and thus to the dangers she presents to herself and to those around her. She disguises her alienation from her mother and Ruth, and from anyone she perceives
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This representation of fashion as symptomatic of a damaged psychological state, that ran counter to women’s “natural” role as wife and mother, was echoed in other aspects of American culture in the post-war period. There was a marked concern with contemporary gender roles, in particular how men and women would cope with the impact of the war, and how they would return to normality. Several books, including Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham’s Modern Woman: The Last Sex (1947) and Richard Carle’s Women: An Analytical Study (1949), highlighted these issues, and portrayed fashion as not just unnatural, but also a highly problematic expression of femininity, as is apparent in Lundberg and Farnham’s characterisation of the woman of fashion as “a neurotic ... the frequently seen overdressed, over-perfumed, over-bedizened person, the ever-current version of the ‘glamour girl’.” Fashion magazines such as Vogue and Glamour ran articles discussing the problems of gender and dealing with returning husbands once the initial glow of the allied victory wore off, and women had to get used to returning to a more subordinate role. These anxieties were also expressed in many Hollywood films of the period.

In Leave Her to Heaven, this ambivalence towards fashion and femininity is clearly expressed in Ellen’s oriental flower-print dress, worn towards the start of the film in New Mexico. It is very similar to a 1944 advertisement for an Adrian ready-to-wear outfit, which was made of the same soft drape fabric and bluish colours, cut to shape the body and emphasise the shoulders. This dress separates Ellen from the other women, its colour exaggerates her femininity, and its print states her exotic otherwise. She uses this powerful glamour to ensnare Richard, who seems both thrilled and intimidated by her seduction of him. She skillfully uses not only her patrician fashion style, but also her consciousness that she is “other” to manipulate him into a whirlwind marriage.

It is not just Ellen’s costume that is deployed in the film to signal her fashion status and to entrap Richard. Gene Tierney’s athletic body is displayed to full effect in the trim suits and flowing dresses, as well as in her riding gear and swimwear. Sportswear became a signature fashion style in the America of the 1930s, and by the mid-1940s it was established as part of a national ideal of modern, dynamic femininity and streamlined physicality. It was represented in fashion magazines as quintessentially American, and therefore in contrast to the leisurely elite styles of Old World couture. Both Ellen and Tierney encapsulated this ideal. Indeed, Tierney was one of the very few film stars to be found on the pages of high-fashion magazines such as Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar at the time. Her upper-class air and athletic figure meant that she fitted in well with the society women and models that dominated their pages.

This imagery resonated with contemporary fashion photography, particularly the work of Toni Frissell and Louise Dahl-Wolfe. These photographers combined snapshot-style nonchalance with monumentalising portrayals of models in simple sportswear that emphasised lean athleticism, as described by Vogue: “It is not just an accident of Nature and heredity that American women, as a group, have the most admirable figures in the world ... [with] our long-legged frameworks, our athletic lives, and our conscientious efforts towards sleekness.” This ideal was then connected to the “ideal” American landscape, from pale sandy beaches and clear blue seas to arid deserts, which were already a symbol of national identity. In Frissell’s photographs of models paddling in the ocean, and Dahl-Wolfe’s shots of models at Frank Lloyd-Wright’s famous Taliesin West building set against Arizona skies, women became emblems of the American ideal of simplicity and naturalness.

Leave Her to Heaven’s vivid Technicolor echoed Dahl-Wolfe’s use of colour to construct hyper-real visions of an Edenic landscape. Ellen’s increasingly destructive obsessions, and violent horror of Danny, and later her own unborn baby become all the more shocking when portrayed in this environment. The bright sunshine glistening on the water, the lush trees, Ellen’s trim bathing suit and pure white wrap, her fashionably sport-toned body; these all add to the shock when she allows Danny to drown. Her crime is committed in a setting diametrically opposed to the twilight city streets of most film noir. Her violence is passive, yet fatal. Her tortured psychology and aberrant behaviour in this pivotal scene dramatically subvert expectations constructed in fashion photography and Hollywood cinema, and already established within the national, and arguably international, psyche. The clues to Ellen’s mental state, hinted at in her perfectionist and obsessive approach to fashion, which were heightened through her manipulation of American style ideals, come to catastrophic fruition as she turns into the perverse, anti-maternal woman feared by contemporary commentators.