Window Dressing: Isolation in Cornell Woolrich's Short Fiction

Annika R.P. Deutsch, Boise State University

Publication Date
5-2017

Date of Final Oral Examination (Defense)
2-27-2017

Type of Culminating Activity
Thesis

Degree Title
Master of Arts in English, Literature

Department
English

Major Advisor
Jacqueline O'Connor, Ph.D.

Advisor
Ralph Clare, Ph.D.

Advisor
Jeffrey W. Westover, Ph.D.

Abstract
Cornell Woolrich was a prolific American noir detective fiction writer. Though recognized by some as the father of noir fiction, he is often overshadowed by other writers of his era, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain. Many of the themes found in Woolrich's writing, particularly isolation and the associated fear and anxiety, are as palpable today as they were in the times he was writing. In this thesis, I argue that Woolrich's continued relevance is the result of his unique portrayal of American city life. Woolrich utilizes recognizable themes from the noir, mystery, and thriller genres in his short fiction but dresses them up in such a way that he not only comments on life but encourages his readers to live their lives to the fullest, to avoid the dangers his characters face. There are a number of gaps in the scholarship on Woolrich, and I attempt to fill a few of these by focusing on his short fiction rather than the film adaptations of his works or his novels. Each chapter focuses on different aspects of isolation portrayed in the stories: physical isolation ("New York Blues"), emotional isolation ("Rear Window" and "Fire Escape"), and alienation associated with police ("Rear Window," "Murder at the Automat," and "Detective William Brown"). While Woolrich's fiction is permeated with a sense of isolation, it is impossible to feel that isolation without also showing some form of community. Woolrich's protagonists are not originally part of their neighborhood, but by the end of each story, there are hints that they might become active members in their communities of neighbors and friends. For a man like Woolrich who did not have a lasting marriage and very little is known about his romantic relationships, it is quite possible that he was highlighting friendships over romantic relationships for a reason. In an age when social media superficially aids the formulation and ability to maintain friendships yet really inhibits meaningful friendships, Woolrich's appeal to his readers not to isolate themselves stands out as even more critical than it may have been at the time he was writing.

DOI
https://doi.org/10.18122/B23992

Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.18122/B23992
by Cornell Woolrich. Film noir expert Thomas Renzi has supplied an outstanding introduction to this volume, which includes many of Woolrich's best-known tales, including "Rear Window," "Marihuana," and over a dozen others. With a stunning cover by famed artist Matt Mahurin. (retrieved from Amazon Thu, 12 Mar 2015 18:17:19 -0400). In honor of Cornell Woolrich's Black series of novels, I call this piece, about the stories concerning Cornell Woolrich's personal life that have accreted over the decades, The Black Legend. Herewith the legend of Cornell Woolrich, dark as his darkest fiction: Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich was born on December 14, 1903 in New York City to Genero and Claire (nee Attalie) Hopley-Woolrich. In 1907 the family moved to Mexico and Genero and Claire divorced soon after. Cornell stayed with his father in Mexico for the duration of his childhood.