

# **Investigating Veronica Mars**

## **The Noir and Teen Clash in Neptune, California**



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“[...] why is *Veronica Mars* so good? It bears little resemblance to life as I know it, but I can't take my eyes off the damn thing.”

(Stephen King, Entertainment Weekly, 01/02-2007)

## **Abstract**

What happens when you combine the long tradition of film noir and the contemporary television teen drama? Through genre analysis, this thesis explores how the television show *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) mixes noir and teen drama and how this creates a dark vision of society and teen life. Through four chapters I investigate key points of the show, such as the narration and aesthetics, the representation of the noir universe through the show's depiction of social class inequalities and an incapacitated criminal justice system, the show's exploration of teen drama themes and how this is affected by noir and finally, an analysis of the main characters and how they relate to this hybrid universe. Noir and teen elements pulsate throughout the entire show. Together they create a tense, paranoid and mysterious atmosphere and allow the show to repeatedly explore dark themes and plots that do not commonly appear in teen dramas. The teen private investigator protagonist Veronica must tackle mysteries ranging everywhere from disappearances, blackmail, scams and theft, to situations where she must deceive the FBI, confront and battle a serial rapist and solve the mass murder of her fellow classmates, all while making her way through high school and college.



## Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been a long, frustrating, enjoyable and enriching ride. Here it is, the academic journey of Neptune, California and I hope that the reader finds it entertaining and fascinating. Though I am responsible for most of the work, I would not have been able to complete this thesis without the help of these amazing people:

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Sarpsborg

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Kim Johansen Østby



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## Introduction

### Murder Casts a Long Shadow...

Veronica: A girl, a teenager, and a private detective - I'm a triple threat. Barely fits on my business card.

(3x18 "I Know What You'll Do Next Summer")

*Veronica Mars* came my way in late 2007. It was an extremely gripping show and I watched the entire first season over the course of one weekend. *Veronica Mars* tells the story of a teenage girl living in a very corrupt California town, Neptune. After her best friend is found murdered, Veronica is ostracized in school and her father is made the laughing stock of the town. Veronica is drugged and raped at a party. Her father opens a private investigator's office and hires Veronica as his assistant. Initially helping him out, she starts her own side-business of helping those less fortunate in school. Then she finds evidence that blows the supposedly-solved murder case of her best friend Lilly wide open. Her journey to uncover the truth leads her on deceitful journey, exploring themes ranging everywhere from e-mail scams and dog-theft rings to kidnapping, rape, child molestations and mass murder. However, solving her friend's murder is only the beginning. While exploring these mysteries, the show also uses a variety of storytelling tools, such as flashbacks, dreams, voiceover narration, strange coloring and dark scenes. This is more than just a teen drama. This is noir.

### **About *Veronica Mars***

*Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) is a television show explicitly constructed to be both a noir private investigation story and a teen melodrama. The show was critically acclaimed, but canceled after three seasons due to low ratings. This has deemed it the status of a cult television show. The show is primarily a mystery show where each episode is centered on at least one particular mystery. In a majority of the cases, the episodic mysteries are solved in the same episode in which they appear. Each season also has a larger mystery which is not solved until the season finale (except season three which has smaller mysteries instead). Thus the show mixes concepts from both the "series" and the "serial". I would like to discuss what this means. Media researcher Audun Engelstad explains that the series consists of closed episodes and that the events in each episode revolve around the same group of people, while secondary characters and opponents are switched out on an episodic basis. The serial, according to Engelstad, is continuing and involves plots where the characters and the

setting/environment go through changes while the storyline culminates in a conclusion in the final episode (Engelstad 2004: 14-15). *Veronica Mars* is also an ensemble drama, a type of narrative used much in television and particularly in the teen drama genre. Engelstad explains:

The ensemble-oriented drama has a slower progression than the stories that build up around a dominating protagonist. This slowness results from the ensemble drama presenting several parallel storylines, where some are working as an obstacle for the main riddle. Therefore the main feature of the major plotline is given less attention. Ensemble stories provide a type of dramaturgical approach which is especially suited for television. The attention can be divided between several characters and side stories, and in doing that the focus on the underlying main conflict can be split up across several episodes. (Engelstad 2004: 51-52, my translation)

Because of its ensemble focus, *Veronica Mars* is also able to divide its major mysteries across the entire season. The major mysteries are usually the main conflict of a season and since the seasons consists of 22 episodes (the third season only has 20 episodes), the ensemble drama is a type of show that is fitting for this approach. Catering to the same mystery for 22 episodes is tiring, both for writers and the viewers. The inclusion of several other characters and their lives allows for the slow progression of the main storyline, although the show does focus on one dominating protagonist, Veronica. The ensemble cast in *Veronica Mars* consists of several characters who are not involved with solving mysteries, which means that the show focuses on many storylines besides its main mystery narrative.

## The Research Question

- In what ways does *Veronica Mars* combine noir with teen drama?

This is the superior research question for this thesis. I consider this to be a fascinating question and extremely relevant to an academic exploration of this show. Teen dramas are usually known for their generic mixing, usually combining melodrama and supernatural/sci-fi stories (Ross and Stein 2008: 8), but such an extensive mixing between noir and teen drama has not been done before. Noir and teen drama are also two genres that seem interesting to combine. Noir is so focused on crime, ambiguity and mischance while teen dramas often explore teen life between groups of friends and their hopes and fears. What happens when these two genres are combined? This is my aim to investigate. I have devised four chapters for the exploration of this noir and teen genre hybrid:

- The first chapter will examine the narration and aesthetics of *Veronica Mars*. The show uses several of noir's trademark visual and narrative styles, mixing them with teen drama modes of storytelling. Noir is known for its distinct aesthetics and narrative tools, such as neon signs, darkness, flashbacks, voiceovers and dreams. Several of these tools are used extensively in *Veronica Mars* and this becomes a natural starting point for the discussion of noir and teen in the show.
- In the second chapter I will discuss the noir universe of *Veronica Mars*. A noir universe is usually unstable, dark, ambiguous and filled with paranoia. In teen dramas, the small town is often a contrast to the noir universe. What happens in *Veronica Mars*? The show focuses heavily on class indifferences among its citizens and presents an incapacitated criminal justice system. I explore these issues as major contributing factors for the noir universe in the show, as well as how Veronica is able to investigate the various mysteries as a result of this universe.
- Chapter three will see the exploration of common teen melodrama themes in *Veronica Mars* and how such traditional themes are colored by the noir genre. Teen dramas often revolve around relationships, family and sexuality. How are these issues addressed in teen dramas and how are they affected by noir?
- The fourth and final chapter discusses the main characters of the show and how the noir and teen universe is reflected in them. As most of the cast consists of a diversity of teenage characters, it is interesting to explore how these characters exist within the noir universe and how they manage to fight back at the injustice that often strikes them.

## **Methodology and Theory**

In order to answer my research questions, I will be performing a genre analysis of *Veronica Mars*. The thesis will be textual analytical with focus on the genres noir and teen (melodrama). I will discuss concepts central to these genres and analyze examples from *Veronica Mars* related to these concepts. I believe that this is a good and reasonable approach to my research question and that it will yield fruitful answers. I have also watched the entire show multiple times. Regarding the selection of material from the show, I do not have any formal restrictions on which episodes to use. I wish to use material from all three seasons, as characters change and themes and mysteries evolve. Therefore I will pick relevant examples

from the entire show to discuss in relation to the theories (for example when discussing flashbacks in chapter one or homosexuality in chapter three, I will include examples from episodes where these tools and topics appear). The first chapter will be an analysis of aesthetics and narration. Chapters two and three will be more thematic and the fourth chapter is character analysis.

I do not expect there to always be a clash between noir and teen drama. In some cases, certain themes might be teen-drama specific and at times there may be concepts from noir that is not traditionally teen. However, in *Veronica Mars* these themes actively work together, as the show is not divided into a “teen” part and a “noir” part. Everything intermeshes, and it is my focus to examine this.

While noir and teen drama perhaps sounds like an unusual combination, they also reflect two different academic trends: there have been written countless books on noir while teen television has largely been ignored in academic research. Noir is also predominantly a movie genre, while teen dramas are usually television shows. Because of this, there will be a combination of film and television theory in this thesis.

For theory on teen television, I have chosen the two books *Teen TV* (2004) by Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson, and *Teen Television* (2008) by Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein. Currently these are among the only and best academic resources available on teen television dramas, taking genre, programming and consumption into account. Roz Kaveney’s book *Teen Dreams* (2006) has some helpful points, although the book is not very academic and thus I will not be using it much. Since teen dramas are also melodramas, I have included a classic book on melodrama, Christine Gledhill’s *Home Is Where The Heart Is* (1987). This book explores several points relevant to *Veronica Mars* which the teen books do not discuss.

As for the vast field of film noir and neo-noir, I have chosen three books that are suitable for the discussions of noir in *Veronica Mars*. The first is Andrew Spicer’s *Film Noir* (2002). This book introduces and addresses classic noir and neo-noir, as well as a focus on character types. The second book is Foster Hirsch’s *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (1999). In this book, Hirsch discusses and compares the neo-noir period with the classic noir period. He also has detailed accounts of noir narratives and sexuality. The third book is Steven M. Sanders and Aeon J. Skoble’s *The Philosophy of TV Noir* (2008). The book is an essay

collection where the contributors discuss (mostly from a philosophical perspective) noir themes in several television shows. This book is currently the only one available on television noir, and as such it is a relevant book for discussing *Veronica Mars* (although the book never mentions the show). There is also a master's thesis by Anja Tucker from the University of Bergen where she discusses the concept "teen noir". She discusses examples where noir concepts have been identified in the teen genre. She uses *Veronica Mars* in some parts of her thesis and she has several points which I both agree and disagree with and that I choose to discuss in my own thesis. Regarding theory on noir, I feel that these books are sufficient as several themes and discussions are pervasive in all books and I have material on both the classic and the neo-era of noir.

These six books plus Tucker's thesis will be used in most chapters. I also use other miscellaneous genre and style books related to the different discussions, such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art* (2004) and Peter Larsen's *Filmmusikk (Film Music)* (2005) for chapter one. Current academic work on *Veronica Mars* itself is limited, but some essays are found in *Teen Television* and there are a few online articles. There is also an unauthorized book edited by the show's creator Rob Thomas titled *Neptune Noir* (2006). This book is an essay collection with contributors from both popular science and academia. There are some interesting essays there that I will be using, and the book also has useful thoughts by the show's creator himself. I will refer to these when they contribute to the analysis.

## Introducing Noir

The framework for this thesis is noir and teen drama, but what exactly do these concepts mean? Regarding the characteristics of film noir, film professor Andrew Spicer argues:

The label 'film noir' designates a cycle of films that share a similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterization. Their iconography (repeated visual patterning) consists of images of the dark, night-time city, its street damp with rain which reflects the flashing neon signs. Its sleazy milieu of claustrophobic alleyways and deserted docklands alternates with gaudy nightclubs and swank apartments. The visual style habitually employs high contrast (chiaroscuro) lighting, where deep, enveloping shadows are fractured by shafts of light from a single source, and dark, claustrophobic interiors have shadowy shapes on the walls [...]. Noir's highly complex narrative patterning is created by the use of first-person voice-overs, multiple narrators, flashbacks and ellipses which often create ambiguous or inconclusive endings [...]. The noir universe is dark, malign and unstable where

individuals are trapped through fear and paranoia, or overwhelmed by the power of sexual desire. (Spicer 2002: 4)

As we can see from this description, noir includes both certain visual styles and themes. We are going to see a more in-depth discussion of this in relation to *Veronica Mars* in the following four chapters. Another concept which is typical for noir is moral ambiguity which is also featured in the show.

Noir is usually divided into two periods: classic noir and neo-noir. Film professor Foster Hirsch argues that the classic film noir period lasted from the early 1940s to the late 1950s (Hirsch 1999: 1). Noir released after this period is referred to as neo-noir. Spicer explains that neo-noir is a contemporary rendering of the film noir sensitivity (Spicer 2002: 130). Neo-noir is usually experimental while trying to maintain the mood of the classic noirs. While the term neo-noir works as a description for all noirs released after the classic period, Hirsch argues for something called postmodern film noir which he dates from 1981 (Spicer 2002: 149). However, since neo-noir can be used as a superior term I am mainly going to refer to noir as either classic noir or neo-noir (as postmodern is included in neo-noir)

Is noir a genre? This is an ongoing debate. For example, Spicer merely refers to noir as a label in his book. Hirsch, on the other hand, argues that noir is entitled to full generic status. He claims that if noir is supposed to be a movement and not a genre, then its link to a certain era is enforced. However, noir has survived through its common visual and narrative techniques (Hirsch 1999: 2-4). I choose to follow Hirsch's view for this thesis and discuss noir as a genre based on the fact that noir still shares repeated visual styles and narration techniques.

## **Introducing Teen**

What is teen television? Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein discuss this phenomenon in the introduction of their book *Teen Television*. They argue that:

In popular discourse, Teen TV is associated as much with its assumed audience (of teens) as with its content [...] While Teen TV may be associated popularly with a teen audience, and while networks and advertisers certainly desire teen viewers as a market, this does not exclude the possibility that Teen TV programs may also address, court, and successfully draw in both pre-teen and older viewers [...] It is also important to acknowledge that teens and teen themes are represented on television beyond the televisual spaces distinctly named (or overtly branded) teen. For example, programming on subscription networks such as HBO often features teen characters



and teen issues, engaging with ideas of teen culture and teen identity while situating these teen characters within multigenerational family or pseudo-family contexts. (Ross and Stein 2008: 5)

However, their book, as well as this thesis, follows a more narrow focus on the teen television concept. I will return to this shortly. While noir has received much academic attention, teen television has often been ignored. Ross and Stein argue:

[...] the “teen” half of Teen TV signifies a culturally transgressive yet commercial, mainstream group – a luminal position, from the academic perspective, to be sure. The “television” half of the term Teen TV is, of course, medium-specific, and brings with it its own set of associations and expectations. From the condemnation of television as a vast wasteland (a perception that is still surprisingly pervasive) to the popular and academic association of television with female and working-class viewers, TV itself remains marked as a suspect category. While teen film as a cultural category suffers from associations with B movies and mass-pleasing, predictable, cliché-ridden scripts, Teen TV brings with it specific perceptions of TV *overall* as a low brow, deeply commercial medium. (Ross and Stein 2008: 7)

While noir probably has received much academic attention because of its link to film and its special aesthetics, teen television has suffered because of negative associations of both the teen focus and the television medium. Scholars Glyn Davies and Kay Dickinson argue for another challenge represented in academic treatment of teen television: “Another reason we might feel insecure about writing about teens is because, not only are we no longer adolescents ourselves, but we would also hate to fall into that ‘square’ category of trying to ‘understand’ teens, and getting it hopelessly wrong” (Davis and Dickinson 2004: 5). With so little academic material available, teen television remains a vastly unexplored phenomenon. Regarding the teen television perspective of their book and which I adopt in this thesis, they explain:

[...] this collection focuses on the more (nominally, at least) female-oriented teen TV programs – for several reasons. For one, such programs (female-oriented, serial, hour-long melodramas which feature teen characters and are marketed to teen viewers) have shaped (and continue to shape) the predominant perception of Teen TV at this cultural moment [...] Thus, the essays in this collection dwell predominantly on programs that are a) most commonly thought of as Teen TV in contemporary public discourse, and b) not being considered at length in other academic media studies arenas. (Ross and Stein 2008: 17-18).

As *Veronica Mars* is a part of this trend of American teen television (the hour-long teen-centered serial melodrama) and because it is influenced by the same type of shows that

preceded it, I choose to discuss the phenomenon in relation to these shows. When I use the term “teen drama” in this thesis, I am referring to these hour-long serial melodramas (such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *The O.C.*, *Smallville* etc.).

I am examining the teen drama genre conventions more closely within the thesis. The concept I would like to briefly introduce here is the melodrama, which teen dramas actively base their mode of storytelling upon. According to scholar Miranda J. Banks, the melodrama is typically female-oriented, “that is, women are generally the protagonists of the narrative, and virtually always the primary audience for the genre” (Banks 2004: 19). According to Christine Gledhill, melodrama is associated with the domestic sphere, and the woman’s film has had an emphasis on talk rather than action (Gledhill 1987: 21, 35). The teen dramas draw influences from this, both basing its stories within the domestic sphere (although primarily with a teen focus) and using talk over action. Melodrama is a genre focused on emotion and interpersonal relationships.

I am discussing both noir and teen dramas more thoroughly in the thesis itself. The descriptions provided here are meant as an introduction to the field of both noir and teen drama, with emphasis on the central concepts.

## **The Academic Relevance**

*Veronica Mars* is a fascinating television show and I hope to prove its academic value through this thesis. The show explicitly combines noir and teen drama, and from what we have seen above during the introduction of these genres, there are bound to be tensions. On one hand we have noir with its focus on crime and dark society. On the other hand we have the teen drama with its teen-centered exploration of life, friendships and love.

This focus of this thesis is special because it takes into account both genres that *Veronica Mars* is based on. Current academic material has either been focused on the noir (such as the short chapter discussing location by Amanda Ann Klein in *Neptune Noir*), or other aspects of the show such as Caralyn Bolte’s essay about the cultural issues on the show in *Teen Television* or Andrea Braitwaite’s essay about *Veronica Mars* and feminism in the same book. Anja Tucker has also explored some of the noir influences in *Veronica Mars* in her thesis. While these are all interesting pieces of research which I discuss in my thesis, it is my belief

that one cannot discuss and fully understand *Veronica Mars* without taking into account both its noir and teen drama influences. By merely focusing on one of these genres, I believe that valuable information and interpretations are left out. This thesis is not trying to discredit or disprove previous *Veronica Mars* or teen drama research (though there are some concepts I disagree with and discuss within the thesis). My hope is that the already available academic work and this thesis will bring a greater understanding to what ideas and principles *Veronica Mars* is based on.

The story of *Veronica Mars* is a dark, teen-centered noir exploration of crime, a quest for justice in a corrupted, class-torn town. The journey begins!



## Chapter 1

### Mars Noir Aesthetics – Narration and Style



The dark city, wet streets, neon signs, a private investigator trapped in an underworld of lies and crime; these are all elements of noir. Also, do not forget high school halls, campus cafeterias, basketball matches or dances. Wait, what is that last part about? Since the classic noir period of the 40s and the 50s, noir has gone through several changes to match the modern times and technology and at the same time attempting to stay true to the ideals of the classic noirs. While it used to be primarily a film genre, noir has also found its way into television. Noir styles and themes can usually be traced in hybrid shows, such as mystery shows, science fiction, horror or police procedural shows. *Veronica Mars* explicitly combines both classic and neo-noir techniques which create a striking visual style set in typical teen drama locations. *Veronica Mars* also mixes different types of dramaturgical approaches, such as the melodrama, ensemble drama and the crime/mystery narrative which opens up for complicated plots, a wealth of different storylines and a plethora of characters. The discussion in this chapter will be related to the following research questions:

- How does *Veronica Mars* combine crime-story narratives and teen drama narratives?  
What is the effect of this combination with regards to storylines?

- What types of noir-style aesthetic/narration is used in *Veronica Mars*? What effect is attained through the use of these techniques? Are there instances of teen drama aesthetics and how does this work together with noir?

The main literature used for this chapter consists of Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir*, Foster Hirsch's *Detours and Lost Highways*, Steven M. Sanders and Aeon J. Skoble's *The Philosophy of TV Noir*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art*, Art Silverblatt's *Genre Studies in Mass Media*, Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson's *Teen TV*, Tzvetan Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* and Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein's *Teen Television*.

## Teen Heroic Melodrama and Crime Stories

I mentioned some general tendencies of the melodrama in the introduction to this thesis. A more thorough analysis of this related to the teen melodrama will be in chapters two and three, but here I would like to devote a paragraph to discuss the two different narrative structures of the teen melodrama and how *Veronica Mars* relates to this. Though “teen drama” is used as a superior term for the genre, supernaturally-based shows and more realistically-based shows usually use different narrative structures. In shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Roswell*, *Smallville* and *Charmed*, the focus lies within dominating, heroic protagonists with special abilities. In each episode, a problem which usually only the protagonists (by using their special abilities) are able to handle occurs (such as a monster or an otherworldly issue). The protagonists lead double lives which always causes struggle between their regular and heroic identities (such as keeping their abilities safe from public exposure). In addition to this, there is usually a season-long mystery/problem. This is a different structure than the realistically-based teen dramas. In *Dawson's Creek*, *The O.C.*, *One Tree Hill* and *Life As We Know It*, there are no dominating protagonists with special abilities in the sense of the supernatural dramas above. While there certainly are episodic conflicts in these shows, the ensemble focus is more dominant and as such, attention is more easily divided between the different characters. The resolution of the conflicts is not based on the special skills of the protagonists. I propose to use the term “teen heroic melodrama” for those shows that focus on the episodic/seasonal conflicts which only the protagonist can handle. This term is useful because it refers to this special narrative structure of certain teen dramas. The term may be similar to how researcher Miranda J. Banks discusses the teen male melodrama (which I discuss more closely in chapter three). Banks claims that the teen male melodrama includes a

heroic, self-sacrificing (male) character that derives from the women's melodrama combined with the male melodrama's troubled youth (Banks 2004: 18). Interestingly, she uses *Roswell* and *Smallville* as her examples (which are teen heroic melodramas according to my definition). However, with the release of *Life As We Know It*, which was released after Banks' essay was published, I argue that the teen male melodrama is not required to include heroic, self-sacrificing characters and thus these dramas are not exclusively teen heroic melodramas. This leads to another important question: What then characterizes the teen male melodrama? I will return to this in chapter three as that discussion is more closely linked to the thematic content of teen dramas. For this chapter, the focus is on the teen heroic melodrama.

The term "teen heroic melodrama" is also useful because it is not gender-specific, meaning that it includes shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*. *Veronica Mars* is a non-supernatural version of the teen heroic melodrama and as such, there are some elements that are similar to and different from the supernatural dramas. Veronica does have special abilities, but they are not based on supernatural forces. Instead she possesses investigator skills which give her a similar heroic status. Also unlike the supernatural dramas, Veronica's position as an investigator is a job and as such, she does not have to hide her "true" identity. However, her investigator identity and her devotion to justice always clashes with her desire to live a normal life, much in the sense of the characters of the supernatural dramas.

The teen heroic melodramas use a deliberate case/mystery structure in most episodes which usually requires the resolve of the protagonist. In *Veronica Mars*, this is represented through the crime story/mystery. In *The Poetics of Prose*, Tzvetan Todorov argues that the classic detective story consists of two stories and therefore has a dual structure: the first story is the story of the crime, while the second story is the story of the investigation. He also claims that the story of the crime ends before the story of the investigation begins (Todorov 1977: 44). This is a reasonable statement, because there would be no point in having an investigation if there is nothing to investigate. It should be mentioned that Todorov is talking about books in this context. And in those detective stories, according to him, the story of the investigation has a lesser importance than the story of the crime. It serves only as the mediator between the reader and the story of the crime, and that the investigators do not act, they learn in order to expose the crime. In the case of the whodunit story, he states that "We are concerned then in the whodunit with two stories of which one is absent but real, the other present but insignificant" (Todorov 1977: 44-46). What he is referring to is that the story of the crime has

already happened, and that the story of the investigation is the one the reader is experiencing in order to learn of the story of the crime (and thus the investigation story is not the important one).

Todorov contrasts this type of detective fiction with what he calls “the thriller” (which he claims originated in the United States just before and after World War II, a time that is central to the classic noir period). Todorov explains the two forms that are central to the thriller:

The first can be called *curiosity*; it proceeds from effect to cause: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive). The second form is *suspense*, and here the movement is from cause to effect: we are first shown the causes, the initial *données* (gangsters preparing a heist), and our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen, that is, certain effects (corpses, crimes, fights). (Todorov 1977: 47)

Todorov claims that these two forms were inconceivable in the classic whodunit stories because the chief characters were immunized. However, as Todorov argues, “The situation is reversed in the thriller: everything is possible, and the detective risks his health, if not his life” (Todorov 1977: 47).

I believe that television has greatly changed how the crime story is presented. It is still a dual story like Todorov argues. But the importance of the story of the investigation has been considerably increased. For example, modern shows like *CSI*, *Bones* and *The Mentalist*, which in their essence are whodunit stories, focus on the different methods of investigation and therefore create excitement about this process. The focus on the procedure of the investigation has been intensified and basically becomes the primary and most important story. Whether it is through the use of special forensic techniques or mentalist skills like the three shows mentioned, the investigation seems to have taken over the story of the crime’s previous importance in the whodunit stories. These shows also include the suspense elements from the thriller at times, creating situations where the culprits fight back after being exposed and some main characters may get wounded.

In *Veronica Mars*, the story of the investigation is also the main narrative element that creates excitement. In each episode, Veronica investigates a case and in order to do so, she interrogates, plants listening devices, blackmails, threatens and lies. The stories of the crimes on this show are particularly interesting because they reveal much of the noir worldview and



compromised position of the characters. The whodunit stories on *Veronica Mars* often involve characters who do not go to jail after their actions have been exposed (depending on whether the act is actually a crime or a morally unacceptable action). The story of the crimes on *Veronica Mars* usually uncovers the state of the noir society that Neptune represents. Therefore I would argue that the story of the crime often has a significant meaning on *Veronica Mars* (other than simply being a traditional whodunit story from classic detective fiction), though it is the story of the investigation that remains the focus and which causes tension and excitement. The show also uses suspense elements from the thriller in certain mysteries, and Veronica is by no means immunized like in the traditional detective stories. When she solves some of the largest mysteries (primarily the season-long mysteries like the Lilly Kane murder and the school bus explosion), the form changes from the whodunit story to the thriller. Suddenly Veronica is placed in mortal danger from the desperate culprits who wish to silence her. In essence, we know that Veronica can never die because the show is named after her, but she is put into harm's way on several occasions, suffering both mental and physical abuse.

Communications researcher Andrea Braithwaite in *Teen Television* also discusses Todorov's theory of the dual structure and relates it to *Veronica Mars* in another manner:

Todorov's formulation also describes the confluence of hardboiled and teen drama in *Veronica Mars*. In this instance, the series' double architecture is particularly gendered, and its structure is central to understanding the chick dick's cultural work. *Veronica Mars* draws upon the hardboiled tradition's representation of power, knowledge, and authority, a masculine form epitomized and popularized by characters like Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, and iconographically embodied by Humphrey Bogart in film adaptations. At the same time the program invokes the feminine melodrama and popular culture's typical 'representations of girls as figures of social redemption and salvation' [...] Veronica's dual life as both a high school girl and a private investigator problematizes this familiar performance; the imbrications of a hardboiled narrative within a teen drama politicizes the criteria for social redemption by resolutely insisting that violence is constituted by its cultural context (Braithwaite 2008: 134-135).

Braithwaite argues that another dual structure of *Veronica Mars* is found in the show's combination of teen melodrama and the hardboiled investigation. Braithwaite's essay is particularly focused on detecting feminism in *Veronica Mars* and many of these points are found in her interpretation of Todorov. The hardboiled tradition refers to a type of literature which often served the basis for classic noir films, and they are traditionally more closely

related to the thriller than the classic whodunit stories. By linking the predominantly masculine hardboiled narrative to the more feminine melodrama narrative, Braithwaite discusses that the show has a gendered dual structure. Braithwaite does not primarily discuss the narrative functions in *Veronica Mars*, she is more preoccupied with the interesting thematic discussion which I will return to in subsequent chapters. The interesting part here which seems to correlate to my conclusion is the “the imbrications of a hardboiled narrative within a teen drama politicizes the criteria for social redemption by resolutely insisting that violence is constituted by its cultural context” section. This is very closely related to the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. I argued above that the story of the crime often reveals several important factors related to the Neptune society and Braithwaite seems to have reached the same conclusion. The hardboiled investigation narrative allows the teen drama to continually uncover social issues (which are then often revealed through the story of the crime) which are very important in this show, and thus *Veronica Mars* has a dual structure between the mystery narrative and the teen drama. The story of the investigation dominates the narrative and even in this process, social issues are explored. Chapter two will discuss these issues in greater detail.

### **The Noir Storytelling in *Veronica Mars***

The narration in *Veronica Mars* appears to be quite complex, mixing melodrama/ensemble drama with a crime-story/mystery narrative, many parallel storylines with characters who are often not involved with the main mystery storylines and Veronica being both a high-school student and a private investigator, usually being unable to separate the two identities. What about the noir narratives? Are they present? The first part of this discussion will be devoted into explaining the different storytelling techniques in *Veronica Mars*, and the second part will be used to analyze the visual styles.

Foster Hirsch speaks of narratives which are commonly used in noir, and which can be related to the story of the crime and the story of the investigation in *Veronica Mars*. He says that:

Classic noir yielded a few basic, recurrent narrative patterns: the private eye’s investigation of a missing person or murder; the bourgeois male seduced into crime by a femme fatale; a bourgeois home or safe place invaded by criminals; a caper that misfires; a bystander sucked into a crime scene merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time (Hirsch 1999: 145)

The main type of noir narrative pattern used in *Veronica Mars* is the private investigation. Though several of the other narratives Hirsch mentions appear in some form as well, the investigation is dominant in all episodes. Hirsch calls this type of narrative “the quest motif” (Hirsch 1999: 146). He also says that “The private-eye investigation [...] may be the narrative mold that most readily connotes ‘noir’ in the popular mind”, but as a narrative, he feels that “In the classic period, despite their reputations and their familiar iconography, the private-eye stories were rarely the most enticing of noir’s offerings”. (Hirsch 1999: 145) However, he argues that in the neo-noir era (which begins from around 1960 and counting according to him):

The private-eye investigation begins with some straight forward renderings and then undergoes a number of creative mutations. The quest motif has, in fact, proven to be the most elastic of noir’s narrative pedigrees, the one most receptive to postmodern inscriptions in tone, plotting, and visual design. (Hirsch 1999: 146)

*Veronica Mars* is a good example related to his comment that neo-noir has expanded on the private-eye quest stories. *Veronica Mars* is both a classic noir and neo-noir private-eye story. As a television show, it also allows Veronica to tackle many cases with different contents. The show draws much from the classic noirs through its hardboiled narrative and the private investigator solving a mystery, and its neo-noir rendering (or “creative mutation” as Hirsch puts it) is the combination of the hardboiled male detective and a teenage girl.

When it comes to Todorov’s story of the crime, I would like to argue that Hirsch’s term “melodramas of mischance” narratives is appropriate for *Veronica Mars*. He claims that:

Noir’s narratives of mischance, in which bourgeois characters are sucked into a criminal undertow, follow two basic formats. In the first, passersby crash into crime scenes through mere happenstance, and the film therefore posit a world in which misfortune can overtake anyone for no reason at all. In the second, and much more varied narrative group, noir assaults characters who seem either to invite or deserve it. Both kinds of stories force characters to confront a slippery, unstable universe pitted with traps. (Hirsch 1999: 211)

Hirsch is generally talking about protagonists here, but I would like to apply this to the many characters on *Veronica Mars* who are the perpetrators behind the crimes/mysteries. A majority of the villains are teenagers/young adults (but not exclusively, there are also several examples of adults as well) who end up in morally compromising situations that force them to

hurt others, or they end up in situations which they cannot get out of alone. One of many examples of this is found in 2x16 “The Rapes of Graff” where the character Troy is accused of rape simply because he was the last one seen with the victim. Only with Veronica’s help is he able to escape his fate. Another more major example is Aaron Echolls who murders Lilly Kane in a rage in order to prevent her from exposing their love affair. Noir’s mischance narratives, as Hirsch describes them, is a major part of *Veronica Mars*, and more in-depth discussions of this will be found in the subsequent chapters as well.

As for the story of the investigation, Veronica is “assaulted by noir” because she willingly invites it. Her constant involvement with afflicted characters and investigation forces her to continually venture into Neptune’s noir universe, where it is repeatedly revealed that misfortune does overtake anyone for no reason at all, like Hirsch puts it. Chapter two has a more thorough thematic discussion of the noir universe in *Veronica Mars*.

An interesting topic related to *Veronica Mars*’ mystery narratives and teen dramas in general is that the mysteries allow the show to repeatedly explore darker themes and plots. English professor Caralyn Bolte argues in *Teen Television* that “[*Veronica Mars*] is concerned, throughout its first season, with accurately and realistically confronting issues that are confined to ‘very special episode’ status on other shows” (Bolte 2008: 108). The issues Bolte is speaking about are the kind of topics that are continually raised in the mysteries: theft, violence, rape, murder and so on. When these issues appear in other teen shows (at least those that are supposed to present a realistic world, as opposed to the more supernatural/horror-based shows), they often represent a major issue for the characters and a break from their otherwise “normal” teen lives. That is not to say that these issues are handled more poorly or less seriously on *Veronica Mars*. But a mystery narrative on an episodic basis calls for a multitude of these “very special episode” issues. Bolte thinks that “[...] [*Veronica Mars*] will never have a ‘very special episode’, because its entire philosophy of storytelling focuses on interrogating, carefully and skillfully, the violence, stereotypes, and divisions that infect Neptune society and, by extension, ours as well” (Bolte 2008: 108).

## **A Link to the Past and the Mysterious Present**

Film professor Andrew Spicer explains that old film noirs showed a “remarkable pattern of narrative experimentation” and that this experimentation was evident in the following

techniques: “extensive use of voice-over/flashback, or multiple narration which interrupts, interprets or rearranges the time frame; the use of dream sequences and subjective camerawork that frequently attempt to render psychological disturbance [...]” (Spicer 2002: 75). Today, these techniques are more widespread and can be found in many genres. They also appear in *Veronica Mars* as a part of the show’s noir elements.

### **Flashbacks – Memories of Lost Times**

According to Bordwell and Thompson, “a flashback is simply a portion of a story that the plot presents out of chronological order”. This is a commonly used technique in both films and television and it is commonly used in the crime/mystery genre. Bordwell and Thompson discuss detective films in relation to flashbacks and the reordering of story events, saying that “A detective film not only manipulates story causality by holding back key events, but the film also juggles story order. The plot presents events surrounding the crime only when the detective reveals them at the climax” (Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 74-75). In *Veronica Mars*, flashbacks are used for two purposes: either to detail events about the characters’ past or to show events/solutions to the mysteries. Regarding the story causality that Bordwell and Thompson mention, in *Veronica Mars* the who and the why are usually not revealed to the viewer until Veronica solves a mystery and confronts the person in question or provides an explanation to the situation. In this sense, *Veronica Mars* is a traditional mystery show. The revelation of a crime can lead to a flashback where the story of what really happened is shown, though an explanation of this through dialog is mostly used.

Especially throughout the first season of *Veronica Mars*, flashbacks are used extensively to explore the past of the characters. Bordwell and Thompson say that “One common pattern for reordering story events is an alternation of past and present in the plot” (Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 75). The first episode spends much time using flashbacks to make sense of the story up to that point. The flashbacks do not appear randomly, instead they are triggered by certain dialog, events or characters appearing. For example in 1x04 “The Wrath of Con”, the emergence of the homecoming dance triggers flashbacks about last year’s dance in Veronica’s mind. Flashbacks are also not presented in a chronological order, meaning that the appearance of a flashback where Veronica finds Lilly murdered in 1x01 “Pilot” does not mean that there are no more flashbacks of Lilly in subsequent episodes. The flashbacks can jump to detail events at any time.

The flashbacks in *Veronica Mars* can never reveal information that Veronica does not know about. For example, when she tries to recollect the night she was raped in 1x01 “Pilot”, we are only shown the scenes leading up to where she passes out and the scene cuts to where she wakes up the next morning. She is suddenly located in a bed without her underwear, illustrating that something has happened during the blackout. When she finally receives an explanation of what really happened, the missing pieces in the flashbacks are shown. The same restriction on information also applies when she initiates flashbacks she is not featured in. When she details the events of the summer in 2x01 “Normal Is the Watchword”, another flashback-heavy episode, she narrates about an event involving Logan and the biker gang. The viewers are shown the flashback and the flashback is possible because Veronica has knowledge about the event even though she was not present. However, since Logan does not know what happened during the fight (he blacks out and wakes up with a dead biker next to him), Veronica does not know either and the flashback cannot show what really happened. Again, this works to enhance the mystery.

### **Dream States – Hallucinatory Investigations**

Dream states have also been a part of noir’s mixing of narrative elements. According to Spicer, noir’s use of dreams expresses psychological disturbance and is an attempt to objectify internal states (Spicer 2002: 80-81). I consider this to be a valid point, because this is what the meaning of dream states is in most narratives. Dreams often symbolize fear, desire and mystery. In *Veronica Mars*, dreams are often used in relation to the mysteries, such as Veronica trying to figure out clues. Her murdered best friend Lilly often appears in dreams throughout the first season as Veronica is trying to process the murder case internally in her mind. While the flashbacks are events of the past, dreams take place in the present. But like the flashbacks, the dreams cannot reveal what the character does not know. When Veronica asks Lilly about who really murdered her in a dream in 1x06 “Return of the Kane”, Lilly explains that she wishes she could tell her, but she cannot. Because Veronica has no knowledge of this, the dream cannot reveal the truth. The dreams are processing the characters’ thoughts. In 2x18 “I Am God”, the dream sequences are used extensively as Veronica is “haunted” by dreams as she is trying to make sense of the school bus explosion.

## The Snarky Voice of Reason and Investigation

As a noir trademark, the voiceover can accompany the dark mood and enhance its representation. According to Spicer, the inclusion of voiceover in classic noirs “was an attempt to replicate the first person narration of the pulp fiction sources from which many noirs were adapted” (Spicer 2002: 75). *Veronica Mars* creator Rob Thomas has expressed that “What attracted me originally was the whole idea of noir, and having the very Raymond Chandler-esque narration weaving through it” (Vaughn 2006: 41). What is this type of narration? This refers most likely to the cynical tone in Chandler’s character Philip Marlowe, a hardboiled/noir private investigator that Veronica is often compared to in television reviews and articles (a closer examination of this and Veronica’s character is found in chapter four). Marlowe, in Spicer’s terms, is “an outsider in the corrupted city, who, if cynical, clings to some ideal of justice and retains a hope that things can be made better even as he realizes that such hope is illusory” (Spicer 2002: 87). The comparison of Veronica and Marlowe seems to hint that the show creators have been successful in adopting the spirit of the hardboiled voiceover. Let us discuss a few examples:

Veronica: [voiceover] I’m never getting married. You want an absolute? A sure thing? Well, there it is. Veronica Mars, spinster...old maid. Carve it in stone. I mean, come on. What’s the point? Sure, there’s that initial primal drive... hormonal surge... whatever you want to call it. Ride it out. Better yet, ignore it... Sooner or later, the people you love betray you. And here’s where it ends up – fat men, cocktail waitresses, cheap motels on the wrong side of town. And a soon-to-be ex-spouse wanting a bigger piece of the settlement pie. That’s where I come in. Twenty-two dollars an hour is cheap compared to the long-term fiduciary security sordid photography can secure for you, your offspring... ..your next lover. But do us a favor. If it’s you in there. Dispense with the cuddling. This motel tryst? It is what it is. Make it quick. That person sitting in a car across the street might have a Calculus exam in five... make that four... hours, and she can’t leave until she gets the money shot. (1x01 “Pilot”)

This lengthy voiceover piece is found in the opening scenes of the show, when Veronica is sitting outside the Camelot Motel (a scene I discussed above). She reveals her jaded perception of love and relationships, and her mistrusting attitude. This paragraph foreshadows many of the events to come in the first episode, such as how her mother abandoned them and how she lost all her friends and her social status. She also reveals her work as a private investigator and identifies herself as a high school student. The tone of the content in this voiceover sets the mood for the show.

Veronica: [voiceover] Quite a reputation I've got, huh. You wanna know how I lost my virginity? So do I. (1x01 "Pilot")

This is perhaps one of the most quoted voiceovers from *Veronica Mars* in academic writing, due to its strong implications of sexual victimization which is not usual for teen dramas. After she manages to get rid of the biker gang and their leader Weevil after he questions her reputation, she serves this surprising comment (the UPN network initially wanted the rape storyline excluded from the show (Thomas 2006: 6)) and triggers a flashback to the party where she was drugged and raped.

Veronica: [voiceover] Enough already with this mellow "Incense and Peppermints" vibe. Let's break out the mushrooms and dance naked, strap on the goatskull headgear, sacrifice a few infants. Come on people, you're cultists. Start acting like it (1x09 "Drinking the Kool-Aid")

At first, the comment in this voiceover might seem comic. But it also reveals much about her cynical attitude than what is first believed. In this episode, she is investigating a cult as a part of an episodic mystery. She expects them to be involved in some criminal scheme (as they have recruited a wealthy classmate of Veronica who does not fit the cult characteristic). During her investigation, the cult seems to be overly friendly and having seen the ugliest side of Neptune, Veronica refuses to acknowledge that there is nothing criminal going on. Her voiceover shows her impatience and hope that she soon will have the material she needs for her case.

Veronica: [voiceover] What was I thinking? Christmas in Neptune is, was and always will be, about the trappings: the lights and the tinsel they use to cover up the sordidness, the corruption. No, Veronica, there is no Santa Claus. (1x10 "An Echolls Family Christmas")

Veronica makes this comment after Aaron Echolls is stabbed and critically wounded at his own grand Christmas party. After solving a mystery for a bunch of wealthy classmates and trying to figure out why her mother was run out of town, Veronica realizes that not even Christmas is sacred. Neptune can put up as many Christmas lights and decorations as it wants, but the corruption is always lying underneath the glitter.



Veronica: [voiceover] I know, I'm shameless. But every time I start to feel guilty I remind myself that Lilly would be thinking about colleges right now or what new CD played at maximum volume would most annoy her mother. And I remember my mission. (1x11 "Silence of the Lamb").

Here Veronica is acknowledging her unethical investigation methods and that she feels guilty about taking advantage of certain people in her life. In this case, this refers to Officer Leo D'Amato who she develops an interest in, but he also has access to the evidence room at the sheriff's station and she needs to get in without his knowledge. She orchestrates a scene which allows her to do so. She justifies this course of action by reminding herself what her friend would be doing at that particular moment if she were alive. In this case, Veronica follows a "the ends justify the means" approach which becomes a common pattern in her investigations.

The voiceovers are used extensively on this show. The ones I have chosen here are examples that relate to the cynical noir tone. Many of the voiceovers carry this particular cynicism and pessimism. I believe that allowing a teenage girl to possess this type of attitude through voiceovers serves to emphasize the noir of the show further. However, the contents of her voiceovers are probably not the same as in the voiceovers of a 40 year old disillusioned male private investigator from classic noir. The cynical tone can be argued to be the same though. Author Evelyn Vaughn comments on Veronica's voiceovers, stating that: "She certainly mixes with the common and even criminal element, peppering her voiceovers with slang references to prostitutes, drugs, adultery, and combinations thereof: 'Apparently I've pleased the swim team while jacked up on goofballs' ('Like a Virgin' 1-8)". Vaughn explains that the show's creator Rob Thomas has stated that he wants the voiceovers focused on "snarky commentary", and that he does not want Veronica to share much of her inner struggle with the audience. Vaughn argues for the opposite, stating that through her voiceovers, she is bringing on the vulnerability (Vaughn 2006: 43). What Veronica does not reveal to other characters is stated in voiceovers, and thus they can be argued to reflect her vulnerable sides (which she then keeps to herself).

Like the flashbacks and dreams, voiceovers can be used for both revealing information about characters and investigation (and I believe I have chosen examples which cover both these aspects). The voiceovers allow the viewer to get a deeper insight into Veronica's mind as she comments on other characters, events or the society. While any character can trigger the

appearance of flashbacks or dreams, only Veronica uses the voiceover narration. The voiceovers are extra-diegetic. Diegetic refers to events taking place in the diegesis, the story world (Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 366). The story world in this case is Neptune (and the other locations we see). Veronica's voiceovers are extra-diegetic because we never actually see her in a situation where she might be telling her story to someone, but at the same time they do belong to the story world. In fact, it is unclear who the voiceovers are aimed at. Sometimes there is a "you" reference in them, but it might be a generic reference. If we look at the voiceover examples I have provided here, we can see that she usually speaks in the present tense meaning that the comments in the voiceovers follow the story progression. A possibility is that she could be addressing her dead best friend, but this is quickly proven wrong because she addresses Lilly in the third person. There is no impression of a diary-like function in the voiceovers. It seems that she is simply trying to make sense of events to herself, like in the line above: "What was I thinking?"

Her voiceovers also exist outside the temporal order of the show. As I stated in an example above, after the opening sequence of the pilot, the action suddenly takes place a couple of days prior to the events in the opening. Veronica's voiceover is aware of this and even says that we have to "rewind to yesterday" in order to understand how the events in the opening sequence took place. Therefore it is very likely that she is telling the story to us, though we never see her in that position. Perhaps she acts as the viewers' guide through the story. Though her voiceovers seem to operate outside the show's temporal order, she cannot reveal specific information about events (such as solutions to mysteries before she reveals them during the story) that have not yet happened. The relationship between voiceover, diegesis and the temporal order is complicated. Maybe this is a deliberate way to present a break in the chronology of the story just like the flashbacks and dreams, and present Veronica as a character that ultimately will end up resolving the conflicts she speaks about in the voiceovers.

### **The Importance of Music in *Veronica Mars***

Interestingly, music does not seem to be a particularly important element in film noir literature. Hirsch does mention that neo-noir uses "multilayered soundtracks" on the back of his book, but this only hints that there is no real unity to what type of music connotes noir (Hirsch 1999). There is perhaps a reason why noir is not a musically dependant genre. In his

book *Filmmusikk (Film Music)*, professor Peter Larsen discusses the use of music in the classic noir *The Big Sleep*. He states the following:

That there is no music during the initial conversations in *The Big Sleep* is just one of several marks of the central importance of the dialog in this movie, as well as in the movies of the period generally. [...] The dialog is more important than the music. And music is generally more important than all other sounds. [...] As most of the other movies of the period, *The Big Sleep* is not a sound film, but a talking film accompanied by music and with very discrete sound effects. Non-musical sounds are only in focus when they have decisively narrative functions, such as the sound from shoot-outs and such (Larsen 2005: 109-110, my translation).

Judging from what Larsen argues about the movie and the movie period in general, noir seems to be a genre focused on dialog and action, and that the music is of lesser importance. That much noir literature avoids any in-depth discussion of music is perhaps another testament to this claim. Larsen speaks about movies from the 40s and 50s above, but noir still seems to be focused on action and dialog. That is not to say that music cannot be important in noir, but there seems to be no general idea of what type of music is considered noir. Perhaps the commonly used musical pieces in noir are instrumental suspense scores.

However, the use of music in teen shows is an established trope, and this especially applies to the use of popular music. Film scholar Kay Dickinson argues about the significance of popular music and teens: “Without popular music, the representation and self-definition of the category ‘teenager’ [...] would be almost unrecognizable”. Concerning the use of popular music in teen dramas, she states that: “[...] the implications of the music arrive in a coherent, pre-formed shape [...] Unlike, say, the specially composed score, the songs we hear on teen TV shows have usually held a prior place in the world and have already established a set of definitions for themselves” (Dickinson 2004: 100). She continues:

Consequently, such music *has* to be dealt with in reference to its extra-textual life; it may even be of more importance to teens than the shows which have chosen to adopt it. A television drama plays upon these strengths, using them to drive its own momentum, but the power-exchange is two-way. Both TV and music offer each other contexts through which we can place ourselves: one may inform us of something the other cannot sufficiently articulate, or might add a dynamic contrapuntal flourish by saying something completely in opposition to the other’s train of thought (Dickinson 2004: 100).

I think it is important to state that it is not my intention to track down and analyze the meaning of each popular music track that appears on *Veronica Mars*, this task would require too much time and space and falls outside the scope of the thesis. I will however select a few examples I find interesting in relation to how *Veronica Mars* establishes itself as teen television, and how music is used on the show. Music can be a powerful narration tool. Dickinson speaks a lot about how music that appears in teen dramas often are based on industrial decisions, like television companies wanting to promote artists from their own record labels and have their tracks appear on the shows. I will not be discussing the occurrence of this in *Veronica Mars*. Though it can be discussed in that manner, it holds no relevance here.

Dickinson comments on the uses of diegetic music (music which occurs from within the story world) in teen dramas: “In Episode 17 of *My So-Called Life*, a song is used not only to describe or evoke teenage tastes, but also (as it so often does in such drama series) to suggest that adolescents *choose* to play music in order to enhance or explain their moods” (Dickinson 2004: 101). In *Veronica Mars*, there is an example in 1x07 “The Girl Next Door” where Veronica and her neighbor are talking. Veronica mentions hearing her play a Snow Patrol CD. Snow Patrol’s music is very moody and often mellow, emphasizing the need of comfort that Veronica’s neighbor needs in the episode. In episode 1x22 “Leave It to Beaver”, a flashback shows Lilly and Veronica happily dancing to Spice Girls’ “Wannabe”, an upbeat, girly pop song. In the flashback, the girls are seemingly having the time of their life. The music emphasizes the fatalistic aura of the flashback (a concept which I discuss below), as the viewer knows that the events that follow the flashback are disastrous and there will never be a return to that carefree time. Near the end of the same episode, Veronica has solved Lilly’s murder and is having a dream in which she says good-bye to her friend. As they float in the pool, a song called “Lily Dreams On” is played with the opening lines “Lily I hope you picture me in your dreams”.

The music in teen dramas and *Veronica Mars* often seems to be used as leitmotifs. A leitmotif is described by Larsen as “a theme or another coherent musical idea that is used in a musically dramatic work “to represent or symbolize a person, a thing, place, idea, mental state, supernatural force” [...]” (Larsen 2005: 64). As we see from the examples above, the music is used as leitmotifs. The Spice Girls song reflects innocence and fun, and the song in

Veronica's dream about Lilly represents closure as well as the lyrics being appropriate for the situation.

Music in *Veronica Mars*, like any other television show, is both diegetic and nondiegetic. In most cases the music is nondiegetic, a piece of music is added that fits the mood of the scene, a general leitmotif. I mention the use of Daft Punk's "One More Time" in the dream with gay student Peter below. However, perhaps the most striking use of music on *Veronica Mars* which gives popular music another function is found in 3x09 "Spit and Eggs". The motif is the electronica song "Right Here, Right Now" by Fatboy Slim. The song is played from a radio at a fraternity party at Hearst College. At the same time, Mercer Hayes arrives in a dorm room to rape his unconscious victim. He turns on the same radio channel and hears the same song as the partygoers. However, Veronica attacks him. He turns up the music, creating a scene of confusion as they battle. Veronica escapes the room and the song is suddenly nondiegetic, as if it is following her as she desperately makes her escape filmed in slow-motion. The words of the song, "right here, right now", enhance the direness of the situation Veronica is in. At the same time we are shown scenes of people dancing and having a good time at the party, listening to the same song. The song becomes a symbol of terror, paranoia and partying and its use here creates a noir scene by contrasting the two situations.

Like Dickinson argues above, music in television can also be used to convey moods that do not correspond with the images/situation. In the final scenes of 3x20 "The Bitch Is Back", Veronica votes for her father in the sheriff election (though he most likely loses the race due to actions by Veronica). The song "It Never Rains in Southern California" plays as Veronica heads out into the rain after voting. The music becomes an ironic leitmotif.

The show's theme song should also be mentioned. The Dandy Warhols' "We Used To Be Friends" is an upbeat pop/rock song and the lyrics of the song accompanies many of the show's themes. Seasons one and two use the original upbeat version of the song, while the third season features a mellower remix as the opening credits are redesigned to look more noir.

The inclusion of popular music in *Veronica Mars* creates a distinct teen sound and feeling, but the music is often present to emphasize different moods. There does not seem to be any outstanding uses of sound on the show. Like in noir, sound seems to only be important when

they have a special narrative function, like in fight scenes and so on. For example, in 2x01 “Normal Is the Watchword”, Veronica (in a voiceover) explains that after Logan is freed from murder charges, the biker gang is out to get him. The show switches to a flashback where she and Logan are in his car making out. Because of the way Veronica introduced the flashback, the viewers know that something bad will happen. We hear the sound of a motorcycle slowly approaching while they are engaged in their activities. Suddenly the biker rampages the car and drives off into the distance. There are instances of this type of sound usage throughout the whole show, but generally there is no extraordinary use of sound.

## Popular Culture in the Teen Mind

Another element in which *Veronica Mars* recognizes itself as a teen drama is through the use of pop-culture references in the dialog. Film and media studies lecturer Valerie Wee discusses this concept:

The WB recognized the 1990s teen audience’s heightened media and cultural literacy; theirs was a pop-culture awareness built upon an obsession with popular entertainment in its myriad forms. As a result, many of the WB shows consistently utilized intertextual pop-culture references in an attempt to harness this target audience’s interests [...] I am not suggesting that shows on other more adult-oriented networks were devoid of any such references; however, they did not approach the intensity and extreme degree that marked the WB shows [...] Interestingly, the intertextual references found in the WB’s teen shows were not only restricted to current pop cultural events or primarily teen-oriented trends [...] These references, therefore, represented the network’s attempt to acknowledge and engage with its media-savvy, target teen audience while simultaneously interpolating them into a more mainstream adult culture (Wee 2008: 52-54)

The intertextual references in the dialog in *Veronica Mars* range everywhere from references to movies, literature, music and consumer products. Here are a couple of examples of this:

Veronica: Cameras are on the roof, so if this guy followed you here, we should be able to spot him.

Gia: Wow, how *Mission Impossible*! I feel like at any moment, Tom Cruise is going to dangle from the ceiling on cables.

Veronica: Great. Now I won't be able to sleep. I hope he doesn't try to marry me.  
(2x20 “Look Who’s Stalking”)

Veronica: Do you know how long I've wanted to go to Stanford?  
Wallace: Since middle school.  
Veronica: Elementary, my dear Wallace. Do you have any idea how long I've waited to say that?  
(2x21 "Happy Go Lucky")

Veronica: What?  
Mac: Miss Mars uses Venus razor.  
Veronica: Because if she doesn't, her legs look like Pluto's.  
Mac: And she's down-to-earth to boot.  
Veronica: I think I read in *Teen People* that a clean leg shave will make that special boy sit up and take notice.  
Mac: I read in *FHM* that boys like bare breasts.  
Veronica: Interesting. I did not know that. Bare breasts, you say? Hmm.  
(3x19 "Weevils Wobble But They Don't Go Down")

There are several examples of these references throughout the show, but what these particular examples display is the characters' constant awareness of popular culture and how these references are incorporated into the dialog, giving the show a distinct teen sensitivity. These popular culture references are not limited to the show's dialog. Episode titles are also often wordplays on pop-culture references, such as "Silence of the Lamb", "Look Who's Stalking", "Ain't No Magic Mountain High Enough", "The Rapes of Graff" and "Weapons of Class Destruction".

In addition to being a show with a complex narrative pattern, *Veronica Mars* also explicitly uses several of noir's hallmark visual stylistic traits. This creates a further connection between noir and *Veronica Mars* and the following discussion will be focused on these elements.

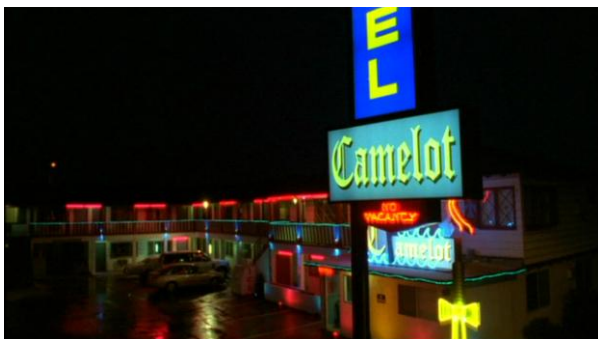
### **Neptune Noir City: Neon, Darkness and Sunshine**

The camera comes down across the colorful neon signs of the gaudy Camelot Motel. A cynical voiceover speaks about infidelity and the redundancy of marriage. It is the middle of the night and the street is lonely, with the exception of a car parked to the side of the road. Inside, a teenage girl patiently awaits with her thermos full of coffee, her camera and her calculus book. After the long wait, the opportunity finally comes! She pulls out her camera and quickly snaps a few photographs, hoping that she got what she came for. Then suddenly a gang of bikers appear. "Well, this can't be good," the girl states. "Car trouble, miss?" the leader of the biker gang asks, with a hint in his voice that he has no intention of helping her. The opening credits play. After the scene, we are suddenly in the middle of a high-school in

broad daylight. The girl explains that in order for us to understand what was going on at the motel, we have to “rewind to yesterday”. And so it all begins...

This is the opening scene of the first episode of *Veronica Mars*, 1x01 “Pilot”, setting the mood for the things to come throughout the show’s three seasons. The show wastes no time in establishing its distinct noir style. Noir is known for using many visual techniques, often meant to express psychological states in characters or create disruptions in the narrative by actively using flashbacks and dreams. Chiaroscuro (low-key lighting), close-up shots and tilted/strange camera angles have also been present throughout noirs. Therefore, it is possible to say that noir is visually a psychological genre (like Spicer argued above, noir’s experimentation with techniques was trying to render psychological disturbance), and the techniques serve to emphasize noir’s focus on the dark human nature. This gives the show a distinct visual style that is not found in other teen dramas. This section will be devoted to the discussion of these visual techniques and what effect they have.

Perhaps the most striking visual style that most people would relate to noir is the dark city and its alluring neon lights. As I mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, Andrew Spicer argues that in classic film noir, the iconography “consists of images of the dark, night-time city, its streets damp with rain which reflects the flashing neon signs. Its sleazy milieu of claustrophobic alleyways and deserted docklands alternates with gaudy nightclubs and swank apartments (Spicer 2002: 4). This noir city representation has been retained in television noir as well (Sanders 2008: 11). *Veronica Mars* invokes much of this iconography immediately during the first episode.

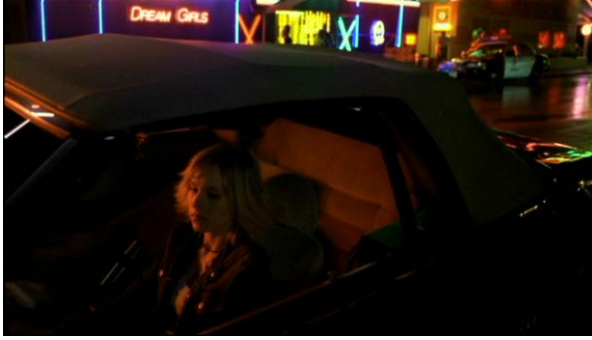


(1) The Camelot Motel (1x01 “Pilot”)



(2) View from atop the Camelot Motel  
(1x01 “Pilot”)





(3) “The Seventh Veil” strip club  
(1x01 “Pilot”)



(4) Veronica is attacked on the roof of the  
Neptune Grand (2x22 “Not Pictured”)

In image 1 we see the Camelot Motel. The sky is strikingly pitch-black with only a faint light in the distance. The motel has gaudy multi-colored lights and the name “Camelot” may invoke ideas of adventure and romance. And in a sense, this is what the motel represents. The Camelot Motel is a place for sordid sexual affairs in Neptune. The “No Vacancy” sign seems to point to the fact that this is a popular activity in town. The lack of cars in the parking lot despite no vacancy enhances that these affairs are supposed to be kept secret and people will not reveal that they are there. In image 2 we see the silent street passing by the motel. Veronica’s car is parked on the right side. The neon lights are reflected in the damp streets and the palm trees on the other side of the road establish the show’s west-coast location. We see another shady location in image 3. This is the local strip club, “The Seventh Veil”. It retains the same gaudy look as the Camelot Motel, though it deploys its own “strip club” look with the text “Dream Girls” in neon and the two neon Xs at each side of the entrance. Here Veronica is collecting video evidence of the police taking oral sex bribes from the strippers so that the club can keep catering to minors and other clientele without ID cards. This points to another noir feature in *Veronica Mars*, the corrupted and incapacitated law enforcement system in Neptune. This is a major plot point throughout the entire show and will be discussed in chapter two. In image 4, the ominous blue neon light atop the Neptune Grand Hotel captures the noir feeling in a very tense situation where Veronica is being attacked by mass murderer Cassidy Casablancas.

In addition to adopting a traditional noir night aesthetic, *Veronica Mars* also has plenty of scenes that take place during daytime. Neptune is in California, which would mean that daytime usually equals sun and warmth. Does this manage to capture a noir atmosphere? Sanders argues that there is a certain noir sensibility in television he calls “sunshine noir”. He

explains that this term refer to crime dramas “that combines a noir sensibility with South Florida locales and high-toned production values” (Sanders 2008: 12, 27). He uses *Miami Vice* as an example of this, saying that “The series showcased Miami as the paradigmatic sunshine noir city, evoking images of tieless men in guayaberas and pastel art deco hotels on Ocean Drive” and “But Miami is also a place where criminal activity is carried out on a massive scale, with the accompanying danger and fear that effectively contrast with the beautiful location photography” (Sanders 2008: 12). Spicer argues that the use of light/sunshine can enhance the noir themes. In his account of Roman Polanski’s film *Chinatown*, he says that “[The images’] surface beauty, where almost every scene is bathed in warm Californian sunlight, only serves to emphasize the rottenness that lies beneath” (Spicer 2002: 139). Film professor Amanda Ann Klein also has thoughts on the use of light in her essay in *Neptune Noir*. She says:

Even the name – film noir – implies that the setting will be “black”, both literally and metaphorically. However, these iconic images allow us to forget that in many films noir, it is not the dark, rain-soaked city, but the sunny, California suburb, with its manicured lawns, idyllic homes, and crystal blue swimming pools, that serve as the backdrop for the film’s twisted plots (Klein 2006: 84)

She relates much of this representation of light in old film noirs to the change that occurred in postwar America, where she states that “the seeming homogenization of American society was almost more frightening than the ‘big city’ and the affluent, not the destitute, generated distrust in the popular imagination, making suburban living a subject ripe for exploitation in 1940s and the 1950s” (Klein 2006: 85). This relates to the postwar decentralization of America, where suburbs became the new symbol of the American dream. In noir then, sunlight becomes another tool to emphasize dark themes, though perhaps in a more absurd way. The theme of suburban living has continued into modern films and television. However, the homogenization of American society is probably more or less outdated as a theme in noir today. For example, *Veronica Mars* focuses on the opposite, namely the inequalities in society. This is a discussion that will continue in chapter two.

Sunshine and sunny locales found their way into both film noir and television noir. *Veronica Mars* has interesting approaches to the use of daylight. I would like to discuss these approaches in the images below:



(5) The Echolls mansion  
(1x06 “Return of the Kane”)



(6) Veronica goes undercover to expose a fraud (1x04 “The Wrath of Con”)



(7) Neptune High cafeteria (1x01 “Pilot”)



(8) Veronica receives disturbing news  
(1x08 “Like a Virgin”)

In image 5, we are introduced to the prestigious mansion in a gated community where the beloved movie star Aaron Echolls and his family lives. It is located in the wealthy part of Neptune, the 90909 zip code area. The weather is sunny and the lawn is well-tended. Usually, tourists and fans of Aaron gather at the gate in hopes of seeing him and take pictures of his seemingly perfect life. However, this idyllic scene only covers up the horrible truth which we learn throughout the course of the first season: Aaron is unfaithful to his wife, eventually driving her to commit suicide and is physically abusing his son Logan. He is also revealed to be a murderer. Image 6 also displays a warm and sunny scene and the ocean in the background. Unlike image 5, the events that unfold here are not as sinister. Veronica dresses up and goes undercover as “Amber” in order to expose a money-fraud scheme administered by some college students. She puts on a cheery, overly-trusting and dim-witted act and meets her equally nice perpetrator. The warm sunlight accompanies their happy and carefree conversation as Veronica attempts to uncover the truth. The irony here, perhaps, is that the man she is meeting is a victim himself and believes he is a part of a television show. Veronica is led further into the noir heart of Neptune.

The outdoor scenes depicted in images 7 and 8 represents the general daytime aesthetic of *Veronica Mars* more closely. Neptune High in image 7 is a site for many of the show's conflicts. The sky is cloudy and there is no warm sunlight. This is where Veronica's status as a social pariah is confirmed each day. In image 8, Veronica has received disturbing news after visiting death-row prisoner Abel Koontz. She arrives in hopes of figuring out who really killed her best friend, but instead she is assaulted with information that might alter her life completely. The sunlight is bleak and cold as she walks across the parking lot to her car. In fact, many of the outdoor scenes look like this. Aesthetically, Neptune certainly does not always look like the sunny and beautiful Miami in television shows with noir themes like *Miami Vice* or *CSI: Miami*. In Neptune, the sky is often cloudy and gloomy or the light is toned down. I would argue that this gives *Veronica Mars* a different "sunshine noir" aesthetic and that it possibly represents the sad state of affairs in the community in Neptune. California is generally considered a warm and sunny state, but in Neptune, the noir is often just as present during daytime as it is at night.

## **Chiaroscuro and Colors of the Mind**

Noir has been a devout follower of the chiaroscuro effect – low-key lighting. Bordwell and Thompson explains this concept as "Low-key illumination creates stronger contrasts and sharper, darker shadows. Often the lighting is hard, and fill light is lessened or eliminated all together. The effect is of *chiaroscuro*, or extremely dark and light regions within the image" (Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 196). They also argue that:

Low-key lighting has usually been applied to somber or mysterious scenes. It was common in horror films of the 1930s and films noirs ("dark films") of the 1940s and 1950s. The low-key approach was revived in the 1980s in such films as *Blade Runner* and *Rumble Fish* and continued in the 1990s in films noirs like *Se7en* and *The Usual Suspects* (Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 196).

The chiaroscuro effect, from what I interpret, is meant to express uncertainty or mystery. It seems to be a technique that is preserved in neo-noirs, and *Veronica Mars* uses this in several scenes:



(9) The PCH biker gang at school  
(1x10 “An Echolls Family Christmas”)



(10) Logan tries to save Veronica  
(2x22 “Not Pictured”)



(11) Veronica unveils a part of the  
conspiracy (1x14 “Mars Vs. Mars”)



(12) Veronica battles the serial rapist  
(3x09 “Spit and Eggs”)

While this may not be quite like the traditional chiaroscuro of black and white noirs, *Veronica Mars* often uses strong contrasts between light and darkness. In image 9, Veronica enters a classroom where the small-time criminal PCH biker gang hangs out. The room has a bleak tone of light and there is a single strong light source in the shape of a star lamp hanging right above the leader Weevil, whom Veronica is there to interrogate in relation to a mystery. The presence of the lamp above Weevil’s head may also signal that he is the only one that is willing to help Veronica, and that he is important in this respect. The presence of the other figures is ominous and kept in the shadows. In image 10, Logan battles mass murderer Cassidy Casablancas on top of a hotel roof. There is a strong play of light and shadow in the scene, enhancing the suspense and the mystery of Cassidy’s deranged psyche. In image 11, Veronica faces a serious situation. She has finally uncovered an important piece of the conspiracy that tore her family apart. She resolutely informs death-row prisoner Abel Koontz of this. He is left speechless and his anxious expression is reflected in the glass as the illuminated Veronica gazes at him. The darkness around her symbolizes her further descent into the mystery of Lilly Kane’s murder and she is the only one who can bring light to that situation. The low-key effect in image 12 does not symbolize mystery as the lighting in the

other images do, here it represents terror. Veronica is overpowered by the serial rapist and tries to reach for her taser gun which is located under a bed. A mysterious source of light under the bed creates a sharp contrast to the consuming darkness behind her as her assailant attacks her again.

Media researcher Art Silverblatt argues that “A dark picture filled with shadows creates a mysterious atmosphere that arouses fear and apprehension”. He also says that “In film noir, or ‘black film’, lighting is the defining production element” (Silverblatt 2007: 175). He continues:

Film noir is also characterized by the metaphorical use of lighting. The genre is defined by its *lack* of illumination; it is sometimes difficult for the audience to make visual sense of what appears on the screen. In the same vein, it is difficult for the characters (and the audience) to navigate their way through the moral ambiguities in the plot [...] Lighting techniques can also alter the psychological space in the films. Thematically, the narratives focus on people who are imprisoned by their own limits. The dim lighting reinforces the sense of isolation and alienation experienced by the characters [...] Characters are seemingly trapped by this lack of light (Silverblatt 2007: 176)

*Veronica Mars* plays a lot on this “lack of illumination” tactic in its scenes, and several of the images in this chapter will testify to that fact. The world is gloomy and the special lighting (or the lack of it) enhances the noir mystery narrative. The dark visual world also brings forth the darkness in the themes of the show.

The addition of color footage in film and television has undoubtedly allowed for more striking visual styles. This is also the case for noir, and *Veronica Mars* has interesting uses of color both to create a special aesthetic and to express psychological states, for example in image 11. Spicer argues that the use of color in neo-noirs accompanied a change in noir’s visual style (Spicer 2002: 147). Classic black-and-white film noirs had already created its unique visuals, and with colors came the possibility to do even more. According to Spicer, neo-noir follows two basic tendencies: revivalism and hybridization. What he means by these terms is that filmmakers wanted to keep the atmosphere of the classical noir, but also reconfigure elements of noir in a “complex generic mix” (Spicer 2002: 150). Regarding the use of color in both film noir and television noir, Sanders points out that:



[...] *Miami Vice*'s use of color is one of the most striking breaks with TV noir of the *Dragnet*, *Naked City* and *Fugitive* variety. As Nicholas Christopher observes in connection with color films noirs of the classic period, 'It is the noir elements... that demand colors: the wild swings in the characters' emotional lives, their intense sexual energy, and the violence rippling all around them'. When one combines sophisticated lighting changes with the impact of color, 'the possibilities of expression grow exponentially with regard to character delineation and imagery development'. Although Christopher is in fact describing the 1958 film *Party Girl* (Nicholas Ray), his account could just as easily apply to *Miami Vice*, especially when he adds that 'background colors are used to reveal and open out the characters' inner emotional states, to tint the fault lines of their shifting relationships, and to define the director's intentions rather than simply to ornament the scene of the action' (Sanders 2008: 97)

Hirsch states that neo-noir has "evolved a distinctive color code [...]" and has produced graphic images of enclosure in a wide-screen format (Hirsch 1999: 12) *Veronica Mars* has several scenes where color and lighting play an important part in expressing the emotions of the characters or the situation at hand. Let us discuss a few examples:



(13) Veronica meets Abel Koontz on death row (1x08 "Like a Virgin")



(14) Veronica solves the bus explosion mystery (2x22 "Not Pictured")

Images 13 and 14 are not thematically related, but the color is. Here the color green is used to represent the surreal/bizarre. In image 13, Veronica meets the man who confessed to killing her best friend in hopes of figuring out clues to the mystery. She arrives trying to clear him of the crime, but he provides no help and instead assaults her with information that puts her paternity into question, causing an internal uproar in Veronica (and which leads to the scene in image 8). In image 14, Veronica discovers the identity of the school bus bomber, one of her classmates, and in doing so she realizes that he is also the one that raped her. Disgusted and in shock she hurries into a bathroom to wash her face.



**(15)** Veronica is trapped in a refrigerator  
(1x22 “Leave It to Beaver”)



**(16)** The high school counselor’s office  
(2x18 “I Am God”)

In image 15 we see a return of the chiaroscuro. Veronica has been trapped in a refrigerator after exposing Lilly Kane’s murderer. A red light signaling danger and death illuminates Veronica’s panic in what would be a pitch-black situation for her and foreshadows that Aaron Echolls plans to set the refrigerator on fire. A strange purple-colored light along with some sunshine dominates image 16. There is no explanation where this light comes from, and it has not been present in earlier visits to the counselor’s office. However, the episode this image is retrieved from is a very psychological one. Veronica is constantly haunted by dreams of the dead students from the school bus throughout the episode, and the purple color might represent her mental state of mind as she tries to explain this to the counselor.

The flashbacks are also usually visually different than the regular story events. Colors like green and blue are often applied and the scenes are often blurry.



**(17)** Keith sees the murdered Lilly Kane  
(1x01 “Pilot”)



**(18)** Cassidy prepares to rape Veronica  
(2x22 “Not Pictured”)

The cool coloring reflects distant, sad and painful memories. In image 18, there is a particular glow throughout the scene. In fact, most of the flashbacks in that episode (2x22 “Not



Pictured”) has the glow effect since they concern the revealing of Cassidy’s evil acts. The glow may symbolize his disturbed mind. There are instances of happy recollections in flashbacks as well. For example, many of the flashbacks in 1x04 “The Wrath of Con” show a period where Veronica and her friends have the time of their lives. The coloring is not as explicit as in the flashbacks above, but the scenes are still blurry/grainy as to indicate that it is a flashback. The visual style of the flashbacks in *Veronica Mars* can be related to a comment by Hirsch regarding the French film noir *Daybreak*: “The film’s flashback structure, as in many noir dramas to come, charges the scenes set in the past with a fatalistic aura; we know the catastrophe that awaits the characters” (Hirsch 1999: 72). The fatalistic aura is very much present in *Veronica Mars*’ flashbacks, most of them lead up to the sad starting point in 1x01 “Pilot” where Veronica is an outsider with no social status. Despite the many sad flashbacks, it is the happy recollections that perhaps have the most fatalistic aura, as the events in those flashbacks concern a time which can never be regained. Bolte argues for another function these flashbacks have visually: “The grayish eight millimeter quality of these flashbacks, and the longing with which Veronica describes them, frames them almost as a dream, a kind of fantasy world that makes the audience wonder if anything remembered so fondly and so vividly could have possibly been real” (Bolte 2008: 97). The distinct visual style of the flashbacks distances them from current events and often gives a surreal impression.

Like the other visual techniques I have discussed, both the use of color and light play an important part in dream sequences:



(19) Duncan hallucinates about his dead sister (1x03 “Meet John Smith”)



(20) Veronica speaks to Meg in a submerged school bus (“2x18 “I Am God”)



**(21)** Veronica returns to the bus to speak with Peter (2x18 “I Am God”)



**(22)** Veronica solves Lilly’s murder (1x22 “Leave it to Beaver”)

The dream states in *Veronica Mars* follow the show’s strong noir coloring. The dreams often use more explicit or stronger lighting than regular scenes, and I will return to the effect of this shortly. In image 19, Duncan stops taking his antidepressants and sustains a head injury. Suddenly he has visions of his dead sister speaking with him, but in reality, it is his inner voice speaking to him that he knows that something is amiss about his sister’s death. The antidepressants have stopped him from processing this information. The coloring is green, reminiscent of the green color in images 13 and 14 which mirrored a surreal situation. Images 20 and 21 are from the same episode, where Veronica constantly returns to a school bus in her dreams to speak with the students who died in the bus explosion. In 20, a warm light illuminates Veronica and Meg. This light comes from no particular source and realistically would be out of place since the bus is submerged in this scene. Meg comes from a religious family, and the warm light in what would be complete darkness may symbolize that. In 21, Veronica speaks to openly-gay student Peter Ferrer. The surroundings in the dream are inspired by him and his lifestyle: colorful, blinking disco lights and the song “One More Time” by Daft Punk playing in the background. Image 22 depicts the pool scene I mentioned above in the music section. Veronica has a pleasant dream of Lilly after solving her murder. They float in pool, surrounded by water lilies and bathed in warm sunlight. Despite the peaceful situation, the dream has a sad undertone as Veronica must say goodbye to Lilly. They say their final words and Lilly disappears, leaving Veronica alone in the pool. The dream represents closure and provides Veronica with the ability to move on.

In images 20, 21 and 22 there is the presence of strong light within the dreams. Silverblatt argues that in noir, “light is often equated with understanding, enlightenment, and goodness” (Silverblatt 2007: 176). This seems like a valid point seeing as the lack of light in noir

emphasizes mystery and uncertainty. The illumination on the school bus can indeed express enlightenment, as these dreams allow Veronica to piece together important clues regarding the major mystery. The light in the dream about Lilly represents goodness. Other dreams about Lilly throughout the first season have been spooky or haunting and have generally looked like the hallucination from image 19.

Flashbacks and dreams used in this context obtain the effect of mental subjectivity. This means that we are able to “see the character’s inner images, representing memory, fantasy, dreams, or hallucinations” (Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 85). In noir this has been used to create psychological confusion. In *Veronica Mars* these dreams and flashbacks actively work together with the main narrative to create cohesion in the characters’ past and present, as well as being powerful tools for creating mysteries and exploring them (like the school bus scenes in 2x18 “I Am God”).

In Spicer’s comment above, noir also used subjective camera to express psychological disturbance. This feature is present in *Veronica Mars* through what Bordwell and Thompson calls the point-of-view shot, shots taken from the character’s optical standpoint. The effect of this is called perceptual subjectivity (Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 85). A version of this technique is found in image 21 above. Here the camera has been placed in the bus seat next to Veronica. There is no character sitting there, instead the effect granted is that the viewer is invited into the bus as if he were sitting right next to Veronica and witnessing the scene.



(23) Aaron emerges from the curtain...



(24) ... Veronica watches in horror as she realizes what is going to happen...



**(25)** ... Aaron strikes Veronica  
(1x22 “Leave it to Beaver”)



**(26)** Veronica is drugged  
(3x09 “Spit and Eggs”)

Images 23, 24 and 25 have an interesting use of the subjective camera and the scene invokes fear. Veronica is trying to escape from Aaron Echolls and she frantically knocks on a terrace door at a nearby house. From Veronica’s point of view, we see Aaron emerging, raising his fist. The camera then changes to Aaron’s point of view as Veronica realizes that she is no longer safe. Then we cut back to Veronica’s point of view and Aaron’s fist strikes the screen (Veronica’s face) and the scene blacks out as if the audience were knocked out along with Veronica. In image 26, Veronica has been drugged and she watches as Mercer tries to get rid of her. Most of the scene is viewed through Veronica’s eyes and it is blurry and confusing, as if the viewers were also drugged.

Though not overly used on the show, these camera effects also build tension, suspense, mystery and fear (like the lighting and coloring). Besides the dreams, flashback and the few cases of subjective camera, objective camera dominates the storytelling.

Though *Veronica Mars* uses many teen-centered locations, such as high school, college, fraternity houses and cafeterias, it is the noir that provides its special visual style. The use of strong colors and low-key lighting is found throughout these teen locations and some of them have been shown in the images above, for example in 7, 9 and 16. In *Veronica Mars*, teen locations like Neptune High become the site for many of Veronica’s investigations. Hearst College also sees Veronica interrogating many of the alumni in her cases. The teen locations are actively incorporated into the plots.

## Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the narrative aspects and the aesthetics of *Veronica Mars*. The show uses a complicated mix of melodrama, ensemble drama and crime story/noir narratives to create noir in a teen drama context. In addition to this, the show uses much of noir's striking iconography such as neon, darkness, chiaroscuro and obscure coloring. Noir flashbacks, dreams and subjective camera states enhance the presence of both mental and perceptual subjectivity. The flashbacks, dreams and voiceover also create a narrative where temporal order is often rearranged and out of original event order. Popular music establishes a teen feeling as well as typical teen locations like schools and cafeterias.

There is much to pay attention to in *Veronica Mars* and as such, there is much more that could be mentioned in a further analysis of narration and style. I believe I have chosen central examples and illustrations to accompany my discussion and I hope I have shown that there is plenty of material ripe for further academic exploration.

The next chapter will deal more closely with Neptune, the noir universe *Veronica Mars* takes place in. I have already established the visual noir, and now I would like to explore the more thematic sides. In chapter two, I will discuss the social class issues and the criminal justice system. These two topics are present in so many of the show's storylines and become a natural point for continuing the discussion of noir and teen in *Veronica Mars*.



## Chapter 2

### **Torn by Class and Lawless? Social War, Crimes and Mysteries**

Piz: See, you realize there's not a lot of college freshmen girls who do this sort of thing... you know... solve crime.

Veronica: (jokingly) There aren't?

Piz: So why do you do it?

Veronica: Cold, hard cash...

Piz: Seriously... Wallace told me about your friend who was murdered?

Veronica: Because I'm good at it, maybe? I don't know. Wallace should stick to analyzing himself.

(3x01 "Welcome Wagon")

Either she does not realize her importance or she is simply being evasive or not interested in taking credit. Though she *is* good at what she does, on a grander scale Neptune needs Veronica Mars. But why is it so? Why is the town so dependent on the sleuthing skills of a teenager? The possible answers to this question may be found in the representation of the noir universe in *Veronica Mars*. In Neptune, issues of social class are explored alongside the flaws of the law enforcement system and its incapability to produce and uphold justice. These topics are among the main contributing factors for many of the crimes and mysteries in the show. In order to explore Neptune and identify what gives rise to the mysteries, I will be discussing the following research questions:

- How does Neptune invoke ideas of the teen drama small town and the noir city? How does the importance of social class emphasize these concepts in *Veronica Mars*?
- In what ways is the criminal justice system in Neptune incapacitated (in accordance with noir conventions), and how does this enable the need for Veronica Mars and her work? Is this incapacitation related to the types of crimes and mysteries Veronica investigates?

The main literature I will turn to for this chapter includes Christine Gledhill's *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, Steven M. Sanders and Aeon Skoble's *The Philosophy of TV Noir*, Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir*, Foster Hirsch's *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir*, Roz Kaveney's *Teen Dreams*, Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein's *Teen Television* and Anja Tucker's thesis *Teen Noir*.

## Home Is Where the Teen Is – Teen Drama, Small Town

The city has always had a special place in noir. In the teen drama, the small town is a very popular setting. Teen dramas are usually focused on the middle class, just like the melodrama.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argues in Christine Gledhill's *Home Is Where the Heart Is*:

In so far as melodrama, like realism, supposes a world of equals, a democracy within the bourgeois strata (alias bourgeois democracy) it also supposes a world without the exercise of social power. The address is to an audience which does not think of itself as possessed of power (but neither as radically dispossessed, disinherited, oppressed) and the world of the subject matter is likewise one in which only middling power relations are present. The characters are neither rulers nor the ruled, but occupy a middle ground, exercising local power or suffering local powerlessness, within the family or the small town (Nowell-Smith 1987: 71)

As we see here, the small town is often used in the melodrama because of its middle-class/bourgeois focus. The small town is usually the norm in teen dramas as well. We have the quaint towns Capeside and Tree Hill from *Dawson's Creek* and *One Tree Hill* respectively (the location is the same: Wilmington, North Carolina), the rural Kansas town Smallville from *Smallville*, the sunny and sleepy town Sunnydale from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Neptune in *Veronica Mars* and the small town Mystic Falls from *The Vampire Diaries* which is located in a forested area and has links to the colonial period. Some teen dramas focus their action in other locations. The characters in short-lived teen series *Life As We Know It* live in Seattle, but they do not live inside the bustling city center. They seem to live in the middle class oriented outskirts of the city (and thus it can be argued to follow the small-town mentality). Shows where many of the main characters are wealthy, like *The O.C.* and *Gossip Girl*, take the action out of the small town. The glamorous, resort-like Newport is the place of residence for the characters in *The O.C.*, while *Gossip Girl* takes place in New York.

Nowell-Smith also speaks of a world without the exercise of social power in melodrama. This is different in *Veronica Mars*, because the exercise of social power is such a great part of the story. Characters included in the show are both among the rulers and the ruled (as Nowell-Smith terms it), as well as characters occupying a middle ground. The story is still set within the melodrama small town, but with a focus on vast socioeconomic differences.

The distinction between small towns and suburbia seems to be unclear in academic literature about teen television. Author Roz Kaveney argues:



The Hughes films [1980s teen flicks such as *The Breakfast Club*, *Sixteen Candles* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*] – and it may simply have been a matter of there being six films by the same writer/director that appeared in cinemas over a three-year period – created or crystallized many stock expectations and character types we find in the canonical work of the teen genre over the ensuing two decades. The Hughes films all take place in Illinois suburbs and thus suburbia became one of the standard expectations; they have a tendency to favor outsiders and underdogs, and so this became a standard expectation, even where it's one that is often subverted through revisionist approaches (Kaveney 2006: 3)

Here it seems that Kaveney is arguing that suburbia became a common trope in teen movies. And that may very well be true for teen movies, but teen television seems to be more focused on the self-sustaining small towns with its own municipal government, police force, schools etc. The suburb is traditionally a residential area of a large city, or areas that have commuting possibilities to the city. Media researcher Ben Aslinger comments that the characters on *One Tree Hill* are “white suburban teenagers” (Aslinger 2008: 78). However, Tree Hill is not a suburb in the sense I have presented here. Anja Tucker argues in her thesis *Teen Noir* that all teen noirs use suburbia as their backdrop (Tucker 2008: 47). I do not agree with this. Suburbia might be used in some of the examples she analyzes (such as the movies *Heathers* and *Brick*), but in the case of *Veronica Mars*, Neptune is not a suburb. Neptune has its own sheriff's department, it has a mayor's office and even a large college is located in the town. The closest city is San Diego and it is located a few hours away, well outside of suburban commuting distance (another piece of evidence that Neptune is not a suburb). English Professor Caralyn Bolte makes a comparison between suburbia, Sunnydale and Neptune:

[Buffy and Veronica] both live in sleepy, yet troubled , marginalized communities, Sunnydale and Neptune respectively, safely separate from the nearest California urban center boundaries that both shows seem to orbit around but never transgress. The towns themselves, which seem to resemble but never claim the status of the real-life suburbs they are patterned after, offer a comfortable sense of distance to the viewer (Bolte 2008: 95)

Bolte argues that the towns are not suburbs, but they carry a resemblance to suburbia. She does not explain this resemblance any further. Tucker argues that “Teen noir does the same for teen suburbanites as the drama series do for adult female suburbanites; presenting their ‘world’ from their point of view” (Tucker 2008: 54). It seems that Tucker is arguing that the drama series also takes place in suburbia. While “drama series” is a broad term, they are most likely melodramas and melodramas usually take place in the small town, not the suburb. This

discussion seems complicated. Small town and suburbia seems to be interchangeable terms at times and other times they are not. If the towns in many of the teen dramas today are rightfully called suburbs, then it may mean that the term “suburbia” is being used to describe populated areas that are not large cities. It may also be that there is a difference in the media form: Teen movies use suburbia as a backdrop more than teen television does. As teen dramas on television are usually melodramas, they keep within the sphere of the small town, like how Nowell-Smith argued above. In this thesis, I will discuss Neptune as a small town. Discussing it primarily as a suburb seems troublesome, and by analyzing it as a small town I do not believe I am limited in my approaches. However, I will relate it to both of noir’s vision of the city and the suburb (as Bolte argued, Neptune resembles a suburb and I wish to explore this). This does not mean that any discussion of suburbia, teens and noir is irrelevant, but I believe it is very important to make a distinction between what is a suburb and what is a small town. In this case, I would argue that Neptune is not a suburb, but it may very well embody the dystopian view of the noir suburb. This will be discussed below.

## **Labyrinthine Dystopia**

In noir, there is the concept of the labyrinth. Philosophy professors Jerold J. Abrams and Elizabeth F. Cooke argue that “[...] essential to virtually all noir detective stories is the idea of the labyrinth” (Abrams and Cooke 2008: 182). Hirsch calls this same concept “the maze” in his book (Hirsch 1999: 145). The labyrinth refers to the detective quest in noir (discussed in chapter one) which the protagonist has to journey through. The term “labyrinth” hints that the quest is deceptive, twisted and full of dead ends. However, at least in the case of *Veronica Mars*, I would like to extend this to the show’s concept of the small town. On her quests, Veronica must repeatedly travel through her town and interact with deceitful and unhelpful individuals. Because the town is featured in all 64 episodes and that Veronica always have to journey through it, Neptune, as well as the quest, represents the labyrinth. English professor Michael Valdez Moses discusses the labyrinth related to Chris Carter’s television shows *The X-Files* and *Millennium*:

The quest to discover the truth leads Carter’s protagonists on a labyrinthine journey through an underworld of crime, deceit, danger and paranoia, a dark realm populated by illegal immigrants, street hustlers, prostitutes, exotic dancers, sexual deviants, the destitute, the insane, disabled vets, alcoholics, junkies, assassins, spies, mystics, fortunetellers, misfits, circus freaks, black marketers, disgraced government officials, petty criminals, religious fanatics, adolescent runaways, computer hackers, and

conspiracy nuts, to name only a few of the commonly encountered types (Moses 2008: 204-205)

Here we see that the labyrinth theme includes not only the quest itself, but everyone that is encountered along the way and that is involved in some form or another. What is even more fascinating here is that if we remove the “circus freaks” from Moses’ quote, this passage could very well describe *Veronica Mars*. This gives a dystopian view of the investigator quest and Neptune as a teen drama town.

Tucker argues that noir in the teen genre has dystopian portrayals of suburbia (Tucker 2008: 54). Noir has traditionally been concerned with using the city as a backdrop for its plots, but once American society started to change after World War II, noir found a new stage for twisted plots. Film professor Amanda Ann Klein explains (this is an expansion of a quote I used in the previous chapter):

Even the name – film noir – implies that the setting will be “black”, both literally and metaphorically. However, these iconic images allow us to forget that in many films noir, it is not the dark, rain-soaked city, but the sunny, California suburb, with its manicured lawns, idyllic homes, and crystal blue swimming pools, that serve as the backdrop for the film’s twisted plots [...] This vilification of suburban living and the upper middle class accoutrement makes sense in the context of postwar America, when the concept of the man in the gray flannel suit driving to his nine-to-five job replaced a more romantic vision of America as agrarian, as a country built on the sweat of good, old-fashioned manual labor. Indeed, the seeming homogenization of American society was almost more frightening than the ‘big city’, and the affluent, not the destitute, generated distrust in the popular imagination, making suburban living a subject ripe for exploitation in the 1940s and the 1950s (Klein 2006: 84-85)

According to Klein’s quote, the post-World War II period brought with it a great deal of change to US society. Decentralization from the city and into suburbs seemed to become increasingly popular. Old ideals of manual labor were replaced by more industrial ideals (from her point about the nine-to-five job as the country returned to “normal” after wartime). Also, suburbs mean people live closer together in smaller numbers than a big city, and thus suburbia’s homogeneity is identified by a certain anonymity that is not present in the small town. The housings are often identical and clustered closely together. Suburbia is more characterized by intimacy than the small town. Tucker argues that suburbia is often seen as the utopian dream for the middle class, a way for them to make the American dream come true (Tucker 2008: 54). What is interesting concerning noir and suburbia then is perhaps

found in philosophy professor Deborah Knight and film professor George McKnight's essay about *CSI*:

In noir films, we typically encounter a dystopic world where either or both of two things are happening. Either there is something darkly corrupt at the heart of the social order, or the social order is threatened by the criminal or antisocial actions of certain individuals or groups. Consequently, the urban setting in noir films is increasingly less identified with community and more with individual self-interest and/or the systematic corruption of the American dream (Knight and McKnight 2008: 161)

Although Knight and McKnight are talking about *CSI*, which takes place in Las Vegas and not in suburbia, I believe there are some interesting points here. If suburbia is meant to represent the American dream, then certainly noir with its focus on corruption of that dream should find plenty of material in suburbia. Abrams and Cooke argue the following in their *X-Files* essay: "From the 1940s to the 1970s [...] as society began to change, film noir did, too (becoming neo-noir). Social issues like race and gender start to play a much larger role [...] And so did the transition from the modern city center to postmodern suburbia" (Abrams and Cooke 2008: 179). Noir has evidently changed to represent the reality of peoples' lives. As suburbia became an increasingly real concept, noir found a way to address that as well. Klein argues that "Today the conceit of the sinister, upper middle class suburb is a familiar one in both film (*Blue Velvet*, 1986) and on television (*Desperate Housewives*), and *Veronica Mars* banks on this familiarity" (Klein 2006: 85). The dystopian view of suburbs in popular culture is what *Veronica Mars* borrows in its noir rendering of small town Neptune. Another element which argues against Neptune being suburbia is the class distinction. Klein identifies suburbs as (upper) middle class. In 1x01 "Pilot" of *Veronica Mars*, Veronica introduces her town as "Neptune, the town without a middle class". Many of the *Veronica Mars* storylines are centered on these class issues and if suburbia is traditionally middle class, then Neptune is perhaps best viewed as an independent town in its own right. In the show, Piz humorously refers to his own suburban background when Veronica asks him where he comes from:

Piz: Portland. Or, well, just outside of Portland, this little suburb called Beaverton. Real salt of the earth people, you know, minivan in every driveway, chicken in every pot.  
(3x01 "Welcome Wagon")

This description of a middle-class suburb is a clear contrast to the class-torn situation in the small town Neptune (and also refers back to the anonymity and homogeneity of suburbia).

## **The Inescapable Town Without a Middle Class?**

Wallace: You think it's a conspiracy?

Veronica: This is Neptune. Nothing happens accidentally.  
(2x01 "Normal is the Watchword")

In classic film noir, Spicer argues that existentialist thought "places great emphasis on the city as a trap" (Spicer 2002: 67). Hirsch seems to agree with this, stating that "the city in classic noir exuded isolation, danger and bewitchment. Both carnival and purgatory, it was a place in which to hide out, to conceal or transform identity". He states that neo-noir is "as likely to take place in vast open spaces as in the pestilential city of tradition" and that both open and closed environments "can suddenly become places without exit" (Hirsch 1999: 15).

According to Spicer, the idea of the corrupt city has also carried into neo-noir (Spicer 2002: 157). And as I discussed in the previous chapter, television noir also adopted the idea of the noir (corrupt) city (Sanders 2008: 11).

While Neptune is a small town and not a city, the concepts of the noir city should still be valid. Tucker argues: "While various teen noirs utilize different aspects and elements from the original movies, the city seems to be without exception the only noir characteristic that is never used" (Tucker 2008: 47). This precedes her comment about all teen noirs using suburbia as a backdrop. That the teen noirs she is discussing do not use the large city as setting is possibly correct, however, the ideas and themes that these noir cities invoke are probably not limited to the large city alone and thus they can be found in both suburbia and small towns, or wherever noir decides to put its focus.

True to the classic noir city, Neptune is considered to be a trap early on. Since her father decides to stay in town despite being disgraced from his position as sheriff and her mother leaves without a trace, Veronica is trapped. There is interestingly enough no mention of any other relatives related to Veronica, no grandparents, aunts, uncles etc (which is also strange for a teen drama). This reinforces the belief that Neptune is a trap and that Veronica has to stay in a town she hates and where people dislike her. Her fate as a private investigator also seems inescapable. After the first season, she swears off detecting after solving the murder of her best friend. However, new problems occur and she comments "Just when I think I'm out, they pull me back in!" (2x01 "Normal is the Watchword"). She even plans to go to Stanford

University, but dramatic events forces her to reconsider and enroll at Hearst College in Neptune instead. And though she tries to start anew there, she soon realizes that her fate follows her wherever she goes. Only at the end of the series do we get a hint that she might be able to escape Neptune in the end: she receives a summer internship at the FBI (though the irony here is that even though she can escape Neptune, she can never escape her fate as a crime fighter). This is reminiscent of an idea in film noir which Sanders discusses: “The remnants of a fated destiny hang over events in film noir like a dense fog from which one cannot emerge without being unalterably changed” (Sanders 2008: 8). The moment she starts her detective work, Veronica’s fate is more or less sealed. She develops talents and skills which will follow her through her entire life.

How is noir’s corrupt city visible in Neptune? A likely answer lies in the show’s exploration of the class inequalities between its denizens. In fact, these differences are important social issues that are present in a majority of the episodes. Some are explored openly, while others are revealed through the mysteries (through the story of the crime which was discussed in the previous chapter). Sanders argues that “TV noir, like film noir, is patterned with so many shadings of ambiguity, criminal violence, alienation, and paranoia that no single generalization about its nature is likely to do justice to its multiple dimensions. TV noir represents a match of style with dark and psychologically compelling themes” and that “Like its film predecessors, TV noir is edgy and unsettling and communicates something of philosophical substance about ourselves and the condition of our lives” (Sanders 2008: 4-5). By intently focusing on class issues, *Veronica Mars* creates a noir universe where who one is and where one comes from determines what one can and cannot do. In turn, this creates paranoia throughout Neptune where everyone is seemingly capable of committing heinous acts to escape their existence. This is in accordance to what Hirsch discusses: “A key noir notion is that criminal instincts are innate in even the most somber-seeming citizens and that once they are given in to they become all-consuming, as well as contagious [...]” (Hirsch 1999: 14). Everyone can become a villain on *Veronica Mars*, and there will be discussions of this below.

Before I continue with Neptune’s class exploration, I would like to address a topic in noir that is going to be important in the discussion of class and the show’s portrayal of this concept: moral ambiguity. Ambiguity has already been stated as important noir trademark by Sanders above. “Film noir presents us with moral ambiguity, shifting identities and impending doom”

says Sanders (Sanders 2008: 10). Philosophy researcher Jennifer L. McMahon states that moral ambiguity is commonly addressed in noir (McMahon 2008: 116). This is again confirmed by Professor of the Humanities Eric Bronson (Bronson 2008: 132). It should be noted that they are generally speaking of moral ambiguity reflected in protagonists. This is certainly evident in Veronica and her methods of investigating, but I would also extend this concept to most characters on the show, as the class issues clearly demonstrate that everyone seems capable of transcending their own moral compasses. Philosophy professor Aeon J. Skoble contests the idea of moral ambiguity in noir and instead he argues that noir often displays moral clarity. I will return to this later on in the chapter. For now I wish to focus on the moral ambiguity as there seems to be a general agreement on this concept. *Veronica Mars* creator Rob Thomas has said that “Noir thrives in a world of moral ambiguity [...]” (Thomas 2006: 82). With that being said, I believe it makes sense to address many of Neptune’s issues as shadings of moral ambiguity.

It was stated above that social issues like class became more visible in neo-noir as opposed to classic noir, but in melodrama this seems to be a general genre convention. Christine Gledhill argues that melodrama often shares its sympathies between two social concepts: the struggle for bourgeois ascendancy and the victims of its success (Gledhill 1987: 21). As we shall see, both of these concepts are very visible in *Veronica Mars*. Therefore the social issues explored on the show are perhaps more melodrama trademarks than a noir trademark. However, noir colors the representations of these issues. In relation to this, Gledhill quotes Martha Vicinus and says that melodrama sides with the powerless and that evil is associated with social power and station (Gledhill 1987: 21).

Gledhill argues that early American adaptations of melodrama dismantled the class oppositions of the European melodrama, focusing on American nationalism as a “great equalizer”. Class distinctions were still present, but they were represented through the use of the country versus the city, where the villain of the melodrama often was associated with the city and the growing divisions between the affluent and the destitute (Gledhill 1987: 24). While this was a trend in earlier melodramas, we can still see traces of this ideology in television melodramas today. Here we might find another reason why teen dramas are so frequently set in small towns away from the bustling cities. As a melodrama trope, the small town is a representation of the good and idyllic, true to the American dream.

But why does *Veronica Mars* focus so intently on class? Is it a noir intensification of melodrama's class focus? That may very well be the case. Bolte also argues that teen dramas have started to focus on cultural commentary, stating that "In recent years, a few Teen TV shows seem to be creating a niche for such cultural commentary amid programming that elides cultural issues in favor of fantasy, 'reality,' or forensic science" (Bolte 2008: 93). Another good answer to consider is probably because of the mystery narrative. The episodic conflicts need to derive from something, and in Neptune conflicts often arise because of the class inequalities. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has monsters and *Smallville* has meteor freaks and aliens. *Veronica Mars* has social war. Let us discuss what this means in Neptune and how it becomes a large part of the storylines.

Above I cited Veronica's comment about Neptune not having a middle class, and I wish to repeat it here for further discussion:

Veronica (voiceover): This is my school. If you go here, your parents are either millionaires or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, the town without a middle class.  
(1x01 "Pilot")

Regarding what Veronica says in this quote, Klein states that:

With these words Veronica Mars established the central role that location, with its implicit ties to class and caste, would play in the series. And it is this incessant focus on location, borders, and who lives in what zip code that places the series so firmly within the long, rich tradition of film noir (Klein 2006: 83)

Bolte also comments on Veronica's words, saying that:

Because Veronica fits into neither category [her parents are not millionaires or do not work for millionaires], she is immediately alienated from both groups. The Mars family, and Veronica in particular, use their private detective work to transcend those rigid social hierarchies, as they work for and with everyone in a seemingly pragmatic but truly economically necessary way (Bolte 2008: 97)

Even though Veronica's comment seems to establish the core of many of the issues in Neptune, it is also a little wrong because the town does have its fair share of middle class denizens. Perhaps it is the presence of so many working class and upper class inhabitants that the middle class is rendered invisible or irrelevant? Either way, it is interestingly the teen



drama dimension of the show that allows for a closer examination of class issues. By having students from all classes attend the same high school (where a lot of the plots start or are investigated) the inequalities between them becomes more visible. There is no private school in Neptune that is exclusively for its rich denizens, everyone must attend Neptune High. While the rest of Neptune society is geographically distanced from each other (by a zip-code hierarchy, there is more on this below), in school everyone is brought together. This is reminiscent of the concept of intimacy in suburbia. In 2x01 “Normal Is the Watchword”, Veronica comments that there is a war between the haves and the have-nots and that one has to choose a side these days. This results in a very tense school dynamic. The rich kids from the 90909 zip code clash with everyone else. Bolte argues: “The 90909 zip code, white, rich, and spoiled, is juxtaposed against the multi-ethnic, distinctly working class neighborhoods on the outskirts of town” (Bolte 2008: 107) Characters from this zip code area are referred to as 09ers. The 09ers occupy a special position in the school hierarchy. For example, they are involved in and dominate most school-related activities (such as sports and cheerleading), enabling them special benefits such as being able to have their food delivered to the school during lunch. This is perhaps a teen drama method of displaying power within the school arena, and as if there were not enough inequalities already, the way these 09ers promote themselves in school makes the borders between privileged and unprivileged even clearer.

Bolte argues that “*Veronica Mars* highlights how a rigidly established and enforced social structure elides individual agency and how the lockstep behavior resulting from such groupthink becomes dangerous and emotionally devastating” (Bolte 2008: 102). This is reminiscent of peer pressure and the need to fit in, a common teen topic both in television and in real life. To exemplify this, Bolte uses episode 1x02 “Credit Where Credit’s Due”. She says that “Veronica, the only person equipped to transcend rigid class boundaries to see the truth” discovers that the love relationship between PCH biker Chardo and 09er Caitlin Ford, Logan’s rich girlfriend, is doomed because of class boundaries (Bolte 2008: 102). Both Caitlin and Chardo are punished by their respective group. It should be mentioned that Chardo has betrayed his cousin Weevil in order to entertain Caitlin, he is not punished simply for going out with her. The PCHers exile Chardo from their group and beats him up. Caitlin is also exiled from the 09ers, no one is paying attention to her and she has no longer a space at the 09er lunch table. “Her exile, it seems, is as complete and as clearly communicated as Chardo’s was through body blows” (Bolte 2008: 103). Both groups use different methods of punishment, but they seem to be equally devastating. Both classes use exile as punishment.

Because of their wealth and social power, 09ers are usually able to escape easily from compromising school situations. Consider the following quote by Klein:

A running theme in *Veronica Mars* is that location, synonymous with class, is destiny. In “The Girl Next Door” (1-7), Eli “Weevil” Navarro complained to Logan Echolls, “All that matters [in this school] is who your parents are and the zip code your mom shot you out in,” after they were both issued detention for very different infractions – Logan publicly humiliated the teacher, while Weevil merely chuckled at the joke. The difference is that students like Logan can bribe teachers by calling upon their parents’ wealth and influence, and students like Weevil are usually the first to be suspected of any crime committed on school grounds precisely because of who their parents are (Klein 2006: 85)

What Klein describes here is reminiscent of an idea about class and power in melodrama. Nowell-Smith argues that in classic melodrama, “the locus of power is the family and the individual private property, the two being connected through inheritance” (Nowell-Smith 1987: 71). As both Logan and Weevil display in the episode in Klein’s comment, who they are and where they come from effectively decides what they can get away with. As the ridiculed teacher in the episode comments to Weevil: “I wonder if you’ll find Mr. Echolls so amusing ten years from now... when you’re pumping his gas.” Because of his background, it is hinted that Weevil is fated to remain a struggling character throughout his life. This also hints that Logan will inevitably be superior throughout his life simply because of his class inheritance. This fated destiny is also a noir idea (please refer to the part about Veronica’s inescapability above).

Despite the difference in their social status, this episode also demonstrates the similarities between 09ers and their “polar opposites”. Bolte argues that “Despite their mutual penchant for biting one-liners and a shared lack of respect for authority, Logan Echolls and Weevil Navarro, the leaders of their respective groups, refuse to see their commonalities even when their actions demonstrate how well they work together” (Bolte 2008: 107). This is where some of the show’s noir focus on moral ambiguity comes in. I wish to give another example before I continue with this discussion. In 1x06 “Return of the Kane”, Veronica supports rebellious outsider Wanda Varner in her race to become student body president and eliminate 09er rule. Wanda becomes quite popular in school and the 09ers manipulate the election out of fear. Despite the promise of a brighter future, Wanda eventually leads the school to believe that Veronica is keeping drugs in her locker (thereby keeping her own drug possession charge

out of her personal records). Veronica is disappointed, but reveals that she did not vote for Wanda as she has realized that just because someone opposes the upper class does not mean that everything will turn out fine. Wanda ultimately loses the race and the 09ers win.

What all these examples display is that the show never really seems to place its sympathies with one particular class or group of people. There are many shadings of ambiguity. The 09ers and the PCH bikers, though economically separated by class, are not morally different. Wanda, the school's big hope, turns out to be no better than the group she is fighting. It is perhaps that Veronica's own lack of social class that allows this display of ambiguity. As she does not belong to any class, the show is not required to sympathize with a particular social class. Instead it is possible to focus on the corruption in all classes and socioeconomic backgrounds, thus creating mysteries where everyone can be the villain. This relates back to Hirsch's concept of the mischance narratives I briefly addressed in chapter one, where everyone is capable of being pulled into noir situations. However, some of the more extreme scenarios originate within the 09er sphere, particularly in the families of the 09er main characters Logan, Duncan and Dick. The main villains of the first and second seasons are both 09ers. This suggests that with power comes corruption, a common fiction trope. Though in *Veronica Mars*, the lack of power also seem to initiate desperate and criminal acts in the implicated characters.

Klein comments on the episode with Wanda and the election and says that it is "an episode that cleverly highlighted how the social politics and caste systems of Neptune High School are a carbon copy of those found in Neptune proper [...]" (Klein 2006: 87). What Klein is saying is that inevitably, the 09ers will win on both the small and the grand scale and that they are superior. Another interesting comment by Klein is that "Madison tampered with the voting directions in the classrooms most likely to carry Wanda supporters – band, auto shop, and art, where the students favor black clothing and tattoos over polo shirts and relaxed-fit khakis" and that "the episode (somewhat problematically) implies that these are the activities (and clothing styles) of the school's underclass, that sports and student council are reserved for only the wealthiest of students" (Klein 2006: 88). I believe Klein has a point when there is something problematic about the distinction of class in this episode, but as we saw from Bolte's observations above, the 09er group seems to effectively eliminate all individual expressions, and thus those who want to be "themselves" are considered outcasts and have no place among the privileged whatsoever.

As Klein argues, the class war in school often echoes the class issues in Neptune in general. The power of class can be used for influence in other arenas. Jake Kane is able to use his class as a weapon to evade unpaid tickets on one of his cars in 1x02 “Credit Where Credit’s Due” by simply having the officer mention to the sheriff who he is. In the show’s back story, Veronica’s father Keith accuses Jake of murdering his own daughter. Jake’s class power then manages to remove Keith from office. Aaron Echolls is another beloved 09er, Neptune’s number one movie star. When he is put on trial for statutory rape and the murder of Lilly Kane in 2x21 “Happy Go Lucky”, he is also able to use class as his weapon of choice. Thanks to evidence going missing, he is able to play on the love the community has for him and by tampering with the dead Lilly’s reputation, he is cleared of all charges. It should be noted that class can also work as a double-edged sword, as the spoiled 09er teens who behave just the way they see fit is not well-received by Neptune. When Logan is accused of murder in season two, his class seems to become more of a problem. Because the public has no affection for spoiled rich kids (the majority of the town are not 09ers), they are enraged when he is freed of the murder charges because his high-priced lawyers crushed the testimonies of the working class bikers.

As all this shows, the power of social class is of significant importance. When the Neptune High senior prom is cancelled, the 09ers simply throw their own “Alterna-Prom” as a response to school authority in 2x20 “Look Who’s Stalking”. In 2x01 “Normal Is the Watchword” several 09ers are able to go home from a school field trip by limousine, simply because they dislike the smell on the school bus. This literally saves their lives when the bus later blows up and plunges into the Pacific Ocean. Tucker argues: “All the underprivileged students, who do not have their own cars or an alternative mode of transportation, take the school bus [...] The bus crash, in addition to being the second season’s story arc, served to establish to the audience once again that this was a show that concerned itself with class issues.” She refers to a season two DVD review, quoting that “As the season progressed, the bus crash became a metaphor for Neptune’s social inequities” (Tucker 2008: 61).

Since *Veronica Mars* uses this class trope to demonstrate inequalities in society, the show is also able to do something that is not traditional for teen television: a multi-ethnic cast of characters. Tucker argues that *Veronica Mars* and its representation of ethnicity are different from other southern Californian counterparts. In many shows featuring this location, she says,

the main characters are mostly white and that minorities, if featured at all, are never main characters. This is also said to statistically be a misinterpretation of the location (Tucker 2008: 66). I agree with Tucker's view on this. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The O.C.* do not have any main characters that are not white. Bolte argues: "If Sunnydale is a remarkably white, upper middle-class, political issue-free zone, Neptune is its polar opposite" (Bolte 2008: 107) In *Veronica Mars*, the exclusion of ethnic protagonists in teen shows is remedied by incorporating two characters with ethnic background as main cast; Wallace Fennel who is African-American and Weevil who is Hispanic. Season two also sees the introduction of another African-American main character, Jackie Cook. Several minor characters are also of different ethnic origins. In fact, this move (along with the repeated exploration of class issues) has been viewed as unique:

The cultural commentary of *VM* depends on the interconnectedness of class and ethnicity and the transparency of that connection within Neptune society. The establishment of Neptune as a fictional space depends upon the audience's understanding of the class divisions and the population of those within each class strata, and our recognition of *Veronica's* transgression of those structural borders is dependent on the same. *VM's* elevation of the discourse on race and socioeconomic status by making such divisions so obvious – eliminating the middle class – is a distinctly unique position in teen TV (Bolte 2008: 107)

The upper class in Neptune (the 09ers) is traditionally reserved for its white inhabitants, those who have already achieved the American dream. As such, other ethnicities are often seen struggling, such as Weevil and the Latino biker gang. There are some exceptions. In 1x13 "Lord of the Bling", we meet successful African-American hip-hop producer Bone Hamilton who needs help in finding his missing daughter Yolanda. Jackie Cook from season two has a successful baseball player as her father. Both Yolanda and Jackie are invited into the 09er group, so the concept of being rich is not a question of ethnic origin. However, it is true that many minority characters are seen struggling on the show. Consider Asian-American Hamilton Cho in 1x17 "Kanes and Abel's" who is in the valedictorian race and the possible winner of the Kane scholarship, all while struggling at his parents' pizza restaurant. Without his knowledge, his parents hire someone to harass his competitor, an 09er, because they feel she does not deserve a scholarship. When this is exposed, Hamilton is forced to drop out of the race in order to avoid charges against his parents.

*Veronica Mars* creator Rob Thomas experienced a particular reaction to the representation of minorities on the show, and he explains:

She mentioned to me that she loved the show, but that our portrayal of the minority characters in the show made her uncomfortable. “Why are they criminals?” she asked. Now, while the PCHers were mostly (but not exclusively) Latino, and they certainly steal cars, I hadn’t thought we had portrayed our minority characters in any negative light. Well, that’s not quite true. I didn’t think I had portrayed them any more negatively than our rich White kids. Certainly, Wallace is the moral core of the show. His ethical backbone is certainly stronger than Veronica’s. And I never considered stealing cars any worse than organizing bum fights, or crossing the border for drugs, or setting fire to the community pool. Noir thrives in a world of moral ambiguity and, outside of Wallace, I don’t think anyone is clean [...] (Thomas 2006: 82)

What I interpret from this is that even though some of the minority characters are criminals, it is easy to forget the crimes and misdemeanors of everyone else on the show. Maybe a reason for the reaction that Thomas is referring to is found in what television professor Sharon Ross calls “overwhelmingly white landscapes of film and television” (Ross 2004: 142). Due to the overrepresentation of white characters on television, and particularly in teen dramas, there are still anxieties about how to represent so-called minorities. While it probably has always been alright to incriminate white characters on television, the criminal acts of an ethnic character may possibly become more focused upon by the viewers. And certainly when a noir drama like *Veronica Mars* is one of the teen shows that try to portray these issues, reactions are bound to surface. Everybody can be a criminal in *Veronica Mars*, regardless of ethnic background. Tucker argues:

That the negative actions of the white are ignored while the ones of the ethnic minorities highlighted is not the way to interpret the series. However, by making all classes and races have both good and bad characters, though mostly ambiguous, ones the show comes across as more realistic and a more accurate portrayal of contemporary society. (Tucker 2008: 67)

She makes a valid point that the show does not try to ignore the crimes of white people and focus on what ethnic minorities do. A final example I would like to give, regarding this representation of ambiguous ethnic characters, appears in 3x16 “Un-American Graffiti”. Veronica is hired by the wife of the owner of the Babylon Gardens restaurant (both are Arab-Americans) to find out who is targeting them with vandalism and racist graffiti. The culprit is the brother of an ex-soldier who served in Iraq and ended up paralyzed. The ex-soldier holds no grudges, but the brother seems to be extremely upset. When the restaurant owners try to

speak to him, he rejects them. Veronica later learns that his anger comes from one of the restaurant's employees, Nasir, who is handing out anti-American propaganda flyers. The restaurant owners explain that they kept him as an employee since his student visa expired, but once they learn what he is doing, they fire him and call the immigration service which shows up and takes Nasir away. The restaurant owners explain that they are proud Americans and do not support what Nasir was doing.

I think this episode is a good example combined with Tucker's comment above that the show mixes good and bad characters of all ethnicities. It portrays the Arabic restaurant owners as patriotic Americans, but it is also not afraid to raise the issue that this is not the case for everyone. There is always an ambiguity, like Tucker argues, and the issues of class is one of the ways that *Veronica Mars* manifests the pervasive noir idea of moral ambiguity.

Hirsch argues that noir usually has tried to be a reflection of the Zeitgeist (the spirit of the times) and that it has continued to be so, but only obliquely and metaphorically (Hirsch 1999: 7). *Veronica Mars*' exaggeration of society's class issues is a reflection of this noir Zeitgeist. By using class as a hyperbole, the show is able to investigate social issues in close detail in a small town. The issues also work as a catalyst for many mysteries. The show includes characters of most classes and ethnicities and focuses on the ambiguity in them all and thus it is perhaps a more realistic version of our own world. But it is only so metaphorically, *Veronica Mars* is still fiction. As Hirsch says: "Noir is not, after all, a documentary style" (Hirsch 1999: 7)

Even though the issues of the class-torn Neptune is "at the heart of all the show's storylines" (Bolte 2008: 102), it also serves Veronica in a helpful way as far as her investigations are concerned. Editor and journalist Christopher Hayes argues that:

Moving back and forth across Neptune's battle lines, Veronica occupies a unique position in the high school's social hierarchy. An aggressive, angry outsider with an outsize reputation, she is loathed and feared by students and teachers alike, but because of her investigative savvy, has alliances with everyone from Weevil to Logan Echolls, a sociopathic rich kid who stages fights between homeless men and smashes in Veronica's headlights with a crowbar. Her reputation as a crack detective puts her services in high demand, and like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, the noir heroes from whom she descends, Veronica sees up close how the pathologies of class operate. Her clients range from Neptune's aristocracy to its immigrant strivers, all battling to come to grips with their appointed privileges and deprivations (Hayes 2006).

Class and socioeconomic backgrounds are powerful tools that help create the noir in Neptune. As well as causing significant inequalities between citizens and proving to be helpful in Veronica's investigations, the importance of class pulsates throughout the entire show and becomes a source of fear, paranoia and desperation, enough to make characters from all layers of society embrace their inner moral demons.

## The Criminal Injustice System

Lamb: (admiring himself in a mirror after bench pressing) You know, Keith, you really should've done more to push fitness when you were here.

Keith: Yeah, I was going to get to that, but the crime-fighting kept getting in the way. (2x10 "One Angry Veronica")

Social inequalities, however, cannot be said to be the only phenomenon that causes such a massive outbreak of crime in Neptune. The town is also the victim of a rather indifferent legal system that often refuses to provide help or be of any use for its denizens. After Veronica's father is removed from the position of sheriff and replaced by the younger Don Lamb (through the power of class, I discussed this particular example above), law enforcement in Neptune becomes corrupt. I wish to start this discussion by a quote from *Veronica Mars* creator Rob Thomas:

Contrary to what might be demonstrated in *Veronica Mars*, I actually have an average, possibly even above-average, faith in law enforcement and the criminal justice system. (...) When I began to develop the show, I purchased a couple of books about noir and boned up. I learned that a corrupt legal/law enforcement system was an almost universal element of noir. I was lucky to have read that because (...) had I written Sheriff Lamb as a hard-working, honest man, *Veronica Mars* could not exist. There would be little need for her (Thomas 2006: 114).

In this quote, Thomas is explaining why he represented the law enforcement as corrupt: to create a purpose to Veronica's work and existence in the story. McMahon argues that "One of the most notable features of noir is its focus on crime" and that this applies both to characters "who are either enmeshed in, or involved in the detection of, crime" (McMahon 2008: 116). The most popular current crime investigation shows today are variations of the police procedural, like the *CSI* franchise, *Bones* and *The Mentalist*. Characters in these shows are usually working for the law enforcement, constantly reassuring the viewers that the system



will leave no stone unturned and the villains will be dealt with. This is often done through creative investigation methods, like forensic work, experiments, or mentalist abilities. A common denominator for these shows is that they usually focus exclusively on the method of the investigation, replacing classic detective fiction's focus on the story of the crime (which was discussed in the previous chapter). This is not to say that the law systems presented in these shows are supposed to be perfect, but whenever such questions are raised, the characters are usually so devoted to solving a case that they will work outside regulations to achieve that. In *Veronica Mars* the law enforcement system provides little comfort for many of its citizens. With an antagonizing sheriff and his unmotivated department of deputies, Neptune has another source of noir paranoia. Knight and McKnight argue: "What becomes necessary in noir narratives [...] is a figure whose actions can resolve the mystery and ensure justice, although such figures are often outside the law as traditionally represented by the police" (Knight and McKnight 2008: 161). In Neptune this task usually falls on Veronica, and because of her exiled position in Neptune's class hierarchy, she is able to gather information that would be difficult for the sheriff's department to procure.

Moses argues that "Film noir has always offered a dark vision of authority" (Moses 2008: 222). Moses discusses this in relation to the large government conspiracies taking place in *The X-Files* and *Millennium*. While *Veronica Mars* does portray Neptune's local governments darkly (such as the Mayor trying to enforce incorporation upon the town which will end badly for the town's economically less fortunate citizens), the show's darkest vision of authority is found in the local law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Scholars John J. Blaser and Stephanie L. M. Blaser argue that in many film noirs, the criminal justice system is incompetent and that the police force is corrupt (Blaser and Blaser 2008).

The first episode, 1x01 "Pilot", starts with at least three different points of criticism about Neptune's law enforcement. They certainly set the mood for the representation of law in the show. Veronica's new friend Wallace gives her an account of the night before, when some members of the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) biker gang enters the store he is working in and steal goods. Wallace presses the silent alarm and when Sheriff Lamb arrives and tells him to come outside, he notices the entire biker gang staring at him. Out of fear, he tells Lamb that he pressed the alarm by mistake. Lamb just laughs him off and tells him to go see "the wizard" and ask for "some guts".

Veronica provides a more extreme example in a flashback which details the morning after she has been drugged and raped and goes to the sheriff's office to report the crime. Sheriff Lamb tells a clearly devastated Veronica:

Lamb: Is there anyone in particular you'd like me to arrest or should I just round up the sons of the most important families in town? I've got not a shred of evidence to work with here, but that really doesn't matter to your family, now does it? Mm... Look at this. She cries. I'll tell you what, Veronica Mars, why don't you go see the wizard. Ask for a little backbone."  
(1x01 "Pilot")

When Lamb learns that Veronica has arrived to report a crime, he decides to take her statement himself. His animosity towards Keith Mars is taken out on Veronica and he taunts her though she has clearly been through a very traumatic event. He basically calls her a coward and makes his "Wizard of Oz" reference to humiliate her even further. He also refuses to allow her to report the crime because there is no evidence. It is very likely that Lamb has a problem with people that cannot "stick up for themselves", like the two examples with Wallace and Veronica. He patronizes their fear. This event is what basically makes Lamb Veronica's hate object. Later in the same episode, it is revealed that some of Lamb's officers are taking oral sex bribes from the strippers at the Seventh Veil strip club in order to keep their liquor license because of their "lax ID policy", as lawyer Cliff McCormack (on the show) states.

As these examples show, *Veronica Mars* establishes the corruption in law enforcement early. Knight and McKnight accounts for the sheriff in *CSI*: "For instance, the sheriff is concerned only about the optics of a crime and how they might affect his career, not about justice [...]" (Knight and McKnight 2008: 162). The same bureaucratic attitude is found in Lamb, but he has a vicious edge to his character. In his essay on *The Fugitive*, Skoble argues for an inversion of values, where the police are (superficially) portrayed as the bad guys (Skoble 2008: 84). This inversion of values is found in *Veronica Mars*, where the law enforcement is driven by indifference. There are several instances where Lamb's bureaucratic and indifferent attitude shines through. In 2x02 "Driver Ed", Lamb initiates an official (and poor) investigation on the bus crash which claimed the lives of nine people and makes a public statement that the bus driver was on a suicide mission. Veronica helps the driver's family prove that he was not suicidal and even procures a witness that will testify to this fact. The driver's daughter desperately pleas with Lamb, but he adamantly states that they have his

suicide note as evidence (which in fact was a letter of apology to his wife for wanting to leave her for another woman) and that the case is closed. He coolly makes a comment that he is sorry for her loss.

Law professor and author Alafair Burke has addressed topics regarding Neptune's legal system. I wish to discuss some of her arguments as I believe she can provide a professional point of view on this topic.

In the real world, when girls get raped, boys get molested, and bodies get blown up, people look to the law. They look to the police, prosecutors, jurors, and judges to dole out some justice. They don't call the high school-aged daughter of the disgraced former sheriff. The key to understanding why we believe that the people of Neptune need Veronica Mars lies in Rob Thomas' depiction of the alternative. In Neptune, the criminal justice system is consistently either indifferent or incapacitated. Neptune, in short, is lawless. (Burke 2006: 116)

The examples Burke provides here support the argument that Neptune's legal system is more or less useless. Burke exemplifies this by providing some of the more extreme crimes/mysteries on the show. However, there is something that is slightly off about the cases she uses. The particular crimes in the quote are investigated by the police (except for the molestation issue as it was a well-kept secret and revealed during Veronica's investigations), but it is Veronica who ends up solving them. This does not hurt Burke's argument about an incapacitated system, but I believe it is important to realize that people do not primarily turn to Veronica for help with these extreme cases. However, that a teenager is the only one able to solve them testifies in favor of the claim of a useless law enforcement system in Neptune.

Rob Thomas [...] nimbly convinces us that in Neptune, our suspicions about law's occasional inadequacy are in fact the prevailing, everyday norm. How does he manage to pull that off? Part of the trick is to exaggerate the occasional shortcomings and to flesh them out full in every episode. But that move wouldn't work on its own. A smart viewer would say "But in the real world, law works better than that". We know that in real life, when rich attractive white girls get murdered, and when busloads of kids are blown to bits, the cases don't get short shrift. In real life, the law enforcement A-team steps in. (Burke 2006: 119)

I would argue that the issues Burke presents here are a reflection of the noir Zeitgeist, just like the exaggerations of class. By repeatedly focusing on and enhancing the law system's shortcomings, the noir paranoia is even more evident and contributes to the dark atmosphere

of Neptune. The noir Zeitgeist is meant to be exaggerated, and this happens in *Veronica Mars*. Burke continues:

The key to understanding why we believe in a lawless Neptune is to look at the kinds of crimes Thomas uses to define the context in which these other high-profile, season-defining crimes take place. The big mysteries tackled by Veronica (Who killed Lilly? Who blew up the bus?) may be headline stealers, but the smaller ones wrestled with on an episodic basis are not. Thomas reinforces our perception of a lawless Neptune by focusing on crimes that are routinely ignored, not just in Neptune but everywhere. Specifically, he uses old classics of race, gender and class to remind us in each episode how much we distrust the criminal justice system (Burke 2006: 120).

Burke mentions crimes that are routinely ignored, and gives examples such as even though the PCHers create a lot of trouble for themselves, the police are rarely able to do anything about it. Burke argues that “this echoes real-life gang violence that is infamously difficult to prevent and prosecute”. She also mentions date rapes and psychological torture of children (in the show) as other areas where the law fails to help (Burke 2006: 120-123). The point here is that many of the cases that Veronica handles are crimes/misdemeanors which would receive very little legal attention, due to the fact that they are not large-scale enough or too difficult to solve (for example, the serial rapes at Hearst College where there are never any witnesses) for Neptune’s bureaucratic law enforcement.

Several of the mysteries Veronica tackles are classic detective plots like murder, kidnapping and theft. Others are of a more contemporary/modern origin (which is not to say that the classic detective plots are outdated), such as e-mail scams, corporate conspiracies, fake IDs, date rapes, stolen school mascots, stalking and blackmail. Veronica handles a long list of mysteries. Thomas has commented on his use of mysteries on the show:

I feel like we land in what I feel is uncomfortably campy territory when we bite off more than we can chew story-wise. My personal least favorite episodes – or if not episodes, storylines – are when the stories feel too big for Veronica’s world [...]. When I think of quintessential VM MOWs, I think of a story like, ‘My boyfriend took a dirty video of me. Help me get it back.’ It’s not lightweight and fluffy like a Nancy Drew mystery or something you might find on a family friendly network. It’s noir and edgy, but it feels solvable by a seventeen-year-old girl with skills. (Thomas 2006: 8)

From this quote I interpret that the mysteries are supposed to be within Veronica’s “grasp”, meaning that she should be able to solve them (while possessing her sleuthing skills). Hirsch discusses the noir films *The Net* (1995) and *The Game* (1997), saying that they brought

“bystanders pressed into noir [...] up to postmodern speed” by adding plots that focused on computer hackings and dangerous technological “virtual reality” games respectively (Hirsch 1999: 226). I believe that this is what the writers of *Veronica Mars* are attempting to do: by primarily adopting a teen setting they are able to create contemporary mysteries, issues that are very real in society today. Of course, this does not mean that every mystery is related to being a teen (and many mysteries I have shown here are not), but several of them are. Hirsch states that in noir over the years, the crimes that the hunter (the investigator, the policeman etc.) uncovers have grown exponentially vaster (Hirsch 1999: 164). This means that noir can deal with a plethora of different crimes and mysteries, just like how *Veronica Mars* does not limit itself to a few types of crimes. This of course can also be discussed to be because of the serial narrative. 64 episodes require a certain amount of diversity in order to stay interesting for its viewers.

Even though Thomas might feel that some mysteries are too big for Veronica’s world, they can in fact enhance the noir of the show. If large and extreme cases are not solvable by the police, but by a teenager (that is not to say that Veronica is an average teenager, she is very good at her work, but in a normal world a professional police force should perform better), then it may very well be a noir critique of that system. For example, Sheriff Lamb puts minimal-to-zero effort into solving the serial rapes at Hearst College in season three. If Veronica does not intervene (as with many of the cases Lamb refuses to pursue), then the problem will be left unresolved and result in more victims. The important point about many of Veronica’s investigations is that she rarely seems to ignore anyone’s request (though she appreciates doing it for cash, as she states in 1x11 “Silence of the Lamb”). Veronica usually investigates anything and as such, she represents a counterweight to the sheriff’s department that would ignore most of these cases.

It is not just Neptune’s sheriff’s department that gets the noir treatment. In 1x18 “Weapons of Class Destruction”, Veronica discovers that a series of bomb threats have made against her school. Again, this is a very serious contemporary issue echoing all the school killings that have happened the past few years. A young FBI agent goes undercover as a student and befriends Norris, who is suspected of making the threats. Veronica later reveals that the threats are fake, set up by a former victim of Norris’ bullying. However, the FBI agent plants evidence in Norris’ car and frames him for the threats so that he can arrest him. Luckily, Veronica had followed the agent around earlier in the episode and took pictures of him with

the materials he had planted in Norris' car. Without her resolve, Norris might have been sent to prison because of a corrupted young FBI agent. As Blaser and Blaser argues, even the federal government has been identified as threatening and oppressive in noir (Blaser and Blaser 2008). From this example, we see that this is also addressed in *Veronica Mars*, though the show focuses primarily on local-scale corruption.

Burke says that "Thomas depicts the law as working not only slowly, but rigidly" (Burke 2006: 118). A good example here is from the episode 2x07 "Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner" where Veronica and Duncan discover that the strictly religious Manning family are locking up their young daughter in the closet, forcing her to repeatedly write down Christian doctrines. However, Veronica and Duncan discover this by breaking into their house and Mr. Manning calls Lamb on them. Burke argues that "Lamb's decision to release Veronica and Duncan – and the suggestion that Lamb's own father was abusive – is Lamb's most sympathetic portrayal in the series (Burke 2006: 123). The problem with the law here is that Lamb is unable to do anything to help the young Manning child because of the way she was discovered – the evidence is not admissible. Though Lamb sees the closet they keep their daughter in and the doctrines himself, he can do nothing against them formally. He does release Veronica and Duncan. Burke says that "his beneficence results not from a decision to enforce the law against Mr. Manning, but rather from his decision *not* to enforce the law against Duncan and Veronica. Only by neglecting the expectations of his office is he able to do the right thing. The law, Thomas is telling us, is an impediment – not a vehicle – to justice" (Burke 2006: 123).

This impediment is perhaps best portrayed in 2x11 "Donut Run" which again heavily critiques the law system and its incapability. After giving birth to Duncan's daughter, Meg Manning dies. Her parents (from the example above) deny Duncan any rights to the baby and they wish to put her up for adoption to a family that promotes strict religious discipline. Echoing the horrible events from the Manning household, Duncan kidnaps his daughter and tries to flee the country. Veronica helps him by putting the FBI and Lamb on the wrong tracks. This episode also demonstrates Skoble's point which I briefly mentioned above concerning noir as "demonstrating moral clarity and practical reason". Skoble argues: "I've argued in previous essays on film noir that the 'standard view' of noir as involving moral ambiguity is mistaken, that noir is better understood as demonstrating moral clarity and practical reason" (Skoble 2008: 84). He exemplifies this by analyzing the television show *The*

*Fugitive* and how the protagonist needs to make tough decisions between what is right and wrong and what is the most beneficial to him on his quest. Skoble's thought is interesting and highly relevant in *Veronica Mars*' treatment of this episode in question. The law is unable to protect Duncan's daughter from the abusive Mannings, and the only way to ensure justice is by committing illegal acts. But in this context the show portrays Duncan and Veronica's actions as the right thing to do (and I highly doubt that viewers would sympathize with the Mannings here) and Duncan is able to escape, ensuring his daughter's safe future. The morally right thing to do in this episode is the illegal thing to do, as the justice system would have proven itself to be incapable of ensuring a safe future for Duncan's daughter.

There are many instances of the law's uselessness in *Veronica Mars*, but I believe the examples here are sufficient enough to demonstrate this. Burke argues:

In episode after episode, law and the people who enforce it prove unhelpful – until, of course, Veronica gives the system a little shove. Ultimately, Thomas' masterful and believable depiction of formal legal systems as inadequate is the grounding that makes the rest of the show work. Without this context, Veronica's many witticisms, the multi-layered plots [...] wouldn't fly. It's precisely because cops, prosecutors, lawyers, and judges are credibly depicted as lazy, reactionary, and/or powerless that we satisfied viewers can swallow a series based on a high school student solving not just little mysteries about fake IDs and missing dogs, but also weighty ones, like murder, molestation, and mass violence. We would never buy the notion of Veronica's importance if she existed in a world with meaningful governmental response. We believe in her importance because she lives in a lawless Neptune (Burke 2006: 123).

I think this quote sums up the discussion of the law enforcement system in a good manner. Although Burke's comments are a little subjective here, there are still several valid points which I have shown in this discussion. I have discussed how the system fails to work and how Veronica is needed in a society where everyone seems to invite noir into their lives. The show explores crimes of all types, both classic and more contemporary mysteries, and this contributes to the critique of the society and the criminal justice system. The hyperbole of the law's incapacitation becomes another part in which *Veronica Mars* addresses a noir Zeitgeist. Neptune's safety lies in a teenager, which is both comforting and disturbing at the same time.

## Chapter Conclusion

*Veronica Mars* uses class inequalities between denizens in Neptune to cause conflict, alongside a more or less useless and indifferent law enforcement system. The issues often trigger moral ambiguity in the characters and in accordance with noir ideas, everyone has the potential of becoming villains in the show. Neptune embodies the spirit of the corrupt and inescapable noir city and the more dystopian visions of suburbia in noir and popular culture while locating most of the action in melodrama's small-town America.

Now I would like to turn the attention to another aspect of *Veronica Mars*: What happens to common teen drama themes and issues (such as relationships, sexuality, and family) in a noir universe like Neptune? This will be the main focus of chapter three. There are bound to be some interesting tensions between the genres on this respect. Please refer to the next chapter for that discussion.



## Chapter 3

### The Teen Noir Melodrama



Crime story narratives, noir stylistics and a universe filled with paranoia because of a rigid class division and an incapacitated law enforcement system: these elements make it easy to forget the teen melodrama of *Veronica Mars*. In the midst of all the mysteries the show devotes time to addressing teen life, like in the image above where Veronica and Piz find time to conduct some normal teen activities (3x19 “Weevils Wobble But They Don’t Go Down”). Teen dramas have depicted teen life through several genre hybrids from horror/supernatural and sci-fi to more realistically-themed shows. Because of *Veronica Mars*’ noir focus, I believe it would be interesting to see how the teen melodrama themes clash with noir on this show. Current academic material on *Veronica Mars* has mostly been limited to exploring the show’s take on class issues and mysteries related to these. While these are interesting topics that I devoted an entire chapter to, it becomes easy to overlook the teen themes the show also raises. There are several interesting points to discuss on this subject related to the teen and noir hybridization. I propose the following research questions for this chapter:

- What are common teen melodrama themes and how are they present and addressed in *Veronica Mars*? In what ways are these themes influenced by a noir mentality?

The main literature for this chapter will be Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson's *Teen TV*, Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein's *Teen Television*, Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir*, Foster Hirsch's *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir*, Art Silverblatt's *Genre Studies in Mass Media*, Rob Thomas' *Neptune Noir*, Anja Tucker's thesis *Teen Noir* and Christine Gledhill's *Home Is Where the Heart Is*.

## The Teen Drama and The WB

Keith: Don't forget. You're a high school girl. Do some high school girl things now and then.

Veronica: (jokingly) Relax, Dad. I'm cutting pictures of Ashton [Kutcher] out of Teen People as we speak.

(1x15 "Ruskie Business")

Throughout this thesis so far I have discussed some aspects of both melodrama and the teen drama. In this chapter it is finally time to uncover what teen drama is thematically about, how it relates to melodrama and how *Veronica Mars* relates this to noir. I would argue that any discussion of modern teen drama must account for this concept and its connection to the US channel The WB (which merged with UPN and today exists as The CW). As television professors Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein put it: "By the late 1990s, then, WB programming *was* teen programming from a pop culture standpoint" (Ross and Stein 2008: 15).

Film and media studies lecturer Valerie Wee explains that The WB started to specifically target the teen niche audience in the latter half of the 90s. Wee claims that prior to the mid-1990s, this target group was largely ignored by the entertainment industries. The WB's targeting started with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek* (Wee 2008: 48). On the same channel, other teen-oriented shows were quick to follow, such as *Roswell*, *Charmed* and *Felicity*. Regarding these shows, Wee finds a set of common characteristics that will be important in many teen shows to come. Wee explains these characteristics:

All of these shows share a range of distinct characteristics: they feature a young and highly attractive ensemble cast and they all trace the experiences of youth and growing up with an appealing blend of intelligence, sensitivity, and knowing sarcasm. In addition, the shows addressed many sensitive and relevant teen and youth issues, such

as self-destructive teenage behavior, alcoholism, teenage sex, and sexual identity. Furthermore, these shows' central focus revolved around the relationships and friendships of the key protagonists (Wee 2008: 48).

Here we see the main points that Wee considers to be common for the WB teen dramas (which in reality concerns the majority of teen dramas). First we have the inclusion of an ensemble cast which was discussed in chapter one. The shows also address issues that are related to teens/being a teenager. The most important parts in Wee's quote regarding teen themes for this analysis are the relationships of the key protagonists, sex and sexual identity. These are very prominent themes on *Veronica Mars* and will be discussed below as they will help answer this chapter's research questions. The WB shows seem to hint that parents/families often are superfluous because the shows mainly seem to focus on the key teen protagonists. The focus of the dramas is still based within the domestic sphere, but the issues that occur are explored through the eyes of the teenager. For example, in *Dawson's Creek*, Dawson's mother's is unfaithful to her husband, but the show does not place the main focus on how the parents tackle this situation. Instead, the emotional focus lies on how Dawson experiences this rift in his family. Similarly in *Veronica Mars*, the disappearance of Veronica's mother Lianne is not explored primarily through her father Keith. It is how Veronica deals with this issue emotionally that is central to the narrative of this particular storyline (though it should be said that the shows do not ignore the parents' emotional responses to the familial situation, but the teenager holds the main focus).

The WB teen shows may have focused less on the roles of the parents within the drama, but this move did not originate within these shows. As Banks argues, it was in 1990 that the FOX show *Beverly Hills 90210* created some expectations for teen shows to come, especially related to how family was represented. Banks says that the show took "[...] the first steps toward the erasure of the parents (later, just mothers) as central figures within the drama". She claims that the parents were central in the narrative only in the beginning, and as the teens grew up, they became, as Banks puts it, "superfluous to the drama, and conveniently moved overseas" (Banks 2004: 21). For example, this happens again in *Smallville*. Clark's adoptive father is killed and when Clark no longer needs his mother, she conveniently takes over her husband's position as senator and moves away. While *Beverly Hills 90210* may have started to remove the parents from the domestic sphere (though the focus is still on the domestic), Banks argues that it was the show *Party of Five* that would carry on this tradition. Banks says that the show "set the standard for absent parents and for emotional intensity in television's

teen melodrama” (Banks 2004: 22). The reason for this is that the characters’ parents were killed by a drunk driver and the show consequently dealt with their lives without the possibility of their parents being present. Teen dramas seem to have a different family focus than the traditional family melodrama where the adults are the main characters. Now I wish to discuss the representation of family in *Veronica Mars*, as it is evident here that a large part of teen melodramas address these issues. I will also attempt to link this discussion up to the subgenre of teen male melodrama, as these dramas also change the role of the family. This is relevant to *Veronica Mars*’ representation of these issues. It should be said that some teen dramas have since the WB era attempted to reincorporate the parents as central figures within the drama. For example, *The O.C.* includes several adults/parents as main characters and details much of their life despite primarily being a teen drama. In *Veronica Mars*, Veronica’s father Keith is a prominent main character appearing in all episodes.

### **Teen Male Melodrama, Family and Noir**

In chapter one I briefly mentioned the teen male melodrama, and I will elaborate on this concept here as it is relevant for the teen drama family focus. According to researcher Miranda J. Banks, teen male melodrama adds new tropes to the teen genre and the representation of family. While having its roots in the domestic family melodrama, Banks says that the teen male melodrama includes a heroic, self-sacrificing (male) character that derives from the women’s melodrama combined with the male melodrama’s troubled youth (a concept I briefly addressed in relation to teen heroic melodrama in chapter one) (Banks 2004: 18). As stated in chapter one, she uses the shows *Smallville* and *Roswell* in her analysis, both of these shows feature a male protagonist from outer space. The role of family in these shows is summed up by Banks: “[...] in the teen male melodrama the focus of attention is a young adult, making the parents into characters that, at the most basic level, either support or frustrate the lives of the teens that fall under their care” (Banks 2004: 19). This quote is particularly interesting with respect to the depictions of family in *Veronica Mars* and what Banks is saying here should not be limited to the teen male melodrama. As *Smallville* and *Roswell* are both WB shows, they too follow the WB teen drama model from Wee’s quote above. The point Banks is making is that the parents in the two sci-fi shows she is discussing are not the protagonists’ biological parents. Because the protagonists are aliens, the parents cannot provide much help, and as Banks says: “[...] their adoptive human mothers offer little

beyond affection, and their adoptive fathers and male guardians can only serve as protectors [that no one figures out the protagonists' true identities]" (Banks 2004: 25).

This might suggest that the teen male melodrama is limited to supernatural or sci-fi stories, which is perhaps considered a more male approach to the melodrama. It would also seem that from these examples, the teen male melodrama is automatically considered teen heroic melodrama (the narrative structure I discussed in chapter one which refers to teen dramas with dominating protagonists with special abilities). This has changed and I am now going to go a little off-topic in order to defend my statements about this type of drama. This is necessary so that I can discuss how more recent types of teen male melodrama continue the tradition of frustrating families without being supernaturally-based. *Roswell* and *Smallville* might have been the prime examples of teen male melodrama when Banks published her essay (and I am not arguing that she is wrong in her discussion). However, the short-lived ABC show *Life As We Know It* (it only ran for 13 episodes) provides an excellent example of teen male melodrama without the use of otherworldly plotlines or self-sacrificing protagonists, but it still contains the focus on male main characters. I argue for an expansion of the teen male melodrama concept because of this show and its male point of view. The term "teen male melodrama" is fitting for teen dramas which feature male main characters and should not be exclusive to shows where the males are otherworldly beings with superpowers. If the term is limited to these supernatural shows, what could these other male-centered teen dramas be called? The term "teen male melodrama" should be used for dramas where the main characters are mainly male, regardless of special powers and alien origin.

I would now like to return to the discussion of family in teen male melodrama. *Life As We Know It* centers on three male friends (Dino, Ben and Jonathan) and particularly their friendship and their relationship with girlfriends, sex, school and family. True to Bank's definition of the family in teen male melodrama, the families of these teens are frustrating, though not because their sons are from another planet. Dino's mother is unfaithful with Dino's hockey coach and this leads to Dino's parents being separated. Dino struggles with his allegiance to his parents, such as who to live with, which parent to blame for the situation and so on. Ben's parents are strict and seemingly expect way too much of him. Jonathan's parents are more relaxed, but this seems to be just as frustrating for him. Their open and sharing nature (particularly with regards to the topic of sex) is awkward for Jonathan. What I am showing here (and which Banks displayed above) is that parents in teen male melodrama

usually are unable to understand their teenage sons and thus they become a source of frustration.

Wee explains an important characteristic of the WB teen shows which seems to be universal for teen melodramas: “These WB teen shows actively cultivated the niche teen audience by exploring issues that would resonate with teenagers, such as the complicated, conflicted relationships teenagers have with family and friends.” (Wee 2008: 50). She describes some of the family relationships in some of the WB shows: In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the relationship Buffy has with her mother Joyce is based on misunderstandings. Joyce believes Buffy is a regular teenager when she is in fact destined to save the world. On *Dawson’s Creek*, Wee mentions that three of the main characters have dysfunctional relationships with their parents: Joey’s father is in prison and her mother is dead, Jennifer’s mother has abandoned her responsibilities and sent her off to live with her grandmother, and Pacey is ignored by his parents (Wee 2008: 50-51). In *The O.C.*, Ryan is thrown out from his home and ends up being adopted by the Cohen family in Newport.

*Veronica Mars* continues the teen drama tradition of frustrating and dysfunctional families, but often the source of frustration is not because the parents cannot understand their teens. Instead, the parents seem to have their very own complicated issues which negatively affect their children’s lives. Veronica’s mother has disappeared without a trace and her father Keith is left to take care of her. Duncan Kane has lost his sister and his parents are covering up her death in order to protect him (without his knowledge). Wallace lives with his single mother Alicia and does not know that the man who raised him is not his father. Logan Echolls’ movie star father Aaron turns out to be an abusive husband and father, violently assaulting his son and driving his wife to commit suicide. Dick and Cassidy Casablancas live in a broken home and when their father is accused of corporate fraud, he escapes the country and leaves them in the care of their young, gold-digging stepmother. Mac finds out that she was switched at birth and really belongs with another family. Parker’s parents provide little support after she is raped, they blame her for being irresponsible and orders her to return home from college with them. Interestingly, one of the few seemingly happy nuclear families is the one that belongs to Mayor Woody Goodman. But here the vision of a happy family is obliterated when it is revealed that the mayor is a pedophile and a child molester. Like its teen drama predecessors, which base the dysfunctional families on melodrama and soap opera conventions, *Veronica Mars* introduces difficult family relations for most of its main characters and side characters.

Scholars John J. Blaser and Stephanie L.M. Blaser argue that in the classical Hollywood cinema and in American culture in general, family and home life is celebrated as a safe haven. Because of classic film noir's focus on different values and institutions in society, they claim that these movies are not exclusively focused on family. They explain how they view the family in film noir: "[...] like classical Hollywood cinema, film noir often expresses its view of American society through the image of the family generally and specifically woman's place in the family" (Blaser and Blaser 2008). From this quote I interpret that the representation of family in noir is particularly gendered. Blaser and Blaser discuss three types of film noir women: the femme fatale, a sexually liberated and ambitious woman; the nurturing woman (recognized as the "nurturer/homebuilder" by Spicer (2002: 91)), who Blaser and Blaser claim is depicted as "dull, featureless and, in the end, unattainable [...]"; and the "marrying type" who supposedly threatens the hero by insisting marriage. Blaser and Blaser explain that "Each type of film noir woman functions in a way that undermines society's image of the traditional family" (Blaser and Blaser 2008). This view of females in classic noir is an echo of the times in which they originated, and such values are most likely different in noirs today (though the femme fatale has continued to be a source of sexual terror as Hirsch argues (Hirsch 1999: 188)). The point I wish to call attention to here is that noir seems to be concerned with the disintegration of the family institution, and perhaps this is partly what has influenced the families in *Veronica Mars*. Tucker argues that because noir plots usually are dark and sinister, family life is often left out of the narrative (Tucker 2008: 27). In a teen melodrama, the representation of family in some form or another seems to be required. This is probably mostly due to the focus on teenaged protagonists, a demographic that usually belongs to a family in most cases.

The claim that family is not very much focused upon in film noir seems to have carried over into the neo-noirs and television noirs. For example, neither Hirsch (1999), Spicer (2002) nor Sanders and Skoble (2008) discuss the family institution in a significant matter, leading me to interpret that family is traditionally not a noir topic and that it instead derives from melodrama influences.

Despite film noir's disintegration of family through the use of unstable female characters, Blaser and Blaser argue: "Still, noir films stop short of rejecting the family altogether. While criticizing the family and marriage in a fairly overt way, film noir cannot resist the urge to

restore or reinforce the family, even if it is only at the last minute [...] the ending contradicts the content and style of the film itself” (Blaser and Blaser 2008). This is perhaps a strange move for movies that deliberately attempt to destroy the family. Even in the dysfunctional families of teen melodramas, there is often a desire to establish the safety of the family. Dawson in *Dawson’s Creek* wishes for his parents to get back together, Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* becomes extra protective of her sister Dawn after their mother dies (who Dawn later tries to magically resurrect, proving that family is indeed important). Clark in *Smallville* has continually tried to hunt down any remaining links to his biological family.

Even hardboiled Veronica Mars dreams of the reestablishment of the nuclear family. Veronica continually searches for her mother in the first season, but finding her is anything but a dream. Her mother is an alcoholic and she cannot even tell Veronica her true paternity because she does not know herself. Lianne is depicted far from the self-sacrificing mother of melodramas or the guiding mothers of teen male melodramas. This is perhaps a little unfair to Lianne’s character because it should be mentioned that she left town only to avert death threats against Veronica, thus proving some self-sacrificing mother traits. Veronica uses her college money to put her through rehabilitation in hopes of her returning to a stable family life. Both Veronica and Keith are overjoyed when Lianne surprisingly returns to them, but the joy is short-lived. Already in the next episode, Veronica discovers that Lianne is still drinking. Realizing that her dream was only just a dream and that Lianne instead provides instability, she orders Lianne to leave. Lianne steals Veronica’s money and leaves Neptune, never to return or to be heard from again. Here the series does something that is unusual for a teen show. It actually makes clear that in this particular situation, a broken family is often the better solution. Regarding the reestablishment of the family in film noir, Blaser and Blaser say that this is one of two types of noir endings that relates to the family, one he calls the unrealistic happy ending. The other is the denial of marriage and he states in the following quote: “[both endings] can be seen as critique of classical Hollywood cinema and the traditional values that it reinforces” (Blaser and Blaser 2008). *Veronica Mars* does not use this unrealistic happy ending type. That the best position for Veronica is in a broken home may be the result of a more contemporary zeitgeist (the spirit of the times, the way the family situation often is in real life today). Teen dramas have been preoccupied with detailing events that mimic the real life of teenagers, and broken homes are very common situations for teenagers today. However, if we look back at how families are represented in *Veronica Mars* in the passage above, there is perhaps little doubt that the show challenges both conventional



family values from American culture like film noir does and the family in teen melodramas while at the same time expressing the desire for domestic stability.

In fact, the nuclear family in general does not represent safety in *Veronica Mars*. The characters seem better off without this particular domestic situation. Though Logan is crushed by his mother's suicide, which can be interpreted as her escape from a very abusive family life, he is better off living without his parents (though this is not so strange considering the nature of Aaron Echolls' character). Logan actually enlists Veronica's help to prove that his mother did not die, indicating his desire for family life as well. But like Veronica's case, the dream can only remain a dream. Wallace meets his real father whom his mother Alicia wants nothing to do with, thereby denying Wallace the nuclear family. He goes off to live with him, but returns later after realizing where he belongs and where he can find stability. Perhaps a more explicit example of the criticism of traditional family values is found in Mac's family situation. In 1x11 "Silence of the Lamb", Veronica discovers that Mac was switched at birth and that this was not discovered until Mac was a year old. The parents of both families accepted settlement money from the hospital and decided to keep the children they had since they had already grown attached to them. Mac is not surprised to learn that she is adopted and seeks out her true family, a wealthy 09er family. After spending some time with her biological mother and sister (Mac does not reveal her identity, though her biological mother seems to recognize her), Mac decides that she is better off with her adopted family as she sees this as her true family, biologically or not. Mac's biological woman appears in a car outside Mac's house at the end of the episode where Mac and her family are preparing for their annual camping trip. Her mother gives her a longing look before she drives off. This actually resolves the storyline and it is never brought up again. Mac is perfectly happy with her adoptive family, though she was curious to see what her life could have been like. This is both similar and different to Ryan Atwood's position in *The O.C.*. Ryan is placed into the custody of a wealthy and caring Newport family, offering him stability that his mother could not provide. While initially struggling to fit in he eventually adjusts to his new setting, proving that the nuclear family represented by biological parents is not necessarily the ideal. The difference from Mac's situation (besides Ryan being adopted by the Cohens as a teenager, already having "another" family) is that Ryan's other family members turn up at various points during the storyline and Ryan attempts to include them in his new life. Mac disregarded this entirely and apparently did not even reveal to her adoptive family that she knew she truly belonged to another family.

Though *Veronica Mars* often represents dark and unstable sides of the family, the relationship Veronica has with her father is always depicted as stable and safe (though they both undeniably commit mistakes in their relationship). The stability represented by Mars senior and junior is perhaps because of their common fate: they are both exiled in their community and they are both private investigators. In fact, the reason they get along so well is maybe due to them not taking on the traditional role of parent and teenager. Communications researcher Andrea Braithwaite comments on their relationship, stating that “While constantly concerned about his daughter’s welfare, safety, and academic success [...], Keith Mars recognizes and supports Veronica’s independence” (Braithwaite 2008: 139). Television and pop culture essayist Joyce Millmann argues that even though there are periods where Keith takes on an authoritative parental role, “Veronica and Keith’s relationship is unusually harmonious, open, and relaxed for a TV depiction of a parent and teen [...] Veronica and Keith’s relationship is more like a partnership than a parent-child hierarchy” (Millmann 2006: 50). This is perhaps a good reason for why their relationship provides such a stable counterweight to most other families on the show. This family relationship withstands all resistance. The toughest challenge for their relationship is presented in 2x11 “Donut Run”, when Veronica goes behind her father’s back to help Duncan escape the country with his illegitimate daughter. Keith is furious and claims that he cannot trust her again, but already in the next episode their relationship is back to normal. It seems that noir cannot tear this family up further than what it has already done.

### **Romance and Relationships – Reflexivity Versus Action**

The concept of relationships is also important to teen dramas, like Wee observed above. *Veronica Mars* has its own spins on this teen melodrama theme which often collide with the pessimism of the noir genre.

Braithwaite argues in the following quote that in the case of *Veronica Mars* and its mystery and private eye investigation narratives, a clash with the traditional teen genre occurs: “The private eye investigator is often a loner, unencumbered by familial or romantic ties and fiercely proud and protective of his autonomy. Such a characteristic is at odds with the teen series, which continually mines interpersonal relationships for dramatic conflict [which is what melodrama most often bases its narratives on]” (Braithwaite 2008: 138). What I think

Braithwaite is stating here is that the (hardboiled) private eye character type is not traditionally meant to be applied to a teen character. I believe it is much easier to imagine a middle-aged man in film noir diverge from romantic relationships. But in a teen drama series with a female teen as protagonist, this is most likely unavoidable since the teen drama constructs its narratives based on interpersonal relationships, like Braithwaite argues. In what ways are we supposed to understand the nature of relationships in teen dramas, and does this apply to *Veronica Mars* which clearly follows both a noir and a teen drama thematic?

Media scholar Matt Hills explores a theoretical perspective on love relationships in *Dawson's Creek* in his essay in *Teen TV*. Seeing as *Dawson's Creek* was one of the earliest WB teen dramas (and the WB dramas set the standard for teen dramas to come as discussed above), the presentation of relationships Hills discusses might be helpful in understanding how this concept is represented in teen dramas in general and in *Veronica Mars*. Hills opens his arguments by stating the following about the teen drama in *Dawson's Creek*: "By stressing teen agency and articulacy, *Dawson's Creek* seeks to align itself with cultural systems of value that credit individual agency, self-mastery and self-expression. It carries out these textual moves by 'therapeutising' its teen characters and their relationships [...]" and he relates this to a term he borrows from sociologist Anthony Giddens called "expressions of processes of reflexivity" (Hills 2004: 54). What this means is that the characters are constantly self-aware (which was also stated earlier in this chapter in a quote by Wee) and that they repeatedly talk about their feelings and relationships through dialog with each other as if it they were in a therapeutic setting. Teen characters in teen dramas have become extremely mature and articulate, perhaps even more so than what an actual teenager would be. Wee argues that in the WB shows, "The main teenage protagonists [...] tended to be thoughtful and introspective, serious and responsible, mature and self-aware [...]" (Wee 2008: 49). That the teen characters are portrayed this way is perhaps due to the fact that it is television and not film as Banks argues regarding the teen male melodrama: "Though teen rebellion is often accepted in film, on television the text always privileges the more thoughtful, obedient boy" (Banks 2004: 19). Characters are seemingly more introspective and self-aware in teen dramas. This relates back to how love relationships are presented in teen dramas. This repeated awareness of oneself and the "therapeutic conversations" is perhaps a modern concept, and Hills attempts to discuss this.

Borrowing further terms from Giddens, Hills tries to discern between two types of relationships Giddens refers to as “romantic love” and “confluent love” (also called the “pure relationship”):

‘Romantic love’ – the ‘one true love’ of soulmates with its discourses of magic and destiny – is hence contrasted by Giddens to the actively worked-on and worked-out ‘confluent love’ of the pure relationship. [...] The ‘pure relationship’ is devoid of institutional/social features or sanctions that might compel its continuation (such as a social pressure to remain married), and it can therefore ‘be terminated, more or less at will, by either partner at any particular point’. This type of relationship, entered into entirely for its own benefits, and capable of being ended immediately when either partner is dissatisfied, is viewed by Giddens as having close connections with the reflexive project of self. (Hills 2004: 55)

The concept of romantic love seems to be outdated when it is compared to the more modern confluent love, but perhaps it is confluent love that describes teen relations most accurately? The teen years in general is a very hormonal phase very closely linked to finding one’s own identity. Teen love relationships are also often ephemeral or short-termed, and therefore the concept of romantic love is perhaps reserved for the later stages of life. However, the confluent love also seems to focus much on the involved parts being overly reflexive about themselves and their feelings. Perhaps these concepts are better used to understand the relationships of teen television characters than an actual teen romance itself. The trouble with using these concepts on any type of relationship (and in this case particularly, teen drama relationships) is that while romantic love seems to indicate a soulmate status and true feelings, the confluent relationship seems, at least the way Hills presents it, to not be related to romantic notions and feelings at all. The confluent love seems purely exploitive at best. With that being said, Hills also discusses the difficulties of applying these terms to the relationships in his discussion:

Although this interpretation is tempting, it is far too tidy. It splits audiences, and phases of the show, into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects, and demonstrates a profound lack of analytical flexibility. Rather than simply ‘applying’ Giddens’ romantic/confluent love opposition to *Dawson’s Creek*, I want to suggest that one aspect of the programme’s bid for ‘quality’ status lies in how it combines supposedly conflicting versions of traditional and late-modern relationships. I am not arguing that Giddens’ model is wrong – though it may be, I remain open on this question – only that Giddens identifies two very different types of romantic relationship. And by dramatizing a clash between these types of love relationship, *Dawson’s Creek* avoids affirming clichés of teen romance while making romance a matter of both apparent

predestination ('soulmates') and mature reflexivity ('talking through one's hopes and fears in and for a relationship'). (Hills 2004: 56-57)

Hills recognizes the trouble of simply applying each of these concepts onto relationships. He remarks that the concepts are conflicting and that they are (in *Dawson's Creek* which he analyzes) combined (Hills 2004: 56). This seems to be a good way to interpret relationships on teen dramas, to combine feelings of love with the more egalitarian and reflexive relationships of the modern age. Interestingly, if this is the model for relationships that the WB teen shows adopted and that influenced relationships in the teen genre, then *Veronica Mars* deliberately breaks with that tradition. We can still identify the mix of romantic and confluent love, but it is presented in a different manner. *Veronica Mars* creator Rob Thomas has expressed how he feels about the representation of relationships in teen dramas:

One of the things I hate in television is "emotional exposition". It's used all the time. People, particularly all the teens on the WB, talk about their feelings. Though we're not always successful, I want *Veronica Mars* writers to have "action" define character rather than dialogue or monologue. (Thomas 2006: 34)

As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, this is at odds with melodrama which focuses on repeated dialog in its narratives. In Thomas' comment we also see a reference to the teen relationships and their self-reflexive nature on the WB. Interestingly in this case, Thomas has also written episodes for *Dawson's Creek* which means that he has experience in the field of teen dramas. In *Veronica Mars*, the need for action is preferred over therapeutic conversations and reflections on relationships. The trouble with this opposed to relationships in teen romances that take on a reflexive nature is that it becomes difficult to analyze the relationships on *Veronica Mars* with references to how Hills uses Giddens' terms. If reflexivity is a major part of the modern confluent love (or the teen relationships which mixes the concepts) where constant dialog about the relationship is required, then *Veronica Mars*' "action over dialog" complicates this matter. Some relationships on the show can perhaps easily be identified as confluent as they are based on practicality, such as Veronica's relationships with Troy and Leo. Veronica gets involved with Troy because as an 09er he represents the possibility of reacquiring social acceptance for her. On the other hand, Troy attempts to manipulate Veronica's sleuthing skills in order to escape town and meet up with his former girlfriend. Leo is a deputy in the sheriff's office and their relationship is also short-lived. Veronica and Leo get involved after she causes trouble for him by taking advantage of his trusting nature. Feeling guilty for this, she dates him but they break up after she realizes

she has feelings for Logan Echolls. These relationships can be argued to be confluent since they are most likely based on practicality for the characters. However, the lack of reflexivity and conversations about the relationship complicates this concept.

The show also has its own attempt at the soulmate status of the romantic love between Veronica and Logan. Initially portrayed as enemies, Veronica and Logan eventually develop romantic feelings for each other. Their relationship is on-and-off and this is due to the common nature of both characters. Psychologist Misty Hook has observed the following about the pairing of Veronica and Logan:

The darkness [in Veronica and Logan] also contributes to one of my favorite aspects (and one of the most unusual for TV) of the Veronica and Logan relationship: they're not sweet. They are sarcastic, cynical, and vengeful, and often do not hesitate to use other people to further their own agenda (Hook 2006: 178).

If this is how their relationship is best defined, then I would argue that it complicates the notion of the romantic love and the soulmate status, as there is nothing in Hook's quote that resembles the connotations of the romantic soulmate concept. Veronica and Logan are rarely seen interacting in relationship activities. In fact, they are broken up more than they are romantically involved. Hook has also commented on this:

Veronica and Logan will never experience the happily-ever-after; they will constantly have to struggle to be with each other. [...]. Already we have seen the two of them kept apart by murder, other people, violence, fear, and mistrust – yet they always return to each other (Hook 2006: 182)

Despite not portraying their relationship as particularly romantic, it does carry this predestination concept of romantic love that is included in the soulmate status, as Hills argued above. This is also interesting relating to concepts of romance in melodrama. In Christine Gledhill's *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, Maria Laplace argues:

In the novels of women's fiction, the ideal heterosexual relationship is always represented in the terms of perfect understanding, a mutual transparency between the lovers, a relation of 'soulmates'. Caring and mutuality are part of this relation, as is admiration and respect on the part of the man for the woman. The romantic hero is a 'maternal man' capable of nurturing the heroine; tender, expressive about his feelings, he does not hesitate to express his love and admiration, passionately and often poetically. The woman's film follows these conventions (Laplace 1987: 159)

While romances in teen dramas are most likely a little different from the ones portrayed in women's pulp fiction and romance novels (such as usually excluding the overwhelming "magical" passion and poeticism), we still see some similar tendencies based on what Hills discussed. Melodrama focuses on the romance as both soulmate status (romantic love) and mutuality (confluent love). However, the particular notion of romance Laplace is discussing seems to hint that romance in these books and movies are almost magical and eternal, which is most likely not the case for common teen drama romances. *Veronica Mars* also challenges melodrama depictions of romance with Logan and Veronica's relationship. As both melodrama and teen drama focuses on being open and expressing one's feeling, something different occurs in *Veronica Mars*. Thomas explains: "Jason [Dohring, who plays Logan] has told me he hates saying 'I love you' onscreen. The good news is that I hate writing it, so we're a good pair" (Thomas 2006: 170). Though Logan undeniably confesses his love for Veronica at certain points, he is far from the melodrama notion of the maternal man. The idea of reducing the emotional exposition combined with Hook's account of Logan and Veronica displays that this is a show more focused on action than relationship dialog.

Hook's quote about Veronica and Logan is based on material up until the end of season two, but her prediction comes true. Veronica and Logan are not together when the show ends (though the show hints at unresolved issues between them in their final scene together in the cafeteria). Most of Veronica's relationships are stormy, especially in regards to how they are ended. Duncan breaks up with her for mysterious reasons, Troy attempts to manipulate her. She breaks ties with Logan three times. After being reconciled, Duncan is forced to leave her in order to escape the country with his illegitimate daughter. The fourth time Veronica and Logan attempts a relationship, he actually breaks up with her because she cannot leave her private investigator persona aside (constantly putting her in danger and requiring Logan to change). I believe it is Veronica's position as a private investigator that enforces these types of relationships. Klein notices a similar tendency in this quote: "Like the classic *noir* hero, Veronica invariably unearths truths and foils her enemies at the close of each episode, but always at the cost of her personal (often romantic) happiness" (Klein 2006: 92). Her role transcends that of a typical teenager and thus she seemingly has to suffer consequences. The show does attempt to establish a normal relationship for Veronica in season three. The relationship with Piz represents a polar opposite to Veronica's previous experiences as Piz is sympathetic and kind-hearted (like Duncan, Piz seems to follow the melodrama ideal of the kind and caring man). Veronica herself remarks the following that their relationship is

“Happy enough. There's no rollercoaster, but I think I can do without the adrenaline and nausea” (3x18 “I Know What You’ll Do Next Summer”). While I do think she is specifically comparing Piz with Logan here, this could be a general reference to most of her relationships. However, joy may be short-lived when Veronica and Piz is videotaped having sex and the video is posted all over the student mailing list. Enraged, Veronica seeks out revenge against Piz’ wishes and he gives her a displeased look when she smiles after Logan beats up the perpetrator. Again, we see that her search for justice often collides with her own happiness like Klein argues. However, because these events occurred in the final scenes of the last episode, there was never a resolution to this situation and one can only speculate what would happen next. Whether her actions cause repercussions in her relationship with Piz is left unresolved.

*Veronica Mars* strays from the path of teen melodrama which uses interpersonal relationships between its key protagonists for dramatic conflict. For example, Wallace has a love interest in season one that appears in two episodes and disappears without any mention. Season two remedies this by introducing main character Jackie Cook, but in season three Wallace is not involved in a romantic relationship with anyone at all. I believe much of this is because of the mystery narrative and that the show focuses its dramatic conflict here. The show rarely focuses on the relationships of other protagonists, which is strange for a teen show and it seems to favor other scenes such as Veronica investigating cases. I do not suspect that this is a typical noir move, instead it is a deliberate move from the show’s writers in order to create a different type of teen melodrama, one where the dramatic tension mainly lies within the mysteries and Veronica’s partaking in the investigation of these. As such she often figures out what is wrong in other characters’ relationships which lead to the dissolution of these, and usually she jeopardizes her own happiness with a boyfriend because of her line of work.

## **The Duality of Sexuality**

Mrs. Hauser: All right, people, pair up. You each have a piece of paper with an STD on it. You have to inform your partner that you have said STD.

Veronica: All right, Gia, we can be partners, but no glove, no love.

Dick: Yeah, let's get the dried-up divorcée to teach us about sex.

Gia: I heard her husband left her for a man.

Dick: And now we get bitchy and bitter for a year.

Gia: Mrs. Hauser, mine's wrong. Isn't this a flower?

Mrs. Hauser: No, Gia. Chlamydia is not a flower.

Gia: Well, we have it on, like, a trellis at our beach house.



Veronica: Your trellis is a whore.  
(2x07 “Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner”)

Of all the themes discussed in this chapter, the topic of sexuality is one that receives strong attention in both noir and the teen genre. However, the two genres present it in a very different manner and I will investigate how these interesting tensions are reflected in *Veronica Mars*. The themes of sex and sexuality get off to a rather gloomy start in the first episode of *Veronica Mars*. Veronica is sitting outside a motel observing people cheating on their spouses. During lunchtime she verbally spars with the biker gang leader Weevil about his penis size and later she reveals that her first sex experience came in the form of a date rape which she cannot remember. The quote that introduces this section shows the jaded (and comic) nature of Neptune’s teens. So what is it about sexuality and Neptune?

### **Compelling and Dangerous – Sex and Sexual Terror**

Silverblatt argues that “sex is pervasive throughout all genres. However, how certain genres treat this subject furnishes perspective into the targeted audience’s attitudes toward sex”. He refers to a quote by Alessandra Stanley who is discussing sex in teenage dramas. Her points include that sex is no longer a teenage trauma, and that teenage sexuality can be used for dramatic tension (Silverblatt 2007: 108). With this in mind, what then can we make of the opening episode of *Veronica Mars*? Is the series trying to break with certain teen sexuality ideals, or trying to highlight areas other teen series have not explored? Thomas has stated in an interview that he wanted the characters to have a jaded relationship with sexuality, saying that:

This idea that I was attracted to, and had been thinking about since I taught high school, was this vague notion about teenagers being desensitized and jaded and sexualized so much earlier than I feel like even my generation 15, 20 years before had been. That seemed like a perfect thing to try to shine a spotlight on. (Salon.com).

The representation of sexuality in *Veronica Mars* is then colored by the modern age and extremely enlightened teenagers. Sex and sexual assaults are certainly used for dramatic tension in the show. Veronica’s rape is an ongoing mystery and ultimately it is revealed that Lilly Kane was murdered because she wanted to expose her love affair with Aaron Echolls. Sex and sexuality are often linked to pathological behavior on *Veronica Mars*. Pathological sex is a noir trademark (Hirsch 1999: 9).

Hirsch argues that in classic noir, sexual repression was the norm both for the characters and the viewers. The femmes fatales appeared in these movies as signs of temptation, promising what Hirsch calls “a raw and liberating sexuality” (Hirsch 1999: 179). The femme fatale is a trademark noir character which I mentioned above in relation to the topic of family. In *Veronica Mars* the femme fatale is gone, most likely because the show features a female protagonist. That is not to say that some characters do not exhibit these femme fatale traits (the character Kendall Casablancas comes to mind who sleeps around in order to secure her financial future, never once showing that she harbors romantic feelings), but the presence of this character is not as significant. The femme fatale, I would argue, is simply not needed in a noir with teen characters. In noir, the femme fatale is often the symbol of repressed sexuality. Sexuality is usually not repressed in teen dramas, it is instead repeatedly explored as something fascinating and something which concerns all characters. With that being said, we saw that Hirsch argued that most sex in noir is tinged with pathology. This is also the case in neo-noirs. Hirsch discusses how this is reflected:

Despite changes in sexual politics, despite the work that feminism has accomplished in raising awareness about gender, the woman who exudes a potent sexual force still arouses the anxiety of many (male) filmmakers and spectators. To the extent that the femme fatale is an essential part of noir’s texture, the genre remains scarred by a politically incorrect substratum. Regardless of the story’s point of view [...] the character type is marked by her monstrous threat to “civilized” environment” (Hirsch 1999: 188)

Hirsch observes that sexual liberation (here in the form of the femme fatale) is still an anxious theme in noir. I would argue that this is in opposition to the teen genre which seemingly encourages the exploration of sexuality. Sexuality among teen characters in teen dramas is usually not an anxious subject, but there are instances where it can lead to self-destructive behavior. Just like Silverblatt argues, the teen drama does not initially treat sex as a trauma (though it often becomes so in *Veronica Mars*) and this contradicts many of the noir ideas of sex. Hirsch continues his argument:

Produced in a society more liberated than the one to which the original cycle was addressed, neo-noir remains – and is probably destined to remain – a sexually conservative, perhaps even reactionary, genre. Any noir story in which a woman whose wickedness is tied precisely to her sexual power is condemned to the sexual rear guard; for no matter how brazenly the films may depict the woman’s sexuality, at heart they are driven by an elemental fear of sex (Hirsch 1999: 188).

This fear of sex is more or less gone in teen dramas, which primarily adopts a liberal humanism in its narratives according to Wee (Wee 2008: 51). Some plotlines on *Veronica Mars* use sexual acts as a symbol of violence, like Veronica's rape, the child molestations by Mayor Woody Goodman (notice the dark sexual reference in his name) and the serial rapes by Mercer at Hearst College. These are all serious sexual crimes and their repeated appearance in *Veronica Mars* represents a darker side to the more positive explorations of sexuality in teen dramas. In *Veronica Mars*, the use of sex as depictions of violence and power is usually encoded as male. This is a typical neo-noir move according to Hirsch. He argues that:

In classic noir, fatal sexuality was traditionally encoded as female, whereas male sexuality, especially if it was contained within the boundaries of marriage, was rarely depicted as poisonous. [...] But in neo-noir, instigation is not as tightly gender segregated, and so the homme fatale has become a recurrent character (Hirsch 1999: 201)

The homme fatale is depicted as the male counterpart of the femme fatale with regards to dangerous sexuality. The classic homme fatale is more concerned with driving his wife mad or making her commit suicide (Spicer 2002: 89). In neo-noir, the homme fatale has taken on many of the same roles as the femme fatale:

In these revisions of fatale-ism, attractive men are set up to inspire and to receive the gaze of the camera and of other characters – that sexually appraising gaze formerly reserved for the sexual woman only. [...] In the other representative homes fatales narratives, the seducers are seen from a greater distance. Like the wicked women of classic noir, they are presented as objects to be scrutinized and decoded; and along with other characters, we're prodded into wondering, Is he or isn't he? In usurping the narrative and visual space traditionally occupied by women, the homme fatale is a genuinely transgressive figure who casts into sexual shadow the female costars hostage to his appeal. [...] Like the femme fatale stories, these films betray a fundamental fear of the unleashed libido that their devious protagonists embody. (Hirsch 1999: 201-202)

This is a more common type in *Veronica Mars* than the femme fatale. We have examples of these dangerous men like famous movie star Aaron Echolls whose tyrannic, sexually voracious and murderous nature makes his wife commit suicide, or the good-looking and charming Mercer Hayes who feels that it is perfectly acceptable for him to drug and rape female college students. He thinks that he is taking what they happily would have given him and that he wishes to not waste his precious time getting to know them first (3x09 "Spit and Eggs"). However, true to noir and the show's focus on moral ambiguity, it should be noted

that pathological sexual behavior is not encoded as exclusively male in *Veronica Mars*. The feminist group at Hearst College pretends that one of their members is raped in order to promote justice for the victims of the serial rapist. They also drug fraternity leader Chip Diller, shave off his hair and forcibly insert a plastic egg into his where-the-sun-do-not-shine area, thereby committing a form of female rape.

The fear of sexual power in personal relationships is usually obsolete in *Veronica Mars*' teen drama (with one strong exception being Cassidy Casablancas, but this belongs in the discussion of homosexuality below). Despite being raped, Veronica shows no trouble of engaging in sexual activities later on (though she abstains from sex until she seemingly solves her rape). Duncan, teary-eyed and enraged, reveals to a devastated Veronica that he slept with her even though he believed she was his sister (a situation which qualifies for noir's pathological sex). However, after Veronica reveals that they are not related, they have no trouble getting back together. Logan does not experience any traumas to his sexuality when he enters into a purely sexual relationship devoid of any romantic feelings with Kendall Casablancas (the femme fatale-like woman I mentioned above). In fact, he has no trouble ending their relationship when he has had enough, and she has no trouble moving on to the next guy in her seduction attempts. After Parker is raped, she spends just one episode being upset before she decides to pull herself together and carry on with her life.

Is this telling us that violence combined with sex have no consequences for the afflicted characters? It certainly seems so, but it may also be because the characters refuse to be victimized by sex-related violence. Veronica vehemently pursues a solution to her own rape, turning the tragic event into a driving force. Parker's case is similar. She refuses to let the rapist rob her of her life. This is one way to interpret the events surrounding violence and sex in *Veronica Mars*. Instead of being victimized, the characters turn their bad luck around and fight back. This is a discussion that will be examined more closely in the next chapter. Another possible explanation is the "action over dialog" focus of the show. Since the show devotes less time to talk about emotional issues, there is little time for characters to suffer long traumas and thus they recover quickly. Noir's ambiguity is still visible here though, as not all characters recover as easily. Cassidy Casablancas was molested when he was younger and he turns into a murdering psychopath. Previously-respected Chip Diller is humiliated for being raped by the raging feminist group and because of this, he does not report the crime and the feminists are off the hook.

The teens on *Veronica Mars* are sexually enlightened, often using explicit references to sex in their everyday speech, like in the sexual education class comment above or situations like this when Veronica comments on Logan not missing one of his classes:

Veronica: [about two girls] New friends?

Logan: Yeah, from weightlifting class.

Veronica: Right! The only class you never miss. So, what - you guys, like, spot each other doing squat thrusts and stuff?

Logan: And have group sex in the showers.

(3x03 "Wichita Linebacker")

Another of many examples can be found in this somewhat awkward exchange between father and daughter Mars:

Keith: So, senior year. How was your first day at school honey?

Veronica: Great! I beat up a freshman, stole his lunch money and then skipped out after lunch.

Keith: What, no pre-marital sex?

Veronica: Oh, yeah... yes. But don't worry dad, I swear you're gonna like these guys.

Keith: That's my girl.

(2x01 "Normal Is the Watchword")

Usually the sexual references are used as jokes and for a humoristic effect, like the ones above. Other times they are used to signal gendered dominance:

Weevil: Sister. The only time I care what a woman has to say is when she's riding my big old hog. Even then, it's not so much words, just a bunch of "oohs" and "ahs" you know?

Veronica: So it's big huh?

Weevil: Legendary.

Veronica: Well, let's see it. I mean if it's as big as you say, I'll be your girlfriend. [she bats her eyes and gasps] We could go to prom together. What? What seems to be the problem? I'm on a schedule here, vato.

Felix: Weevil, don't let blondie talk to you like that.

Veronica: Sounds like your buddy here wants to see it too.

Felix: Oh, hell, I'll show you mine!

(1x01 "Pilot")

These sexual banters are pervasive throughout the show and highlight both a jaded sexual nature in the characters (which the writers intended to) and a sexual liberation represented by teens.

### **If You're Out, You're Definitely Not In**

Another topic regarding sexuality which clearly causes a clash between noir and teen drama is the representation of homosexuality. As argued above, teen dramas have adopted a liberal humanism in its narratives which allows them to explore difficult and often controversial issues relevant to the teen and the youth audience (Wee 2008: 51). Homosexuality is one such issue and several teen dramas address this. Wee uses *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek* as examples as these shows have gay main characters, Willow and Jack respectively. Wee argues the following about these characters: "The series' deliberate decision not to exploit or treat Willow's or Jack's sexuality as 'alternative' or aberrant, as well as the attempts to represent their romantic relationships as largely functional, healthy, supportive, and loving, highlights the series' liberal and humanist stance" (Wee 2008: 51). However, Wee argues, this liberalism can only go so far. The treatment of these relationships fell on the conservative side, with Willow never being able to consummate her romance with Tara on-screen and Jack always pining for a partner. The WB shows tried to be liberal and conservative at the same time (Wee 2008: 59). Scholar Glyn Davis has also explored how this concept is represented in teen dramas and calls it "liberal conservatism", stating that: "If the teen series has the potential to tell us things about queer teens, it will only tell us certain things, and not others" (Davis 2004: 130). This can be related to Wee's comment about Jack and Willow. Since they were never allowed to act in the same way like the heterosexual characters, there are only certain messages that the shows can transmit. Davis does observe that almost all of the representations of gay teens in teen dramas are positive/politically correct, as if they are serving a role-model function for the viewers. The representations of gay protagonists have remained conservative and in later teen dramas such as *The O.C.*, *One Tree Hill* and even *Veronica Mars*, homosexuality often just briefly "visits" the shows and the main characters are never gay themselves.

Noir tells a different story about homosexuality, at least in the few instances that the genre has addressed it. Hirsch argues in the introduction of his book that in classic noir homosexuality could not be named or seen (Hirsch 1999: 9). This is probably understandable considering the time period these classic noirs were made in. This does not seem to have changed with the times however, as Hirsch argues in this quote:

But even after homosexuality has become an available subject, its presence in crime movies has remained both rare and contested. While it was always permissible to suggest that heterosexual obsession could lead to crime, the same equation between gay desire and a plunge into noir remains an uneasy coupling (Hirsch 1999: 9)

It seems that noir filmmakers have wanted to avoid stepping into a thematic quagmire, just like the teen genre has avoided negative depictions of gay teenagers. Hirsch discusses homosexuality in noir further later on in his book:

While homosexuality is no longer a proscribed subject, it is still heavily segregated, and certainly in neo-noir it remains marginalized. Touching on it at all within the context of a psychological or erotic thriller seems to lead to a moral quicksand. If heterosexuality in noir usually is a dirty deal, then, almost reflexively, homosexuality is even more disruptive and dangerous. On virtually every occasion in which homosexuality appears in noir, it has been branded as the narrative's noir element, the source of aberrant, criminal behavior (Hirsch 1999: 204).

He argues for this by using the thriller *Cruising* (1980) as his example where noir and homosexuality are a negative match. He argues that the film has a warped perspective where the terms homosexual and murderer are almost equivalent. The film portrays homosexuality as a contaminating practice consisting of chaotic, depersonalizing rituals (Hirsch 1999: 206). Hirsch also claims in this quote that this movie has had negative effects on the topic of homosexuality in noir:

As if scorched by the example set in *Cruising*, neo-noir films have kept their distance from homosexuality. When it surfaces, like the kiss of the spider woman, it is almost invariably fatal. In *Frisk* (1995), a little-seen independent film made by and primarily for gays, homosexuality is subjected to an equally unenlightened treatment, depicted as the eruptive overflow of sexual desire gone mad (Hirsch 1999: 206-207)

Noir seems to have an extremely stressed relationship with homosexuality, far from the liberal and positive approach that the teen dramas try to adopt (though their depiction of homosexuality often remains on the conservative side, as the scholars argued above). We can identify a genre clash between the noir and teen drama depiction of homosexuality. Noir seems to be reluctant to address the issue, while teen dramas want to normalize it. So what happens in *Veronica Mars*? I argue that it incorporates elements from both the noir and teen tradition, and below will be a discussion of this. The general attitude of the treatment of the topic on this show can be perhaps be summed up by a quote from the episode booklet from the season two DVD set: "In Neptune High, if you're out, you're definitely not in".

Homosexuality is almost absent in the first season of the series. Besides a flashback in 1x04 “The Wrath of Con” where Lilly kisses Veronica on a dare, there is only one example found in 1x20 “M.A.D.” Here we meet a gay student named Seth (stereotypically he wears a pink/purple shirt and hangs with the drama club “outcasts”) who is not involved in a large part of the story. He is harassed by the homophobic Tad at one point. When Tad’s girlfriend Carmen wants to break up, he threatens to publish a revealing video of her if she does. In order to get back at him, Veronica plays on his homophobia and with Carmen and Seth’s help, creates a fake website supposedly created by Tad to celebrate his “secret gay love”. This representation is perhaps not trying to address the issue of homosexuality as much as it is concerned with exploiting Tad’s homophobia as a part of the plot.

While some teen shows may try to depict homosexuality as unproblematic, *Veronica Mars* also displays a different side to it which, in reality, may be the case for many teens. In 2x08 “Ahoy, Mateys”, Veronica’s father is investigating a series of hurtful pranks aimed at the Oliveres family who lost their son Marcos in the bus explosion. Veronica joins in and figures out that Carlos was sent to a place called “Camp SelfQuest” which helps teenagers who “struggle with their sexuality”. She realizes that Marcos was gay. The culprit of the pranks is Marcos’ would-be boyfriend Ryan who wants to get back at Marcos’ parents. They sent Marcos off to what Ryan calls “camp homophobia” after they discovered Ryan and their “shirtless son” together and when he returned, he was forced to do “normal” things in order to win back the respect of his parents. Ryan says that if this had not happened, Marcos would never have been on the bus and died on that fateful day.

Ryan returns and asks for Veronica’s help in 2x14 “Versatile Toppings” where the topic of homosexuality is brought up again. Someone has hacked a Neptune High gay chat room site and threatens to expose the students if they do not pay. One girl, Marlana, does not pay and therefore her sexual orientation becomes known to the entire school. She is immediately ridiculed by students (especially the 09ers). The next day, cheerleader Kylie refuses to be blackmailed and reveals herself on the school’s news channel broadcast. Incidentally, she is Marlana’s girlfriend. Veronica later finds out that it was actually Kylie who is behind the entire blackmail scheme. She orchestrated it so that she would make her girlfriend come out, and to make quick money to get out of Neptune. She promises to give the money she received back and that she will tell Marlana about what she had done.



Glyn Davis states that “coming-out scenes in teen series seem to reinforce the act as an individualized one, and as an exultant liberationist confession of one’s essential(ised) identity” (Davis 2004: 131). Marlena’s coming-out scene was indeed a painful ordeal, most certainly because she was not allowed to come out on her own terms, she was forced out. Kylie, on the other hand, who “battled” the blackmailer and announced to the entire school on television that she was gay, had a more liberating experience. Kylie explains to Veronica that she outed Marlena so that she herself could come out. She wants to be able to walk down the school halls with her like a normal couple. Ironically, she resorts to immoral and probably illegal acts to attain this.

Cassidy Casablancas, a main character in season two, might have been gay although this was never stated directly. The show drops several hints, such as his inability to be intimate with his girlfriend Mac. He was also molested by Mayor Woody Goodman when he was younger (two of Goodman’s other victims were also gay) and his nickname “Beaver” hints at something sexual, in contrast to his older (and sexually superior) brother “Dick”. He managed to rape Veronica while she was unconscious however, to which she furiously states: “You didn’t run out like you said you did, did you? No, you wanted to prove you were a man. It helped that I was unconscious, didn’t it? Easy to imagine whatever you needed to imagine!” (2x22 “Not Pictured”). His sexual struggle might also be trauma from being molested, and thus the nature of Cassidy’s true sexuality is open for debate. Either way, his raping of Veronica (and his relentless comeback to her response: “And Dick still thinks I’m a virgin...”) qualifies for the pathologic sexuality of noir.

Unlike teen dramas and their liberal humanism, *Veronica Mars* is occupied with representing the darker sides of its gay characters (which is in accordance to how the show treats all of its other characters). Marcos is portrayed as spiteful and bitter through his secret radio show, Kylie blackmails fellow gay students to force her girlfriend to come out and Ryan uses psychological terror against the family of Marcos. The show does not implicate homosexuality as the root of the problem in these cases (except maybe in the case of Kylie the cheerleader), but the show is not concerned with creating role-model gay characters for its viewers. By focusing on the crimes and morally ambiguous acts of characters from all classes, *Veronica Mars* is almost required to treat homosexual characters in the same manner, but without making homosexuality into a pathological issue.

*Veronica Mars* exemplifies the difficulty of being gay in high school. To avoid harassment, the Neptune students are forced to be themselves only in an online locked school chat room. College provides an escape from this though, and it is hinted on the show twice. When Kylie reveals to Veronica that she is a lesbian, Veronica answers “That’s cool” to which Kylie replies “Only when you’re in college”. Veronica dreams of Lilly in 2x22 “Not Pictured”, where Lilly reveals that in college she has had certain experiences with another girl. Regarding this Lilly humorously says: “It’s college. It’s expected!” Neptune High is represented as oppressive, but the future seems to hold a brighter promise for its gay students.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

I have tried to identify common melodrama and teen melodrama themes and explored how noir invades these themes in *Veronica Mars*. The show attempts to both be a teen melodrama and distance itself from that genre at the same time. The reflexive teen dialog is removed, replaced by action over words and a narrative focus that often finds its dramatic tension from other sources than the relationships between its key protagonists. Love relationships are almost doomed to fail. The representation of sex and sexuality is a lot darker than other teen drama counterparts. All of this creates a different teen melodrama which I suggest could simply be called teen noir melodrama. *Veronica Mars* mixes traditional melodrama, teen drama and noir and the result is a dystopian universe where darkness influences all of its themes and there are not many optimistic outcomes.

Some topics here have presented more theoretical challenges than others, such as how one can properly analyze love relationships on teen dramas and television in general. While I do think my discussion is sufficient for the purpose of this chapter, I am sure that each of these issues can be explored in greater detail on another occasion. Our stay in Neptune has one more chapter left and that is the character analysis chapter. I am sure that we will see equally interesting tensions between noir and teen dramas there as well.

## Chapter 4

### P.I.s, Friends, Victims and Psychos: The Denizens of Neptune



Piz: This girl, she's... she's our age... and she's a "detective"... Is she also a cartoon? (3x01 "Welcome Wagon")

In the three preceding chapters I have explored the narration, style, universe and themes of *Veronica Mars*. But how does the noir universe affect the main characters? *Veronica Mars*' ensemble cast (the season three cast is depicted above) is an interesting combination of certain noir character types and teens (though two adult main characters are included). Some are of the more heroic type, some are sidekicks while others appear to be sources of conflict. In *Veronica Mars*, social class is often an important element in the storylines (which was discussed in detail in chapter two) and this also seems to be reflected in the main characters as well. That is why I will ask the following research questions for this chapter:

- How is *Veronica Mars*' noir and teen universe reflected in the main characters? Are elements of noir character types reflected in these characters, and how is this related to the show's exploration of class?

The literature I wish to use in this chapter includes Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir*, Foster Hirsch's *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir*, Christine Gledhill's *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, Steven M. Sanders & Aeon Skoble's *The Philosophy of TV Noir*, Sharon Marie Ross & Louisa Ellen Stein's *Teen Television* and Anja Tucker's thesis *Teen Noir*. As a helpful tool for this discussion, I am going to use Algirdas Julien Greimas' actantial model of story functions.

### **The Teens Are Revolting!**

Noir has quite a few traditional stock character types and some of which are important for the characters on *Veronica Mars*. Spicer lists several types which he calls the male victim (which he claims is one most pervasive types in film noir), damaged men (which includes maladjusted veterans and rogue cops), the private eye, the noir criminal and psychopath, the homme fatale, the femme fatale, the nurturer/homebuilder, the good-bad girl and the female victim (Spicer 2002: 84-92). Hirsch also recognizes several of these types in his book, like the femme and homme fatale, the veteran and the private investigator (Hirsch 1999). The private eye, the veteran and the femme fatale are also explicitly mentioned as character roles in *The Philosophy of TV Noir*, suggesting the pervasiveness of the character types in noir (Sanders and Skoble 2008). In *Veronica Mars*, only the private investigator and the psychopath appear as main characters. What about the other characters? I propose to use Hirsch's concepts of noir mischance narratives. I mentioned these briefly in chapters one and two and the discussion will continue here, as these are very relevant to the main characters in this show.

Unlike noir, the teen drama does not seem to have any academically predefined or typical character roles. One exception could be the teen heroic melodrama which I discussed in chapter one. In these teen dramas we usually follow a heroic protagonist who often has special abilities and the shows have both an episodic and serial narrative structure (such as a new monster appearing each episode and long seasonal storyline). But what about protagonists in teen shows that do not follow this narrative structure or require a heroic main lead? And what do we make of the other characters? Often they can easily be labeled in a

“friends” category, but this usually does not say anything in particular about the character other than their relation to the protagonist (although I have named one category “Friends” in this chapter, but I will discuss why I have done so in that section). Kaveney has identified some types in teen movies, such as jocks and cheerleaders (Kaveney 2006). How are we supposed to interpret these roles? For example, both the “jock” and “cheerleader” categories do not explicitly state anything about character personality. However, they can be argued to invoke stereotypical representations, such as jocks and cheerleaders being overly popular and mean, but academically flawed. We definitely see this tendency among characters in teen shows (and in *Veronica Mars* too), but these characteristics are usually applied to side characters who appear in a minimum of episodes. However, the terms “jock” and “cheerleader” do not necessarily denote a particular character role. Instead, they merely suggest a character’s position in the school hierarchy (and not just their personality) which is also important to a teen melodrama. These roles are not mentioned in *Teen Television* or *Teen TV*, perhaps suggesting that they are not academically defined as character roles.

What then is typical for a teen drama character? Media scholar Matt Hills discusses some teen drama character traits in *Dawson’s Creek*. He says that:

A typical stereotype of the teenager is indeed the image of an inarticulate, frustrated, if not rage-fuelled, not-quite-yet-adult. [...] In marked contrast to this, the teens in *Dawson’s Creek* avoid stigmatization and pathologisation by virtue of ‘communicating’ with one another and their parents and/or siblings. Although they may occasionally *behave* in irresponsible or immature ways, their talk is always resolutely mature and responsible in its pursuit of open channels of communication and reflexive self-understanding. [...] In other words, *Dawson’s Creek* represents its characters as if they *are* consistently rational and self-present. (Hills 2004: 58)

This constant awareness of oneself is a prevailing notion in teen dramas. As we saw in the previous chapter, *Veronica Mars* often focuses on action over reflexive dialog. However, the show’s teen characters are still extremely autonomous, though this is mostly explored through their actions (such as Veronica being able to solve her own rape or Duncan managing to flee the country and escape the FBI). While teen characters may differ greatly depending on the show, the autonomy and reflexive awareness of oneself seem to be established tropes (which can be explored through dialog or action).

The melodrama usually focuses on bourgeois characters, and Gledhill argues that characters in melodrama “assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child and express basic psychic conditions” (Gledhill 1987: 31). The characters I am discussing here seem to follow this basic melodrama pattern. With the exception of Veronica’s special position as a private investigator, she is both a daughter and a high-school/college student. The same can be said about most of the other main characters, they are teenagers and students and they all have the same desire to live a normal life.

Another concept which I wish to relate this discussion to is philosophy and literature researcher Jennifer L. McMahon’s account of the man of revolt. She discusses the concept of revolt, saying that existentialist philosopher Camus recommends revolt as a response to absurdity. In order to revolt, McMahon (using Camus’ definitions) argues that “one must not only realize absurdity but also courageously confront and actively resist it”. The man of revolt often ends up as a social outsider because he reveals truths that no one wants to hear (McMahon 2008: 122-123). McMahon sums up the main points about this existential hero of revolt: “Ultimately, Camus describes the man of revolt as a warrior because he must actively combat absurdity in the form of violence and lawlessness” (McMahon 2008: 127). McMahon uses this theory to discuss the noir elements in the protagonist of television show *24*. I wish to examine this concept of revolt more closely in the main characters of *Veronica Mars*, as it may help explain how the characters can remain so unfazed by the noir events that repeatedly occur to and around them. While this “man of revolt” concept is perhaps meant to be discussed in relation to dominating protagonists (like McMahon does with *24*), it is still an interesting idea that is relevant to the main characters of *Veronica Mars*.

The analysis of the characters in this chapter will be done in character groups. There are several reasons for why I choose this particular method. For one thing, as this show follows the teen heroic melodrama structure, the show has a dominating protagonist of special importance to the storylines. In this case, Veronica Mars and her private investigator role fill this position. As her father Keith is also a private investigator, I choose to discuss these characters together in the same group. I have labeled another group “Friends” because these characters seem to mainly assume supportive roles and are never the cause of opposition to Veronica or any other character. These characters are also more likely to be innocently victimized. I have called the final group “Frenemies” (a combination of “friend” and “enemy”), which is represented by characters that are more duplicitous and cause conflicts.

We also find antagonizing and malicious characters in this group. I have chosen to focus primarily on characters that have been regular cast members (characters who appear in the opening credits). This approach limits the number of characters, but they are some of the most important ones. Is there a way to academically defend my groupings of the characters? I wish to use the actantial model by Algirdas Julien Greimas as a helpful tool to argue why my groupings are favorable, and how to discuss the characters. First, I would like to introduce the model before I continue my discussion.

## **The Actantial Model**

Greimas' actantial model was designed to describe the function of elements in a story.

Greimas' model is basic and consists of six actants divided by three axes. An actant does not refer to a character in a story. It refers to the function an element in a story possesses.

Professor Louis Hèbert presents a description of Greimas' model:

-The axis of desire [also known as the project axis]: (1) subject / (2) object. The subject is what is directed toward an object. The relationship established between the subject and the object is called a junction, and can be further classified as a conjunction (for example, the Prince wants the Princess) or a disjunction (for example, a murderer succeeds in getting rid of his victim's body).

-The axis of power [also known as the conflict axis]: (3) helper / (4) opponent. The helper assists in achieving the desired junction between the subject and object; the opponent hinders the same (for example, the sword, the horse, courage, and the wise man help the Prince; the witch, the dragon, the far-off castle, and fear hinder him).

-The axis of transmission (the axis of knowledge, according to Greimas) [also known as the communication axis]: (5) sender / (6) receiver. The sender is the element requesting the establishment of the junction between subject and object (for example, the King asks the Prince to rescue the Princess). The receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken. To simplify, let us interpret the receiver (or positive receiver) as that which benefits from achieving the junction between subject and object (for example, the King, the kingdom, the Princess, the Prince, etc.). Sender elements are often receiver elements as well. (Hèbert 2006)

Here we see how story functions can be divided into actants. If we relate this to a common mystery structure on *Veronica Mars*, we can end up with something like this: Veronica (subject) is hired to solve a case (object). A student (sender) wishes for Veronica to solve the case. Certain individuals plus coincidences do not want the case to get solved (opponent) while others provide helpful clues combined with luck and competence (helper). When Veronica solves the case, the student (and often the society) is the receiver. This might seem

like a very simple view of the mystery structure. This particular presentation does not take into account how characters can suddenly change actant positions in a narrative (perhaps the sender also can be the opponent, hiring Veronica on a misleading quest). Hèbert discusses this:

In theory, any real or thematized action ("imaginary" action) may be described by at least one actantial model. Strictly speaking, *the* actantial model for a text does not exist. For one thing, there are as many models as there are actions; for another, the same action can often be seen from several different perspectives (for example, from the subject's point of view, or his rival's, the anti-subject's). (Hèbert 2006)

How will I use this model as a tool for my discussion? A good example suited for my discussion is if we consider “life” or “teen life” as the primary wish and object for these characters. I will then be able to see how noir (as an actant, I refer to noir as situations related to crime, moral ambiguity, mischance etc.) works against or in favor of this desire. I relate this to all the characters. Can “teen drama” be positioned within the actantial model of these characters’ project for life? It certainly can, but “teen drama” as a separate actant is difficult. Unlike noir, which as an actant can be related to terrible events and crime, teen drama refers to so many themes which can be represented as both good and bad. However, we can return to chapter three and pick out certain themes and examine their actantial functions in these characters’ life project, such as “family” and “friends” which I believe are very relevant here. I will also refer to the actant positions in the discussions below (helper, opponent etc.).

Veronica and Keith are the only main characters who solve mysteries for a living, meaning that we can discuss the project of the other characters to mainly be “life”. For characters in the investigator group, noir works both as an opponent and helper in their quest for life. They can also have “mystery solving” as their object, which then works as both opponent and helper in their life project. Their allegiance to no particular class also works the same way, creating both obstacles and helping them in their quest. For the second group, the friends, noir is always an opponent and never provides to be helpful to them in any way in their quest for life. If we relate these characters to the dominating protagonist Veronica, these characters also never assume the role of opponent in her project for mystery solving or life. Instead they are always helpers. Interestingly, this may be related to all of them being considered middle class. The final group has both working class and upper class characters. A couple of characters here can also be considered to be Veronica’s friends, but because they belong to either the



upper class or working class (which can be equally moral ambiguous characters, as discussed in chapter two), noir can in fact be both helper and opponent in their quest for life. Unlike the friends in the previous group, these characters can often assume the role of opponents in other characters' life projects. There will be more discussions of this in the respective groups. As Veronica is the dominating protagonist of the show and because the private investigator is such a classic noir trademark, a large part of the chapter will be devoted to her and the show's interpretation of this noir character type.

### **The Private Investigators – Upholders of Justice**



Veronica Mars



Keith Mars

The name “Veronica” for the show’s title character is hardly random. The name derives from the latin phrase “vera icon” meaning “true image” (Behind the Name). This refers to her interest in photography and her devotion to justice as a private investigator. Her last name derives from the Roman god of war Mars (as well as the planet), indicating a presence of masculinity, strong will and power. She fights injustice in Neptune, the town named after another Roman god and planet. Mars and Neptune hint at the opposition between fire and water and how Veronica struggles against the overwhelming noir town of Neptune.

Hirsch argues that the private-eye investigation is the element that most likely connotes noir in the popular mind and he says that during the 1970s, the private investigator was the most popular character in crime films (Hirsch 1999: 145, 18). In the noirs of the 1980s and 1990s, Hirsch says, the private investigator has become a back number and if he appears at all, “it is likely to be in a period setting, “protected” by a nostalgic framework”. The cop who becomes tarnished by the noir world is argued by Hirsch to usually replace the private investigator (Hirsch 1999: 155-156). According to these claims, it would seem that the private investigator in noir represents nostalgia and past times and that the cop is a more contemporary icon. It is

not stated if this refers to a regular police officer or a police detective (though it is most likely the latter). What we can safely conclude is that this “cop” character belongs to an established law enforcement system, while the private investigator usually does not. The exclusion of the private investigator may be the case for many television noirs as well. For example, in *The Philosophy of TV Noir*, neither of the main shows discussed in the essays (like *Miami Vice*, *24*, *CSI*, *The Sopranos* and *The X-Files*) feature traditional private investigator protagonists. While it may be difficult for some (both viewers and characters on the show, like how Piz expresses it in the quote above) to take a female teen investigator seriously, the show bases both Veronica and Keith on old noir P.I. predecessors. Considering their status as (female) teenager and single parent, this is a particularly fascinating discussion.

In *Veronica Mars* we meet two private investigators. This is interesting because noir usually focuses on one single investigator. In the previous chapter, I referred to a quote by Braithwaite stating that “The private eye investigator is often a loner, unencumbered by familial and romantic ties and fiercely proud and protective of his autonomy” (Braithwaite 2008: 138). I am assuming that Braithwaite is discussing the American hardboiled investigator here, as investigators often have sidekicks and helpers. A classic example is Sherlock Holmes and his partner Dr. Watson. While helping the investigator out, they also enable the investigator to speak his mind. This function is perhaps replaced in American hardboiled noir which often uses the voiceover to convey the investigator’s thoughts. While Veronica and Keith are both loners in a sense; Veronica has lost all her friends (though she starts to regain, albeit slowly, a solid friend base once the show starts) and Keith’s wife disappeared without a trace, they rely on the support of each other. They share a strange family dynamic due to their relationship being more of a partnership than an actual father-daughter relationship (please see chapter three for this discussion). Like Braithwaite has noted, Hirsch also argues that the private investigator usually resists all emotional entanglements that last longer than a night (Hirsch 1999: 149). In *Veronica Mars* however, both investigators are highly interested in seeking out lasting romantic relationships, thereby departing from this noir investigator ideal. Veronica and Keith are never seen deliberately pursuing short-term relationships or engaging in one-night stands. This is perhaps an expression of the teen drama dimension of the show, where love and family is the ultimate goal and thus these elements are important helpers in Veronica and Keith’s life project.

In what ways then do these characters resemble classic noir detectives? A good point would be to look at their personalities and their methods of investigation. Spicer argues that the noir detective is the closest of the noir male types to the conventional hero and he identifies two such classic characters: Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe (Spicer 2002: 87). From this I understand that at least in the classic film noirs, the private investigator role was reserved for adult male characters. The Marlowe character is particularly interesting here because Veronica has been compared to him, like in this review by Alessandra Stanley in the *New York Times*: “An amateur sleuth who is closer in spirit to Philip Marlowe than to Nancy Drew [...]” (New York Times). The quote by Hayes in chapter two also compares Veronica to Spade and Marlowe. What does it mean to be close in spirit to Marlowe? What kind of character is Marlowe? Spicer contrasts both Spade and Marlowe and I think it is necessary to know this distinction here so that we can see if Veronica and Keith have traits from both these classic icons. Spade, according to Spicer, is “an egotistical competitor, hard, sarcastic and motivated largely by a determination to win out over everybody rather than a commitment to justice”. Marlowe, by contrast, is defined by Spicer as “[...] Raymond Chandler’s conception of the modern knight, an outsider in the corrupted city, who, if cynical, clings to some ideal of justice and retains a hope that things can be made better even as he realizes that such hope is illusory” (Spicer 2002: 87).

Here we have several points which are relevant for both Veronica and Keith. I believe that both characters (especially Veronica) express traits from both Spade and Marlowe. Veronica and Keith are both outsiders in the corrupt town Neptune. Veronica has a rougher edge and attitude than Keith, similar to how Spicer discusses Spade. Veronica can be seen as a competitor trying to fight her way back into the society which exiled her and she is certainly hard and sarcastic (an attitude which gradually lightens up as the series progresses). And while she does seem to enjoy exposing the evil deeds of Neptune’s citizens, she remains obliged to see justice be done. This is evident in how she takes on cases for people of all classes, thus not favoring any type of denizen. As I discussed in chapter two, Veronica’s noir fate as an investigator is inescapable and she is always pulled back into investigating. This inescapability refers to an idea in noir that one cannot change fate, or that it will always follow the character. Because there is a strong need for her in Neptune, Veronica usually cannot deny any character help and thus she always returns to investigating even when she swears off it. This also shows that she is determined to bring justice, and like Marlowe, she retains a hope that things can be made better through her work. For example, she initially

hopes that solving the Lilly Kane murder case will bring her family back together and restore her former status. When this eventually turns out to be an illusory hope, she continues her work because there seems to be no other way to procure justice in Neptune. Keith shows similar tendencies. He also believes that things will get better and he resorts to private investigation primarily as a means of income to support him and his daughter. At the same time, as former sheriff of Neptune, he remains obligated to see justice done in his town despite not formally being an officer of the law.

Professor of philosophy Deborah Knight and film studies professor George McKnight discuss the presentation of the noir investigator: “Few noir detectives are initially presented sympathetically – often they initially appear gruff, laconic, and cynical” (Knight and McKnight 2008: 169). This may very well be the case, but not in *Veronica Mars*. Though Veronica can often be described in Knight and McKnight’s words, both she and Keith are presented sympathetically right off the start. Keith has lost his prestigious job and wife, and Veronica has lost her best friend, her former friends have all turned on her, her mother has disappeared and she has been date raped. These events allow the characters to be portrayed as sympathetic, they have been unfairly victimized and they seem to react the way they do with good reason. It should be said that Keith’s exile from Neptune’s society is far from as severe as Veronica’s (though Keith’s exile was a public affair) and thus she remains the more bitter and cynical character of the two. Both of them express a jaded behavior, but often have humorous exchanges with each other. The viewers are meant to show them sympathy, and this victimization of the characters allows for this and excuses their moody behavior.

According to Hirsch, what he calls postclassic private investigators show disdain towards their profession (Hirsch 1999: 155). This is interesting to discuss regarding Veronica and Keith, because it is not always clear how they feel about their work. For Keith, the private investigation business is a means to survive and he is undoubtedly good at it. However, he actively tries to pursue the sheriff position twice during the series, trying to restore his former status and reputation. The idea of noir’s inescapability appears here too (see above for a repetition of this concept), as Keith is never able to reclaim that job (though it is never made clear what the results of the final sheriff elections are, it is implied that he does not win). Keith also wishes for a better professional future for Veronica. To Veronica, investigation is also a means to survive. She works for her father because she too has been exiled from the community. Initially doing small-time work for Keith such as procuring money shots, she

starts her own side business helping out characters that have nowhere else to go. She does it partly because of her sense of justice, partly to win her way back into society and last, but not least, to make money. Tucker argues that Veronica is like any usual noir P.I.: short on cash (Tucker 2008: 38). Veronica also makes no attempt to hide this fact, often she is quick to explain her charges to potential clients. At times she does want to get away from investigation and lead a regular teen life, but she is constantly pulled back in because characters depend on her. Private investigation and her sense of justice then assume opponent roles in Veronica's desire for a normal life. However, these elements may also become helpers, and I discuss this in a paragraph below.

An important point about Veronica's position as an investigator is how Neptune is represented. Sanders argues that the familiar is made unfamiliar through the point of view of the noir antihero, "whose alienation invariably reflects his estrangement and distorts the narrative" (Sanders 2008: 3-4). While Keith may resemble a more traditional noir investigator, it is Veronica's job as a P.I. that makes the familiar unfamiliar. By having its teen protagonist act as an investigator and by incorporating an episodic mystery narrative, the teen drama can repeatedly explore issues of crime and corruption in a setting that otherwise usually does not explore these concepts (please refer back to the "very special episode" discussion in chapter one for more on this). As Veronica constantly needs to investigate cases, teen life is depicted through her investigations. She rarely separates from her investigator persona, enhancing the prominence of the mysteries.

The past, particularly Veronica's, is important on the show, especially during the first season. According to Sanders, (film) noir protagonists are "notoriously reticent, evasive, or opaque about their past" (Sanders 2008: 109). Interestingly, this is not the case for Veronica who seems to have no trouble accounting for past experiences and events. In fact, she seems more than willing to reveal to the viewers her past through mental subjectivity devices such as voiceovers and flashbacks, keeping up with the narrative styles of noir (for more on this, refer to chapter one). At the same time, she usually only reveals this information to the viewers. She rarely speaks about her past to characters on the show (for example, refer to her reaction in the opening quote of chapter two). Sanders also argues that TV noir continues to play on the fact that the past plays an important role "in the formation of the protagonist's character and his present conflicts" (Sanders 2008: 109). This is almost universal for the characters on *Veronica Mars*. Since the story starts approximately a year after Veronica and Keith's exile,

the past holds much information about characters and how they have come to be the characters they are in the present storylines.

Hirsch argues that classic hardboiled detectives followed their own moral code and remained ethically distinct from other characters (Hirsch 1999: 146). Keith can be seen as having a more ethical methodological approach to his work. Veronica, on the other hand, is often relentless in her pursuits. She has no trouble using, threatening, blackmailing, stalking or wire-tapping the people she comes across in her investigations. Keith also shows this tendency, like when he helps Alicia Fennel get rid of a no-good tenant by acting insane and scaring him off (1x08 “Like a Virgin”). Keith is often more discrete while Veronica’s methods are more harsh. For example, in the same episode with the tenant Keith scares off, Veronica videotapes a conversation between her and the culprit of a “purity test” scam and broadcasts it on the school news channel for everyone to see. Veronica’s personality is reflected in her ethics. This complies well with a theory by Sanders who says that in TV noir, “ambiguity is typically found in the morally compromised position of its protagonists” (Sanders 2008: 11). Keith, who is running a professional business, is probably required to act in a different manner than Veronica. Veronica, who has nothing to lose and harbors much anger towards society, acts on these feelings. Interestingly, her relentless methods have a dual nature. While some characters seem to fear her because of her methods, other students seem to admire her. This is a good example of how private investigation will work both for and against Veronica’s desire for a normal teen life.

Tucker argues that Veronica also bears resemblance to a noir character type called “the good-bad girl”. According to Spicer, the good-bad girl “has both masculine and feminine qualities and although appearing to be duplicitous, like the *femme fatale*, proves herself to be loyal. If she cannot actively help the hero, she can support him and believe in his innocence, or his ability to solve the problems” (Spicer 20002: 93). When this character appeared in classic noir, Tucker says that “The good-bad girl introduced a new type of female character to the movies, and opposed the traditional movie roles for women which portrayed them as either good or bad” (Tucker 2008: 25). Though from this, it seems that this character type is more good than bad and that whatever is bad in these characters cannot be too serious (otherwise their good side would not transcend their bad actions). The reason Tucker compares Veronica to the good-bad girl is stated in the following quote:

Late night stake outs in front of cheap motels with neon signs, having connections with everyone from firemen to biker gangs, jaded world-weary voice-overs and a moral code that would seem questionable in any other teen tv-show also contribute to making Veronica a P.I. character. However Veronica's actions are always motivated by a cause, a cause she deems worthy enough to break society's rules for. As discussed previously this moralistic reasoning is also used by the good-bad girl, and is one of the characteristics by which the audience can tell the difference between her and the femme fatale. Like the good-bad girl she usually knows more about the situation than she would ever let on, but few characters see through this. (Tucker 2008: 38-39)

I also discussed this above. Veronica has no trouble using questionable methods in her investigations (these methods are invaluable helpers in her investigations). She most likely follows a "the ends justify the means" approach. A good example of Veronica's ability for moral reasoning related to this approach is found in this voiceover (taken from chapter one):

Veronica: [voiceover] I know, I'm shameless. But every time I start to feel guilty I remind myself that Lilly would be thinking about colleges right now or what new CD played at maximum volume would most annoy her mother. And I remember my mission. (1x11 "Silence of the Lamb").

In this episode she is taking advantage of the affection a deputy at the sheriff's office has for her, in order to sneak into the evidence room and steal the Lilly Kane murder interrogation tapes. We see here that Veronica realizes that she is doing a morally questionable thing, but that in the end it serves a greater purpose: justice for her murdered friend.

Another point in which Tucker argues that Veronica resembles the good-bad girl is how she uses her looks to achieve some of her goals. Tucker argues:

The good-bad girl typically uses her looks to manipulate the characters around her into doing what she wants them to, and this is something we see traces of in Veronica. One such occasion is when she comes to ask Weevil for a favor and he tells her: "See, there you go with that head-tilt thing. You know, you think you're all badass but whenever you need something it's all, 'hey.'" Her answer reveals that this characterization is not surprising to her, nor something she tries to deny: "Just be glad I don't flip my hair. I'd own you." (Tucker 2008: 39)

This can also be discussed in relation to Veronica's status as a female teen investigator. She has an innocent and beautiful appearance. Also, because she is a teenage girl, she is able to adopt something which Braithwaite calls "high drag". This concept often allows Veronica to be a detective by acting as a girl, meaning that she can go undercover by simply acting like a

normal girl would do. Braithwaite does not argue why she uses this particular term for the concept. “Drag” is usually a gendered way of dressing, especially related to transvestism. What “high” means in this context is unclear. Thus I interpret Braithwaite’s term this way: Veronica, as a hardboiled investigator, is not a typical teen girl. However, because she looks like a teen girl and society does not expect her to be anything else, she is able to get away with her investigations by acting as one. To Veronica, the concept of normal teen girl is far from her reality and thus dressing up as one becomes a disguise for her. Braithwaite’s term is confusing, but the concept is much clearer. For example, Veronica goes undercover as a perky cheerleader, she pretends to be an aspiring journalist in order to meet death-row prisoner Abel Koontz, she infiltrates a video-game bar by dressing up as a gamer girl and she “giggles as a ditzy blonde in a sultry red dress and curled tresses to lure a trust-fund scam artist” (Braithwaite 2008: 142). These examples are all from the first season and Veronica continues to play this “girl” card throughout the series. In season two she takes on the role as a trumpy blonde trying to find out if a guy is faithful to his girlfriend, she poses as a babysitter in order to discover child abuse and she pretends to need study help from the mayor’s daughter so that she can snoop around the mayor’s house. In season three, Veronica is seen pretending to be a sorority pledge, a dumb cheerleader and an animal rights activist.

These examples comply with Braithwaite’s comments. As a teen female investigator, Veronica is able to use her position as a teen girl to her advantage. By simply playing a girl, she is able to gain trust and get access to information. Characters may lower their defenses around her when she is interrogating. One of Veronica’s strengths lie in the fact that very few suspect what she can do and she plays on this. That is not to say that Keith is not able to go undercover in his investigations, because he most certainly does. However, Keith has a more limited sphere of undercover operations. While Veronica is able to use her teen girl status for a variety of roles, Keith is usually reduced to taking on the roles such as alarm company employee, prostitute customer or campus security guard.

Noir works as a double-edged sword for these two characters. Noir robs the characters of their normal lives, and it still continues to do so through their work as investigators. However, especially in Veronica’s case, mystery-solving and noir can also be tools that may allow her to return to a more or less normal teen life because she is able to regain respect and trust in society, along with family and friends. As characters of revolt, Veronica and Keith actively combat the lawlessness and absurdity in Neptune through their detective work. True to how



McMahon discusses Camus' concept above, both characters have become social outsiders in their community. Noir detectives are also usually unfazed by crime (Knight and McKnight 2008: 164) and this is reflected in Veronica and Keith. No case seems too big, too small or too bizarre.

### **Friends of the Detective – Victims of Mischance**



Wallace Fennel



Cindy "Mac" Mackenzie



Stosh "Piz" Piznarski



Parker Lee

I argued above that "friends" is not technically a character role and I stand by this argument. The characters here are indeed Veronica's friends and they remain as such throughout the entire series (with the exception of Piz who becomes romantically involved with Veronica). However, it can also easily be argued that certain characters from the category below are also Veronica's friends. The main difference between the characters in this group and the group below is that the "friends" here primarily take on a supporting role in the storylines. They are rarely the cause of conflicts in other characters' lives. Instead, these characters are often innocently victimized when noir strikes and thus they are in their own separate group.

Hirsch's concept of noir as "melodramas of mischance" was addressed in chapter one and this is highly relevant for this group of characters (as well as the group below). According to

Hirsch, these mischance narratives where bourgeois characters are being sucked into a criminal undertow follow two formats: “In the first, passersby crash into crime scenes through mere happenstance, and the films therefore posits a world in which misfortune can overtake anyone for no reason at all”. This is the most relevant concept for this group of characters. The other format, which will be discussed more during the final section below, is discussed by Hirsch: “In the second [format of mischance narratives], and much larger and more varied narrative group, noir assaults characters who seem to either invite or to deserve it” (Hirsch 1999: 211). I discussed an example of this regarding Veronica in chapter one, where her work as an investigator invites noir into her life.

Though *Veronica Mars* is consistently trying to advocate moral ambiguity and uncertainty in its characters, this group of characters is the one who most likely resembles good characters. Though there are a few exceptions to this rule (such as Wallace cheating on his engineering exam or Mac creating an online “purity test” to make money off her classmates), these characters are generally always sympathetic and mean no harm with their actions. These characters are usually nice and supportive, fun-loving and have healthy interests. However, in the noir world of *Veronica Mars*, such attitudes usually mean victimization.

As I stated, these characters rarely cause any conflict intentionally. Instead, because of their innocent and upright personalities, they are often victims of circumstance and thus noir situations are never beneficial to them or their lives. Hirsch argues that in classic noir, “innocent characters [...] collapse when terrible events impinge unexpectedly”, but it seems that characters in neo-noirs often have a stronger resistance to noir (Hirsch 1999: 216). Hirsch does not state exactly what he means by “collapse”, but I interpret this as characters not being able to stand up for themselves when tragedy strikes. Regarding these *Veronica Mars* characters, this is both the case and not the case at the same time. In most of the cases when these characters are struck by tragedy, they require Veronica’s help to get out of trouble. For example, when we are first introduced to Wallace in 1x01 “Pilot”, he is duct-taped naked to a flag pole in the school yard with a crowd standing around him laughing and taking pictures. Only Veronica has the decency to cut him loose, which leads her into trouble with the biker gang who put Wallace up there for trying to report them to the police for stealing. In 2x12 “Rashard and Wallace Go To White Castle”, Wallace is framed with a hit-and-run accident and Veronica must help him. Mac discovers her true family thanks to Veronica, but she is also innocently and unexpectedly victimized at the hands of Cassidy Casablancas. When we first

meet Piz in 3x01 “Welcome Wagon”, he becomes the victim of a Welcome Wagon scam and has all of his belongings stolen. Only with Veronica’s help is he able to recover it. Piz also needs Veronica’s help in 3x03 “Wichita Linebacker” in order to help out his new boss’ boyfriend. And in 3x17 “Debasement Tapes”, Veronica has to save Piz’ employment at the radio station when one of the artists he has booked for a concert refuses to play because of potentially stolen tapes.

Parker is perhaps the most unlucky of these characters. She is introduced in the same episode as Piz and while she does not have any problems that require Veronica’s help in the episode, she gets into serious trouble. She is initially portrayed as carefree and somewhat slutty, moving from one guy to the next, and this proves to be destructive in noir. In his discussion of the movie *Red Rock West*, Hirsch argues that because the protagonist is dumb and sexy, he is an easy mark for noir (Hirsch 1999: 225). While Parker is not really a dumb character, she is initially portrayed as such and her behavior invites noir into her life. Despite warnings about the campus rapist, Parker parties on and becomes a rape victim during her first week at college.

While discussing the movies *The Net* and *The Game*, Hirsch addresses the characters:

[...] even as their lives are overtaken by noir reversals, the characters maintain immunity from their inner demons; they’re victims who never become criminals and, at the end of their bizarre journey, are reinstated into a non-noir world. In contrast, other middle-class characters whose lives are crisscrossed by noir do slip into crime (Hirsch 1999: 229).

As innocent victims, the *Veronica Mars* characters in this group never resort to crime when they are victimized. Because of this, they are usually able to get out of their noir situations easily. They cannot escape the noir world, as Neptune never changes, but they can escape their noir situations. Noir then focuses its mischance on someone else. When noir opposes these characters’ project for life, Veronica is usually the helper allowing them to quickly return to a more or less normal teen situation.

Another interesting point regarding certain characters in this group is that, according to Bolte, the friendships seem to solidify Veronica’s exile instead of reversing it (Bolte 2008: 98). She only discusses this in relation to Wallace though, stating that “[...] her quick befriending and

defense of Wallace seems to reify her as the defender of the downtrodden, friend of the friendless” (Bolte 2008: 98). Mac can also be discussed here, as she initially neither seems to have any particular friends other than the people who need her technical support. As the storylines go on and the characters progress into college, Veronica’s social status changes and with the inclusion of Parker and Piz who have nothing to do with the Neptune High environment, the friendships no longer seem to be based on exile.

But if noir is so focused on the moral ambiguity and innate criminal behavior in its characters, why do these characters get away so easily? My suggestion is that these characters are not represented in the class war of Neptune, which was discussed in chapter two. The characters in this group are all seemingly middle class and thus they exist between the haves and the have-nots. They seem unaffected by class tensions. Thus, their middle-class belonging seem to be a helper against noir. Another argument I want to raise is that these characters are perhaps reminiscent of more traditional teen melodrama characters that the viewers are meant to identify with. In chapter three, I discussed the WB teen dramas. According to researcher Valerie Wee, the teens in those shows struggled to do the right thing and they were thoughtful and morally idealistic (Wee 2008: 49). The “friends” characters here may be *Veronica Mars*’ version of these types of teen drama characters. As such, their attitudes are important helpers in their life projects. The fact that they sometimes are victimized is simply in accordance with the classic noir philosophy that sometimes bad things happen to perfectly good people (Hirsch 1999: 212).

These characters’ revolt is more passive than active, but still present. Whenever mischance and victimization occur, even if they do not engage Veronica in helping them, they recover quickly and carry on with their life. By being Veronica’s friends they can also be argued to be invaluable helpers in her quest for life. They can also help her out during investigations, though not extensively, which is to say that they are not Veronica’s mystery-solving partners. Instead they occasionally help her out when they are able to. Thus they can also contribute to combat lawlessness in Neptune, but they are primarily characters with their own lives separate from Veronica’s constant mystery solving.

## “Frenemies” - Troublemakers Extraordinaire



Duncan Kane



Logan Echolls



Cassidy “Beaver” & Richard “Dick”

Casablancas



Jackie Cook



Eli “Weevil” Navarro



Sheriff Don Lamb

In this group we have characters from the opposite ends of the social ladder. As I discussed in the previous group, the characters’ middle class position seems to contribute to them not causing trouble and conflicts. However, the characters here do (meaning that they can assume the role of opponent in the other characters’ life project) and because of this the idea that class is somehow related to troublesome behavior is reinforced. Though the middle class main characters are innocently victimized, the working and upper class characters of this group are less so. Instead, they seem to deserve a lot of their bad luck, but they are also able to use noir situations to their advantage (something which does not occur with the previous group).

These characters are also victimized (with the exception of Lamb who is mostly ridiculed), but not in the same sense as those in the “friends” category. Neo-noir is traditionally not about innocent bystanders, like how the “friends” often appear to be when they are involved in mysteries. Hirsch argues: “More in the neo line are stories in which the characters tossed precipitously into noir aren’t altogether guiltless, seem, in ways that remain unspoken, somehow to deserve their noir destinies” (Hirsch 1999: 220). Whereas the middle class friends get away easily from noir, the road these characters must overcome is significantly tougher and often there is no happy ending. Hirsch comments on middle-class characters whose lives are crisscrossed by noir:

As opposed to the more or less innocent bystanders who pass in then out of noir, these characters edge into another realm. For them, mischance instigates transgression, for which they pay either with their lives or at least their moral integrity. After noir, if they’re still standing, they’ve been irremediably branded (Hirsch 1999: 229)

There is an opposition here between Hirsch’s argument and my conclusion above that Veronica’s middle class friends are innocent noir victims. It seems implied that the innocent bystanders in Hirsch’s statement are not defined by their social status. Still, what Hirsch argues is highly relevant for characters of this group, despite them being working or upper class (I am uncertain whether Lamb is considered working class or middle class). Though *Veronica Mars* portrays its middle class main characters as generally safe from traumatizing noir events (though Parker was undoubtedly extremely unfortunate), the idea of mischance that Hirsch discusses still applies.

As I discussed in chapter two, melodrama has often focused on the victims of the success of bourgeois ascendancy, and melodrama usually sides with the so-called powerless and social power and station is associated with evil (Gledhill 1987: 21). The 09ers practically rule Neptune with their wealth and social status, and they have tremendous influence on public life (the term “09er” is not restricted to teen characters, it encompasses all generations). However, this success often comes with a price, in the form of repeated conflicts with those less fortunate characters that cross paths with the 09ers, meaning that wealth is both opponent and helper in the 09ers’ life projects. The 09ers are not always winners, nor are they always the villains. They do have a tendency to get off the hook more easily than other characters, such as being able to pay their way out of sticky situations or call on their social power for

intimidation. English professor Michael Valdez Moses argues that in classic noir, money and greed was the root of all evil (Moses 2008: 222). This is a classic trope which probably exists in most genres. Its occurrence in noir is perhaps not surprising, seeing as it provides a polar opposite to the often poor private investigator (in noirs that uses this type of narrative) fighting corruption in the form of wealth.

In *Veronica Mars*, wealth comes with a price. On the surface, people often envy the 09ers. If we dig below this surface, we come across traumatized characters whose wealth provides no true safe haven. For example, Duncan suffers from a violent type of epilepsy and he struggles with the thought of having had sex with Veronica despite believing she was his sister. Logan, tough and brutal on the outside, lives with an ignorant and depressed mother and an abusive father who does not even remember Logan's birthday. Dick and Cassidy have largely been ignored by their rich father, and Jackie Cook lives a complete lie. The corruption and conflicts run even deeper in the families of said characters. Duncan's parents are covering up the murder of their daughter (in order to protect their son, who they believe committed the murder in an epileptic seizure), Logan's movie star father is a notorious adulterer, murderer and drives his wife to commit suicide. Richard Casablancas senior is really the mastermind behind a large corporate scheme and once caught, he flees the country leaving his children in the care of their uncaring and gold-digging stepmother. Jackie's father becomes suspected of killing eight people in a bus explosion and true to the "sins of the father" concept seen with Veronica, she is exiled from the community.

Duncan's secret sexual encounter with Veronica (which Veronica believed was a rape) is exposed, but luckily for him, Veronica is not his sister. This is an excellent example of noir's pathological sexuality (for more on this, see chapter three). His involvement with Meg Manning leaves him with a child and he is forced to flee the country with Veronica's help in order to avoid the deceased Meg's religiously fanatical family. While the scheme is successful, his stay in Neptune has branded him and his personality toughens up. This is evident in Duncan's final appearance, where he orders the assassination of Aaron Echolls who is acquitted of the murder of Lilly Kane (though he did commit the murder). Duncan actually resembles the middle class friends from above by being nice and sympathetic. However, since he has many secrets and because several conflicts involve him, he is included here.

Logan transcends from unsympathetic to sympathetic because of the revelation of his terrible family situation and his romantic involvement with Veronica. However, his overly sarcastic and often fiendish attitude is one of his main opponents in life and leads him into trouble. For example, in season two he is the prime suspect in a murder of a PCH biker member. However, since Logan is innocent he is able to escape noir after an intense investigation. Dick's darkly humoristic, party- and sex-loving nature usually only leads him into trouble with members of the opposite sex, but such attitudes can also become dangerous in noir. Suddenly, Dick finds himself suspected of being involved with the Hearst College serial rapes. Jackie attempts to live a lie. She comes to Neptune to live with her father, former baseball star Terrence Cook. She enjoys the privileges of being an 09er (which includes ridiculing Veronica), but by now it should be clear that this position is almost always cursed. Suddenly Jackie's father is suspected of murdering students in a bus explosion and Jackie is exiled from the rich and the popular. Only Veronica and Wallace seem to support her. Even though Terrence is cleared of all charges, he must spend the next ten years paying off casino debt and Jackie's fantasy life is over; she is forced to return to her life in New York where she has to work as a waitress and raise her little son.

Cassidy has a duplicitous nature hidden from the characters and the viewers. While initially being portrayed as introverted and shy, Cassidy is revealed to be a cunning businessman and a fully-fledged psychopath. According to Spicer, the psychopath in noir has been argued as being American culture's response to boredom and conformity, and that the psychopath has been interchangeable with "sex criminal", "pervert" and "homosexual" (Spicer 2002: 89). Especially the latter is unfortunate, but not surprising considering noir's stressed relationship with homosexuality (see chapter three for more on this). Hirsch argues that the psycho appears in three guises in neo-noir, and the one that is relevant here is the psycho as someone in the family (Hirsch 1999: 276). Cassidy hides around the other main characters as an innocent young man, seemingly preoccupied with school and his girlfriend. Once Veronica exposes him, his personality openly changes into that of a disturbed and homicidal teenager. Hirsch argues that it is unlikely that a noir thriller fully accounts for the psychosis of a character (Hirsch 1999: 277), but in *Veronica Mars* most of Cassidy's behavior is explained.

Weevil is the polar opposite to the 09ers when it comes to social class. He is the leader of the PCH biker gang and is from "the wrong side of the tracks". He could be considered a typical criminal stereotype (a thug), and sometimes he acts that way. However, he often proves to be



a valuable ally to Veronica despite the fact that they do not have a defined relationship. Weevil seems to be neither friend nor foe. Introduced in the first episode as the leader of the small-time criminal PCH biker gang, he is perhaps portrayed stereotypically. However, his appearance in the opening credits seems to hint at something more. While the first episode demonstrated Weevil's tough gangster-like behavior, already in the second episode Weevil is innocently victimized and Veronica helps him out. Tucker argues that this is consistent with how the show portrays its characters, stating that "And while characters are not stereotypically defined by class neither do they remain static, causing one week's villain to be next week's hero" (Tucker 2008: 64). Weevil is double-crossed by his own gang in season two and he attempts a more crime-free life after being released on parole in season three. This proves to be hard. His noir background becomes a perpetual opponent in his life, reminiscent of the idea of the fated destiny in noir. Nevertheless, Weevil's inclusion as a main character is hardly accidental. He can be seen as the working class equivalent of the 09ers: the only thing that separates them is the different socioeconomic background.

Lamb represents noir's corrupted law enforcement. In chapter two I discussed that noir has always had a dark vision of authority (Moses 2008: 222). I discussed how the law enforcement was incapacitated. Lamb has a careless and bureaucratic attitude about the crimes in Neptune and because of this, Veronica and Keith often have to do Lamb's job for him. Lamb is usually portrayed one-dimensionally and he remains the villainous opponent to Veronica and Keith. As Gledhill argued above, melodrama has often focused on the victims of bourgeois ascendancy and Lamb is another example of this. He remains largely indifferent to his position as the town's sheriff, and he cannot produce and uphold justice (and he also seems unwilling to do it). He is very young for his position (actor Michael Muhney was 29 years in season one) and his lax attitude to crime-solving was discussed in chapter two as a major enabling factor for Veronica to be needed as an investigator. Tucker argues: "That it is a show that strives to make all the characters be more than just one-dimensional is shown by how a well established foil to Keith, Sheriff Lamb's back story of childhood abuse is hinted at in "Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner" (2-7) [...]" (Tucker 2008: 65). In this episode, which was discussed as an example in chapter two, Lamb hints at his own past with an abusive father and this gives the character more depth than what he usually is portrayed as. Despite this, Tucker argues that "However even though Lamb turns out to be more than just a one dimensional character new information about him does not change his relationship with Veronica and Keith and he continues to be portrayed as a foil throughout the series." (Tucker 2008: 65).

Lamb is repeatedly used to represent the opposition in law enforcement (and one of the few who recognizes Veronica's true skills), until his untimely death in 3x15 "Papa's Cabin". As Lamb is rarely portrayed outside situations where he is working, not much is known about him on a personal level. However, he can easily be argued to be the antagonistic opponent in the lives of all of the characters in this chapter, repeatedly refusing to help them (as the show is focused on portraying him like this). Veronica and Keith are opponents to his life and work, though they also help him on several occasions whether he acknowledges it or not.

Noir's mischance is undoubtedly a source of great trouble for these characters. But the noir mischance that befalls other characters may also be beneficial to them in their life. For example, Duncan's (indirect) assassination of Aaron Echolls frees Logan from his murdering and abusive father. Keith's downfall in the Lilly Kane murder case allows Lamb to assume the role of sheriff. When their father's corporate scandal is exposed, Dick and Cassidy are able to access their trust fund and live without their parents' support. Noir's mischance is ambiguous for these characters. While initially being devastating when these characters are afflicted by noir, noir's mischance can aid them greatly when it targets other characters. Interestingly, the teen drama theme of family is often a major opponent in the 09ers' life project (refer to chapter three for the discussion of the dysfunctional families in teen dramas). The characters are only able to rightfully pursue their desire for life once their families are out of the equation (with the exception of Logan who did not want his mother to die). This is a fascinating aspect of the show considering how important family is supposed to be to teen characters.

The concept of revolt against absurdity is intensified in these characters, which opposes the more passive reactions of the middle class friends or Veronica and Keith's active investigations of crime. The moral ambiguities of these characters are more severe than the middle class friends. Duncan resorts to crime when the criminal justice system cannot protect his daughter; instead he kidnaps her and flees the country. Logan acts out as a reaction to his terrible family condition and the loss of his girlfriend, causing further misfortune in his life. When he is wrongfully accused with murder, he goes to great lengths to prove his innocence. Dick goes through life with a darkly comical attitude, appearing to be unaffected by the terrible events around him (possibly his way of revolting). He is devastated over Cassidy's actions and blames himself for his part in Cassidy's mental instability. Cassidy revolts very badly against the tragic events that consumed him, being traumatized and turning

psychopathic. Jackie tries to revolt against her life as a teen mother by attempting to live the good life with her father. In some cases the revolt is successful. Duncan is able to escape and Logan recovers from his traumas. Cassidy and Jackie are less fortunate. Cassidy is overpowered and commits suicide and Jackie is forced to return home and take responsibility for the choices she has made.

## Chapter Conclusion

There are many ways to discuss the *Veronica Mars* characters and this chapter is by no means a definite exploration of the characters. Here I have chosen to discuss them related to the noir and teen universe they live in, and how this affects their desire to lead normal lives as teens (or simply normal life in the case of the two adult characters in the chapter). Noir clashes with this desire, constantly creating dangerous and difficult situations for the characters. Even the teen dimension of the show is seen interfering with the characters' projects for life, such as the dysfunctional families of the 09er characters.

I believe I have found some interesting results here. The show focuses much of its dramatic tension in its working class and upper class characters, thereby enforcing the concepts of social war from chapter two. Their morally ambiguous natures repeatedly toss them into noir troubles. Veronica's middle class friends are depicted as nice teens with healthy interests, and thus not much of the dramatic conflicts are based on these characters. They assume a supportive role to Veronica, both as her friend and in her investigations. Though because of this, they are innocently victimized at points. But precisely because they are always innocent, the troubles they are thrown into are resolved fast and without much consequence to their character. They are also the least morally ambiguous characters. As a show that is focused on displaying moral ambiguity in all classes and characters, the middle class represented through these main characters is still depicted as the safe ideal.

Many of the traditional noir character types are gone in the main characters of *Veronica Mars*. We have clear examples of the private investigator and the psychopath. What the show seems to mostly borrow from noir here are the mischance narratives. Characters are repeatedly lured into noir situations which usually require the private investigator's resolve to escape from. As I have demonstrated, the outcome of this depends on the character type.

Another topic which I discussed here is the concept of the man of revolt. While noir seems to be a genre that wants to provoke a change in its characters through unexpected and horrible events, the characters here are often unfazed or spend very little time being affected before moving on. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, this may be due to the show's mystery focus and the "action over dialog" principle. However, the man of revolt is an enticing idea which is very relevant here. Each character has their own way of handling their struggles. The characters realize the strangeness of the world they live in and they actively try to fight back at any injustice that can and will attack them. It is the way they choose to fight that differs, but in most cases, Veronica is there to help with the fight.

## Conclusion:

### Case Closed?

Veronica is certainly a vigilante, and here at VM headquarters, we love her for it. We love her for it in the same way we love Bruce Wayne throwing on a cape and becoming Batman. There's something twisted in both of their psyches that makes "seeking justice" or "wreaking vengeance" a compulsion. When an occasional character (Meg, Carmen) suggests that it might be healthier for Veronica to rid herself of this compulsion, well, yeah... they're probably right. That said, Meg or Carmen would be equally correct in pointing this out to Bruce Wayne. I hope people don't think we're holding Veronica to a different standard because she's a young woman. (Thomas 2006: 124)

## Summary of Key Points

In the introduction I asked the following superior research question:

- In what ways does *Veronica Mars* combine noir with teen drama?

I divided this discussion into four chapters, each focused on its own area where I explored the noir and teen drama influences. In order to answer the research question, I first would like to briefly sum up the four chapters and the main points I discovered.

Chapter one dealt with the narration and aesthetics of *Veronica Mars*. I discussed a type of teen drama which I called "teen heroic melodrama" which uses a dominating, heroic protagonist and that *Veronica Mars* follow this type of teen drama. The show also mixes elements from the whodunit investigation stories and the thriller. I discussed the use of typical noir narrative devices such as flashbacks, dreams and voiceovers which often create a non-linear timeline. In addition, the show has a distinct visual iconography, such as blurry pictures in flashbacks, strong color in dream sequences, neon lights, darkness and weak/cold sunlight. The show also incorporates typical teen drama elements, such as the use of popular music and intertextual references in the dialog and episode titles.

In chapter two I turned to the noir universe of *Veronica Mars*. I discussed how the small town is a repeated motif in teen dramas, and how Neptune is used to portray the dark and inescapable noir city. As a part of this universe, I explored the show's portrayal of the social class issues in town, a topic which has been discussed in academic literature about the show.

Noir's moral ambiguity is an important factor here, as it enables characters from all layers of society to commit criminal acts. Neptune also suffers from an indifferent criminal justice system which causes paranoia in town. This indifference and incapacity allows Veronica to investigate many of the mysteries that appear on the show. She investigates everything from small-scale issues to larger, more serious crimes.

Chapter three was devoted to an exploration of an often ignored area in academic literature on *Veronica Mars*: the teen drama themes. I discussed how various teen dramas (mostly from The WB) created several tropes for this genre. I focused on three main areas common in all of these shows: family, relationships and sexuality. Like most teen dramas, characters in *Veronica Mars* often have stressed relationships with their families. The families of the 09er characters are particularly dysfunctional. Regarding the relationships, the show follows an "action over dialog" principle which is at odds with teen dramas in general. The reflexive dialog is often removed, causing the show to devote less time to address the characters' relationships. Because of noir and Veronica's work as an investigator, her relationships always seem to be doomed. Sex and sexuality are often portrayed as dangerous on the show, which is in accordance with noir conventions and in opposition to the more positive teen drama exploration of these topics. Sexual assaults are used in several storylines and often linked to pathologic behavior in the show's antagonists. Homosexuality usually has positive representations in teen dramas and negative appearances in noir. In *Veronica Mars*, gay characters are portrayed in the same ambiguous manner as other characters.

The fourth and final chapter discussed the main characters in the show. I divided the characters into groups and explored how noir affects these characters. Greimas' actantial model was a helpful tool in my discussions. By analyzing the characters as having "life" as their ultimate project, I was able to see how noir and teen elements play a part in this. There were few instances of noir character types, only the private investigator and the psychopath were present. However, Hirsch's concept of noir's mischance narratives was very relevant to many of these characters. The show's middle class main characters are innocent when noir mischance strikes and because of this, they are able to recover quickly from their misfortune. The working class and upper class characters are much more ambiguous, and they are not always innocent when mischance strikes. Their morally ambiguous nature constantly leads them into trouble and their way out is difficult. I also explored some of McMahon's discussions of the "man of revolt" and attempted to use this theory to discuss how these main

characters are seemingly unfazed by the constant stream of terrible events that surround them. A majority of the characters seem resistant to being traumatized by noir events, they recover quickly and make sure that the injustice is dealt with (often with Veronica's help).

*Veronica Mars* combines noir and teen drama in many different ways. These genres mix and clash in all parts of the show, from the visual style and narration to the characters, themes and the entire universe of the show. Neptune is depicted as a deceptive town, trapping its characters in crime and misfortune. The combination of noir and teen drama allows *Veronica Mars* to repeatedly explore darker themes and issues not commonly addressed in teen dramas.

## **Thesis Contribution**

This thesis has studied the unique combination of noir and teen drama in *Veronica Mars*. By examining both of the genres that the show is based on, this thesis is hopefully contributing to a clearer understanding of this television show. Academic literature on this show has usually focused on specific aspects of the show, such as the class issues, feminism or certain noir elements. I argued in the introduction that in order to fully understand *Veronica Mars*, one needs to be aware of both the noir and teen drama principles of the show. I hope I have shown that this is a valid argument, as these genre elements actively work together and is visible in all parts of the show.

Academically, teen television and *Veronica Mars* has often been left out of research. For example, the show, despite its strong noir influences, is not even mentioned in Sanders and Skoble's *The Philosophy of TV Noir* (2008). The show is arguably much more noir than several of the shows discussed in that book. Perhaps it is the teen label that automatically puts scholars off academic research. This thesis has attempted to remedy this. While it is not meant to be a complete analysis of everything on the show (there are several areas that can and should be discussed more closely), I have divided my attention so that I have visited most areas and gained a good in-depth view of the noir and teen drama mechanisms at work in *Veronica Mars*. It is my hope that this thesis will be a helpful addition to existing research on teen drama, noir and, of course, *Veronica Mars*.

## Closing Comments

Sadly, *Veronica Mars* was canceled in 2007, but the investigations are far from over and the case is anything but closed. With so much material ripe for academic research, *Veronica Mars* will hopefully receive more attention in the future. And hopefully, one day we might see her again, tackling some new heavyweight mystery in the town that never forgives: Neptune, California.

Piz: It's a cool ride. Graduation gift?

Veronica: My dad stood me up for my graduation trip. Lucky for me, he felt really bad about it.

Piz: Stood you up? It's harsh...

Veronica: He had his reasons.

Piz: Well, a Saturn for a Mars...

Veronica: In Neptune! Yeah, the planets are really aligned for this one! Now, move Uranus, the Mercury's rising!

(3x01 "Welcome Wagon")



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