Viewed from a Distance: Gender Roles of Irene Adler and Lisa Freemont Bridget Jones

FYS 43: The Art of the Detective in Fiction and Film

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Although separated by decades, the noir film *Rear Window* (1954) and the neo-noir TV episode *Sherlock:* "A Scandal in Belgravia" (2012) have much in common in terms of their treatment of gender and gender roles. This is particularly clear in the case of the two main female characters of each film, Lisa Freemont of *Rear Window* and Irene Adler of *Sherlock*. There are clear distinctions between how the characters are perceived from a distance versus from a close vantage point.

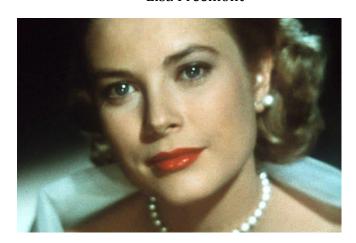
From close angles, the women appear to be very feminine characters. However, when viewed from a distance, their traditional gender roles break down. Through a variety of cinematic techniques, the directors of each film actively set up, break down, and rearrange our perceptions of these two female characters and their roles within the films.

In each of the films, the parallels between Irene Adler and Lisa Freemont are introduced by extreme close ups of the women. A combination of camera work and visual cues draws the viewer's attention to the similarity of the two shots.

Irene Adler



Lisa Freemont



In both shots, the woman's face dominates the frame. The focus of each shot seems to be the eyes, which are highlighted by minimal makeup. Both women feature red lips and flawless skin, but otherwise their beauty is natural. Their heads are tilted to the left, revealing an ear decorated with a simple white earring. In each scene, the background is blurred and monochromatic, forcing the viewer to notice only the woman's face.

In these scenes, the feminine characteristics of Irene Adler and Lisa Freemont are clearly emphasized. Women in film noir are, as one writer puts it, "filmed for [their] sexuality" (Gledhill 32). In addition to the characteristics listed above, Irene and Lisa have thin, arched eyebrows, dark eyelashes, and soft, curved faces. It is also significant to notice that while the two women have red lips and eye shadow, neither is heavily masked by makeup. This suggests that they are exposed, or that we are seeing them without any filter other than that of the camera.

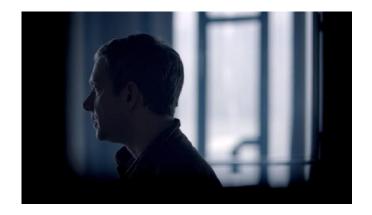
The similarities between the scenes extend beyond visual characteristics. Both scenes are used as an introduction to the main female characters in the film. In "A Scandal in Belgravia," this scene appears when Sherlock first meets Irene Adler in person. Similarly, in *Rear Window*, the scene is the first time Lisa Freemont appears onscreen. In other words, these shots represent both the main male protagonists' and the viewers' first impressions of the women. Through emphasizing Irene and Lisa's feminine facial characteristics, the scenes convey the impression that Irene Adler and Lisa Freemont are very feminine characters. However, first impressions can be deceiving, and accordingly this idea is contradicted by events later on in the films. Both Irene and Lisa defy the traditionally feminine roles set for them in their

respective introductory scenes. Here, we see a tension between how we initially perceive the women through the lens of the camera and how they act and are portrayed in the plotline of the films.

Throughout "A Scandal in Belgravia," it is obvious that Irene Adler does not fall into the traditional definition of a "feminine" character. Commonly in film noir, women play the role of "prizes, desirable objects" that "offer a temporary satisfaction to the men of film noir" (Harvey 40). In contrast, Irene Adler is a power-driven criminal and dominatrix who "makes [her] way in the world by misbehaving" (Sherlock). One of the clearest examples of how Irene Adler breaks traditional gender roles is seen about halfway through "A Scandal in Belgravia," when John Watson confronts her about her faked death. In this scene, Irene appears to be very androgynous. She wears dark clothing that covers most of her skin and reveals no feminine shape, and pulls her hair up so that the angles of her face are sharply defined. This style is jarringly different from her previous appearances onscreen, in which her clothes, or lack thereof, emphasize her physical femininity.

The dialogue between John and Irene is also indicative of how Irene breaks gender norms. Toward the end of their conversation, John makes the statement, "I'm not actually gay," to which Irene replies, "Well I am. Look at us both" (*Sherlock*). In this moment, Irene is inviting us to observe both she and John together, as halves of a whole image. The next two shots cut from Irene to John and back, showing the two figures almost as mirror images of one another. This mirroring is an occurrence that is repeated throughout the entire conversation, and can be seen in the images below.





The profiles of both characters are outlined against the windows, creating an image of each that lack close detail. Instead, the viewer's attention is drawn to the similar clothing, hair, profile shapes, and positioning of each character within the shots. These shots highlight the similarities between Irene and John, and particularly emphasize Irene's physical masculinity in comparison with John's. The fact that Irene is so adept at changing between a traditionally feminine appearance and a traditionally masculine one suggests that she does not clearly fit into either category.

Irene's ambiguous gender is further complicated by her conversation with John. Throughout the conversation, each character implies that the other is romantically involved with Sherlock Holmes. However, both of their sexual orientations contradict a possible romantic attraction to Sherlock—John asserts that he is straight, and Irene states that she is gay. Irene's complex sexuality and gender challenge the viewer's initial heteronormative assumptions as defined by the first feminine close-up of her face.

In more subtle ways, Lisa Freemont in *Rear Window* also displays characteristics and actions that defy the expectations for a traditional female, particularly in the 1950's when *Rear Window* was filmed. Initially, Lisa is portrayed as a very feminine character. In Lisa's very first appearance, her physical femininity is emphasized by the close-up shot of her face and her form-fitting, flowing dress. The gender roles in *Rear Window* are enforced early on in the film by the dialogue between Jefferies and Lisa: Jefferies insists that Lisa's feminine habits and clothing have no place in his rough line of work. In return, Lisa attempts to persuade Jefferies to give up on his life of adventure and danger for the comforts of a home and a family.

Lisa does not begin to break out of the traditional female gender role until later on in the film. In "The Voyeur's Gaze," *Rear Window* is called "a study in misperceptions" (Denzin 126), and this is particularly true in the case of Lisa Freemont. Alfred Hitchcock carefully introduces Lisa's character so that she appears in the most feminine light possible, an impression that is then steadily broken down as the film progresses and as Lisa becomes more engrossed in the mystery of Thorwald's missing wife. This transition out of a traditional female gender role is apparent in the scene in which Lisa breaks into Thorwald's apartment while Jefferies watches from across the apartment complex.



Here, Lisa takes action and initiative, which Jefferies is unable to do given his injuries. Lisa's dominant, possibly "masculine" characteristics are highlighted in the fact that in the same scene, Jefferies acts like the more "feminine" member of the pair, according to movie stereotypes. He sits at home, helpless, while Lisa is in the thick of the action, and he is powerless to protect her when she is in danger. The sharp contrast between this scene and the earlier dialogue between the two characters is evident: the traditional gender roles have flipped.

The blurred lines present in the gender roles that Irene and Lisa occupy return us to the two introductory shots of the women, which appear to be images without a filter. The women's appearance of being exposed, as well as the extremely close vantage point of the camera, make us feel personally connected with Irene and Lisa, as though we can see who they truly are in that moment. In contrast, in the shots where Lisa and Irene step outside their traditional gender roles, they almost appear to be strangers, seen from a distance.

Although the close-ups seen in the two introductory shots give viewers the impression that they are emotionally connected to Irene and Lisa, the camera work is the directors' way of misleading the viewer. Instead of showing us Irene and Lisa's true natures, the closer camera angle depicts the viewer's own initial assumptions about Irene and Lisa's femininity. In contrast, the long shots are used to reveal the women's complex genders and gender roles. In other words, up close, we can only see Irene and Lisa's superficial beauty, and we are mislead by our own assumptions about their genders. However, from a distance, we can see the actions and personalities that make these women such complicated and interesting characters.

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