

Language, itself, becomes a primary locus of compulsion, duplicity, lack of communication. Characters speak precisely, but *at* each other, not *to* each other. Direct questions are always deflected and go unanswered. Conversations have the characteristics of two distinct monologues instead of those of dialogue. Margaret and Mike both speak with an edge; they punch and spar with words, and where Mike "convinces" her of anything, it has less to do with his using logic or tenderness or any other aid to persuasion than with her susceptibility to suggestion—

In the Gambling Room

The language used is crucial. From the moment she steps into the House of Games, Margaret enters an all-male world in which everyone talks: poker talk, insider speech, language which excludes her, eludes her, language as male encoding. The language is both unnatural (and, therefore, "exotic" to both Margaret and the spectator of either sex) and unreal, having more to do with nursery-rhyme ditties than with any male speech to which we are accustomed. A sampling of some of those ditties:

"A man with style is a man who can smile."

"You wanna win the hand, you stay in till the end."

"Everybody stays, everybody plays."

"The man can't play, stay away."

"It happens to the best, it happens to the rest."

"Aces and jacks, man with the axe."

Margaret presumably could have recourse to her own arsenal of speech, psychoanalytic terms which would exclude the men, but she has withheld both her name and profession (it turns out they already knew both from the start), and curiously her own language goes flat, deadened by theirs, so that finally what comes out of her mouth are clichés ("A sucker born every minute, huh?" "You learn something new every day." "You can't cheat an honest man.") or language so loaded (with alliteration, for example) that it's unbelievable ("You bloody better well believe it."). In all of these cons, the con men depersonify her in the most sexist terms, calling her "the bitch," "the broad," "the mark." And, when she sees through the "tell" con of the card game (the leaking squirt gun), the con men don't apologize. Their response is the trite response from the *Godfather* films: "It was only business -- the American way."

William Van Wert, "Psychoanalysis and Con Games."

In the bar with Margaret listening

There is no human kindness in their conversation, no pity for the mark. The fake cop complains: "How come I always gotta play the straight guy?" Joe complains that he threw his arm out "battin' that bitch around." Mike answers: "You pay for it—that's realism." In their world, acting is the order of the day, appearances and surface are everything, so that "realism" is something extra. Sex as well is something figured into the budget, an added touch or realism to be paid for. "A small price to pay," Mike says when reminded of the sex. The biggest joke at her expense is her kleptomania: "The broad's an addict," "She boosts my lucky pocket knife," "The bitch is a booster, a real deaf man."

In the airport baggage area

Once he's wounded, he begins a return tirade, the words of which clearly come more from Margaret and her sessions with Darlene than from any relationship Mike and Margaret have had.

You thief. You always need to get caught, cuz you know you're bad. I never hurt anybody. I never shot anybody. You sought this out. This is what you always wanted. I knew it the first time you came in. You're worthless, you know it? You're a whore. You came back like a dog to its own father. You sick bitch. I'm not gonna give you shit . . . Thank you, sir. May I have another?

We could underline the words for emphasis: thief (her real crime—kleptomania); worthless and whore (her sessions with Darlene); "You came back like a dog to its own father" (nonsensical, since dogs have little or no relationship at all with their fathers; but with a final inversion, "dog" to "god," the statement accrues psychoanalytical import). And the final statement ("Thank you, sir. May I have another?") makes no sense at all within the context of this situation, which is to say that it is ludicrous: that is, ludic, not realistic.