

John Howarth

***THE MALTESE FALCON AS SOCIAL COMMENT:
AN INTERROGATION OF THE URBAN JUNGLE***

ABSTRACT. This work seeks to contextualise Dashiell Hammett's 1931 noir masterpiece *The Maltese Falcon*, effectively setting it against other detective fiction of the era. It then goes on to analyse the urban landscapes employed in the novel and Hammett's insistence on making the novel as realistic as possible, especially when compared to the typical English 'tea and crumpets' type detective story so common at the time.

When it was first published in 1931, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* met with rave reviews. Alexander Woolcott described it as 'an extremely well-written novel and the best detective story America has yet produced'¹. Franklin P. Adams stated that it was 'the first detective story [he] had read through to the end since the days of Sherlock Holmes.'² A further testament to the novel's success was the selling of the film rights to Warner Brothers within 12 months of its publication. Later, acclaimed writers of detective fiction were similarly complementary; Raymond Chandler commenting on Hammett's popularity and influence claimed that

Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people who commit it [...] he put these people down on paper as they are and he made them talk and think in a language they customarily use for these purposes.³

Indeed much has been written about Hammett's style and his insistence on making his novel as realistic as possible, but why does he do it? Does he merely wish to

¹ Dennis Dooley, *Dashiell Hammett*, p. 59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

increase the drama of the tale by injecting a healthy dose of realism? Or does he use this realism to interrogate the urban jungle and make a comment on 20th-century American society? In order to answer these questions it is important to be aware of how detective fiction was written before Hammett.

Detective fiction it's usually said to have been born with Edgar Allan Poe in 1841, but his short stories of logical deduction and ingenuity on the part of the 'detective' were a far cry from those of Hammett and other writers of so called 'hard-boiled' fiction. The success of Poe's tales is largely due to the satisfaction gained by the reader in solving the mystery alongside the detective. Poe, however, was very modest about his work:

These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious — but people think them more ingenious than they are — on account of their method and *air* of method. In the "Murders in the Rue Morgue", for instance, where is the ingenuity of unraveling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unraveling?⁴

Despite his modesty, however, Poe succeeded in creating the first real detective fiction, and it was not long before other writers caught on. In the late Nineteenth Century, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle introduced the now famous Sherlock Holmes in his novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Holmes took over where Poe's Dupin left off, and the scientific analysis of clues, ingeniously carried out by Holmes and made more accessible to the reader by the narration of his sidekick Dr. Watson, became a standard feature of detective stories from that time on.

⁴ John Ostrom (ed.), *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 328.

By the 1920's British mysteries had become very popular and seemed to settle into a certain style. Most of the action centered around rural settings and very soon detective fiction became synonymous with small villages, cups of tea and suspicious butlers. Agatha Christie, perhaps the best known crime writer, introduced Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple to the scene – middle class detectives solving multiple murders over tea and cakes. Soon, other writers began to emerge; for instance, Dorothy L. Sayers was becoming popular with her detective creation Lord Peter Wimsey, thus further perpetuating the middle/upper class image of detective fiction.

By the 1930's detective fiction had become very popular indeed and hardback books were rapidly being replaced by paperbacks at a much lower cost. These tales of vaguely aristocratic heroes solving crimes in the relative comfort of rural England were not, however, as popular in the United States; 'English Society' as Ralph Willet points out 'is tailor made for the formal mystery [...] American society is not.'⁵ The societal differences between England and America necessitated a change in format. It is no coincidence, then, that at this time a trend similar to that which was occurring in England was taking place in America, with the advent of so-called 'pulp' magazines. These affordable publications contained amongst other things the first 'hard-boiled' crime stories; a new, very American brand of detective story.

In contrast to the English detective, the hard-boiled detective tended to work in a city surrounded by perversion and wickedness. Indeed for many readers the format

⁵ Ralph Willet, as at <http://human.ntu.ac.uk/baas/ver4/willet.html>

was too crude and the subject matter too violent. Nevertheless it was through these pulp magazines that many successful crime writers emerged, among them Erle Stanley Gardner and more importantly Dashiell Hammett.

Hammett himself, however, was full of praise for the standard pulp writers. Most of the books which he read, he labelled

Carelessly manufactured improbabilities having more than their fair share of blunders which earn detective stories as a whole the sneers of the captious.⁶

Hammett deplored their lack of realism and offered, in the many reviews he wrote, advice which he said ‘may be of some value to somebody’.⁷ His advice, as Symons notes, was practical ‘although in some cases elementary, such as “a pistol, to be a revolver, must have something on it that revolves” [...] less obvious were technical pointers, for instance, that the effect of a silencer on the sound of a revolver shot is negligible.’⁸

Hammett, then, was undeniably concerned with creating more credible stories; stories which paid attention to small details and which appeared very real. But it was not realism for the sake of realism. Hammett used it to generate a novel which was as once a gripping mystery and a social comment.

In the opening paragraph of *The Maltese Falcon*, we are given a detailed description of Hammett’s detective:

⁶ Dennis Dooley, *Dashiell Hammett*, cit., pp. 59-61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The V motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down--from high flat temples--in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan. (p. 383)

Physically he is what we might expect a conventional hero to be, his sturdy masculinity emphasized by Hammett's insistence on repeatedly employing the V motif. Indeed the description which we are given of his firm chin, hooked nose and distinctive eyes is not dissimilar to that of one of Spade's more conventional precedents, Sherlock Holmes:

His eyes were sharp and piercing [...] and his thin hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin had the prominence and squareness which mark a man of determination.⁹

Both descriptions depict the kind of firm-jawed hero that we might expect to take up the fight against crime; Hammett, however, suffixes his description of Spade with a comparison to Satan and, in doing so, alerts us to the possibility that Spade is not as perfect as he might seem. Indeed, as the novel progresses, we soon discover that he is far from being a conventional hero.

At the start of the novel Spade's partner, Miles Archer, is murdered. By introducing Archer (who himself is no soft touch) and then killing him off so early, Hammett accomplishes a number of things: firstly he makes us aware of the nature of the city in which Spade lives, a city where death can strike anyone at any time. Secondly, by removing his partner, Hammett confirms Spade's image as a loner (in

⁹ From *A Study in Scarlet*, as at www.theway.net/scarlet.htm

fact, after reading the novel it is difficult to imagine Spade ever having worked with anyone.) Finally, when Spade receives the phone call telling him of his partner's death, he is virtually emotionless: 'Hello, yes, speaking...dead?...yes....fifteen minutes. Thanks.' (p382) We are made aware that he is an individual who takes death entirely in his stride; a man who is totally free from sentiment.

This lack of emotion is a little disconcerting to the reader who is used to a rather more 'human' hero, yet it is entirely necessary for Spade to be cold in this way if he is to survive in the hostile city in which he lives. This is not, after all, the sleepy little hamlet one might find in an Agatha Christie novel, nor is it the Paris of August Dupin. It is the hostile, corrupt, iniquitous city of twentieth century America; the urban jungle where only the strongest and most hard-hearted can survive. One only has to read Hammett's bleak description of dark foggy San Francisco to realize what a cold, uninviting environment it is:

Where Bush Street roofed Stockton before slipping downhill to Chinatown, Spade paid his fare and left the taxicab. San Francisco's night fog, thin, clammy, and penetrant, blurred the street. [...] Spade side crossed to the sidewalk between iron-railed hatchways that opened above bare ugly stairs, went to the parapet, and looked down into Stockton Street. [...] The building at the other end had a blank grey sidewall that looked down on the lot behind the billboard. Lights flickered on the sidewall, and the shadows of men moved among lights. (p. 383)

This damp, uninviting world in which men are virtually indistinguishable from their shadows through the fog and the flickering lights, is as cold as Sam Spade himself. It is hardly surprising to learn, therefore, that Hammett himself disliked cities. Michael Logan reveals that Hammett was happiest 'in the country [in] isolated

places where there were animals, birds, bugs and sounds'. Logan implies that it this dislike of cities which was responsible in part for Hammett's grim depiction of urban life. 'Perhaps' he suggests '[this] explains Hammett's facility for the genre, turning personally felt animosity for the urban environment into fictional representations of human failings.'¹⁰ If this is the case then *The Maltese Falcon*, far from being just a gritty hard-boiled detective story, can be said to constitute an attack, or at least a comment, on urban politics.

If we view the novel in this way, then it is important to ask what role Sam Spade plays. Is this cold, detached and morally questionable individual intended as a warning of what can happen to a man when forced to live in a corrupt society surrounded by brutal policeman and double-crossing crooks? Or does Hammett intend for us to see him as a solution; as a kind of folk-hero with the physical courage, moral strength and skills of self-preservation necessary to fight against an ever crumbling social order? (I would certainly not go as far as to suggest, as does Marvin Malin, that Spade, can be seen as a modern day Jesus).¹¹ Either way we retain a degree of respect for Spade. If he is the result of urban corruption then we admire his resilience and resourcefulness; if he is the solution, then we see him as a virtual vigilante, as a champion for the people.

¹⁰ Michael F. Logan, 'Detective Fiction as Urban Critique Changing Perspectives of a Genre', in *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 15, pt. 3, 1992, p. 89.

¹¹ Irving Malin, 'Focus on The Maltese Falcon: The Metaphysical Falcon', in David Madden (ed.), *Tough Guy Writers for the Thirties*, p. 106.

Sam Spade, then, cannot be labeled ‘good’ or ‘bad’ with any certainty, and this is surely further testament to Hammet’s commitment to realism. After all who, in real life, can be described as all good or all bad? Spade, like us, does not live in an ideal world; we should not, therefore, be too quick to condemn him when we witness the somewhat unorthodox methods he employs in pursuing his goals. His (and our) world is one in which good or evil are often indistinguishable to all but the trained eye. This duplicity inherent in society is reinforced time and time again in *The Maltese Falcon*. Brigid O’Shaunessy is, superficially, the innocent, oppressed and fragile victim seemingly caught up in a world of troubles from which she cannot escape without help. Beautiful and seductive, she is precisely the sort of girl we might expect the formal hero of a detective novel to save, fall in love with and marry. But Hammett insists on grimly twisting tradition. This is not, after all, a formal detective novel and Brigid is not simply a damsel in distress; she is a compulsive liar and a murderess; a siren who uses her alluring charm to get what she wants from men. She is just another facet of the corrupt society in which Spade lives. To any normal man, she is potentially fatal (Jacobi and Miles Archer for instance) but to Spade she is transparent: ‘you aren’t ’ he understates ‘exactly what you appear to be.’ (p. 421)

Indeed Spade could accurately say that to virtually every character he encounters. The jovial Gutman, for instance, is really a ruthless and avaricious crook. He, like so many in society, had grown fat off the work of others; he is a man entirely motivated

by money who wrongly assumes everyone else is too. But not Sam Spade. He can see through Gutman's smile and, indeed, he ultimately bluffs the bluffer. Spade, seemingly in readiness to cooperate with Gutman, fools him at his own game of deception. To Spade, Gutman is as transparent as Brigid. To Gutman, Spade is entirely unfathomable: 'there's never any telling what you'll do or say next' Gutman tells Spade with, one suspects, a degree of exasperation, 'except that it's bound to be astonishing.' (p. 534)

Joel Cairo and Wilmer the boy gunman are similarly undone by Spade. Even armed they prove no match for the detective. Indeed Wilmer, the violent hoodlum, is no match even for his employer, Gutman, who is willing to turn him over as a fall guy for his (Gutman's) own financial gain. Even the Falcon itself is not what it seems. In fact it can be said to symbolize what has become the theme of false appearances and reality in the novel. Under the black paint is not the jewel encrusted gold ornament expected, but a worthless leaden shape. The falcon, like the novel's characters, is counterfeit. The falcon, however, can also be seen as a metaphor for urban life; just like the American city which lures people to it with the promise of wealth and a prosperous life, the falcon ultimately fails to deliver.

The Maltese Falcon, then, offers us more than just a gripping tale of mystery and adventure. Hammett takes the well-dressed criminals and middle class detectives of conventional , rural mystery novels and distorts them before plunging them into the gritty, seedy world of 1930's America. Sam Spade himself epitomizes the struggle of

the individual against an oppressive and deceptive society; indeed he becomes Hammett's ironic solution to the problem. After all, Spade is, as David Madden points out, merely 'reacting in kind to the world that made him.' Sam Spade harnesses the corruption and deceit which society has taught him and, in so doing, beats it at its own game.

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