

On The Maltese Falcon, by Dashiell Hammett

(http://www.poetsforum.com/papers/261_1.html)

To fully appreciate a novel, a brief biography of the author is helpful. Dashiell Hammett was born in 1894 in St. Mary's County, Maryland. After an irregular education, he enlisted in the army during World War I, where he was discharged with tuberculosis. Hammett married and had two children whom he abandoned, and chose a career as a writer after a flare-up of his tuberculosis. Before he began writing though, Hammett held several odd jobs, but it was his experience as an operative for the Pinkerton Detective Agency that inspired him. After a relatively short career, Hammett spent World War II in the Army. After the war, he was caught up in the 'witch hunt' of Joseph McCarthy because of his relationship with Lillian Hellman, also a writer, who had associated with radical left-wing causes. Hammett's career ended in 1961 with his death, having spent time in prison for his refusal to testify in the McCarthy hearings. He left unfinished his final work entitled *Tulip*. (West)

Hammett's career in writing began in 1929 when his story *Red Harvest* was published by *Black Mask* magazine. It was in pulp fiction that most of his early novels found their readers. The *Maltese Falcon* was also published by *Black Mask* as a five part serial from September 1929 through January 1930. Published after *Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse*, it falls almost in the middle of his most widely published years, followed by *The Glass Key* and *The Thin Man*. (Nolan 1, 132)

Although detective fiction was born with Edgar Allen Poe in 1841, Dashiell Hammett is generally regarded as the father of the 'hard-boiled' genre. (Nolan 1) His new style of writing was fresh and inviting to his readership who had no real heroes after World War I. Hammett's heroes are hardened and tough, but realistic. (Nolan 2) His experience with Pinkerton lent an authority and realism to his writing that appealed to a wide range of readers, and his heroes defined the hard-boiled genre. They were tough talking in the face of danger, wise-cracking and witty. They drank and smoked heavily and lived as loners. They spoke in street language and kept their own ethics, but they worked alongside *and* outside the law. His heroes are easy to admire—always the right answers, fearless and they lived and worked in the real world of crime and corruption—all of these traits are found in Sam Spade, the hero of *The Maltese Falcon*. (West)

Hammett's effect on this popular form is unmistakable, even today, but many of his contemporaries openly admitted his influence. Such notable and popular authors as Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald

and Ian Fleming credited their inspiration to Hammett. Raymond Chandler, commenting on his influence and popularity, summed up his feelings when he wrote,

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

While Hammett's influence was great, he was accused of stealing some of his ideas and style from Earnest Hemingway, but these are easily dismissed as coincidence because Hammett published in the United States several years before Hemingway. Perhaps the new style of open and simple language was just an idea whose time had come. (*Nolan 4*)

The *Maltese Falcon* begins, as do many detective novels, with a knock on the door from a client. The client, who the reader learns later to be Brigid O'Shaugnessy, hires Sam Spade to trail a man, whom she lies about. The novel takes numerous twists and turns as the ever-lying O'Shaugnessy leads the hero through the plot. Spade's partner is murdered, along with the man he was following, and Miss O'Shaugnessy constantly tries to out-wit Spade while making use of him. Several shady characters appear with clues, like Joel Cairo, a man described as less than masculine, and the obese Mr. Gutman, who heads up the gang of villains. Ultimately, the story centers around a statue of a falcon that is thought to be highly valued, and almost Grail-like in its history. In the end, Sam Spade falls into possession of the statue, and effectively plays out a scenario that leaves him a bit richer, and the other characters happy, but it is ruined when they discover that the statue is a fake. Spade turns all the would-be thieves over to the police, and pins the murder of his partner on Brigid O'Shaugnessy. Spade winds down the last chapter with a business as usual attitude, and fails to fall for the temptress O'Shaugnessy.

Although detective fiction on the whole does not usually have well-developed characters, *The Maltese Falcon* does. There are only a few characters in the book, and several of them are classics. Sam Spade is the prototype tough-guy. As is characteristic of hard-boiled fiction, he chain smokes, drinks like a fish, cares little for the distraction of women, (although he seems to enjoy their company!) and lives as a loner. Sam Spade's charm comes mostly from his arrogant self-confidence, and his seemingly infallible experience with the underworld. Described as a blonde Satan with a deep 'V' motif to his face, Spade is tall, strong and handsome. Although he never carries a gun in the novel, he is no wimp, regularly getting the best of his opponents. Spade's cool manner and nonchalant attitude are very

enticing, and a reader can easily admire his lifestyle. Sam Spade does what he wants to do.

Another major character is Brigid O'Shaughnessy—a stunning beauty that can never tell the truth. She seems to always get her way with every man she meets, but she can never fool Sam Spade. Even though she is a murderer and a thief, there is something very attractive about her. Even as Spade is ready to turn her over to the police, her femininity and sexuality seem to come off the page. Even under the most dire of circumstances, she can always come up with a line like,

Yes, but—oh, sweetheart!—it wasn't only that. I would have come back to you sooner or later. From the first instant I saw you I knew— (Hammett 210)

Spade takes her to bed when she offers herself, and rather cleverly does a strip search that was really not necessary. She is perhaps the most vivid of Hammett's cast.

The third character of note is Mr. Gutman. An obese man, described as having rolls of fat bouncing as his expressions change, he has a calm demeanor and a pleasant manner of speaking. Gutman plans to get rich by selling the statue of the falcon to its rightful owners, and as the leader of the criminals in the novel, he is somewhat likable for his charm and aristocratic bearing. Gutman is always reasonable, and finds himself unable to find fault with Spade's logic, and grudgingly finds it in his best interest. His character is refreshingly different from what a reader might expect, and perhaps he was the inspiration for Star Wars' Jabba the Hut.

The only other major character which Hammett develops is the enigmatic Joel Cairo, a sort of 'gopher' for Gutman. Described demeaningly as a cowardly effeminate, his appearances seem to amuse Spade, who constantly insults him. Often waving a small pistol, he is easily disarmed and overcome, as Spade does several times. Cairo is almost a comic relief, as are the references to his sexuality.

Overall, *The Maltese Falcon* uses simple language, but it is well crafted. The descriptions are brief, but detailed, and the pages seem to fly by in real time. In many spots, Hammett uses expletives that seem mild by 1996 standards, but they were probably rather harsh for the thirties, and add to its sense of realism. Hammett's use of everyday street speech lends an authenticity to his work because of its concrete sound. The characters seem real—and that is the most

striking thing about the book—a reader can suspend their disbelief and allow the novel to consume them for several hours. This is probably the reason for its popularity.

The tone and imagery Hammett uses give a very matter of fact appearance to the daily work of a private investigator. Sam Spade could be the basis for a whole series of stories as the 'everyman' of the genre, but what is most impressive about Hammett's style is the common sense approach to the story's plot and characters. Believability is a key to any novel, but Hammett creates extraordinary circumstances from ordinary people, and this is *The Maltese Falcon*'s greatest strength. Hammett's genius is in making an interesting set of events that any of his readers might find themselves in, given the right surroundings.

There are several points that distinguish *The Maltese Falcon* and other hard-boiled novels from other works of detective fiction. First, clues are generally not as important as how they are found, and what they lead to. As opposed to stories of ratiocination, where the clues themselves are the most important part of the story, the hard-boiled novel deals with settings and interesting characters with exciting adventures. *The Maltese Falcon* creates its interest by developing a hero that the reader can associate with, and it is more important to know how the hero deals with a situation than it is to know the minute details of his logic and reasoning. This is not to imply that Sam Spade is a half-wit, in fact, it is his intelligence and experience that allows him to solve the crime, but unlike a Sherlock Holmes figure, he does not depend on fanciful leaps of intellectual prowess for his success. Another difference is that there is always a presence of danger, with many action-packed situations. Other types of detective fiction are not nearly so vulgar or violent, which makes it very attractive to its audience.

The Maltese Falcon contains most of the elements of the hard-boiled genre, which is no surprise, since Dashiell Hammett virtually defined the form. Of the commodities expected in a hard-boiled novel, it contains most of them, from the spunky secretary, dangerous but sexy villain, and urban setting in California to the slang, hard drinking/smoking, and the loner hero who keeps his distance. This novel has them, and perhaps that is why it is so influential and so good. In Dashiell Hammett's short career, he produced several exceptional stories that have become the basis of a form that has withstood the test of time. *The Maltese Falcon* stands as an excellent example.

Works Cited

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