Chivalrous Tough Guys : Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction and the Crisis of Masculine Individuality*

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Abstract

In the tradition of American hard-boiled detective fiction, the lonesome private investigator untangles the web of crime on the "mean streets" of the modern city. But the world of vice and corruption in which he works challenges his moral and masculine identity.

This article examines Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and the place of the hard-boiled detective in American cultural ideology. It suggests that the hard-boiled detective manifests a deepening crisis of masculinity. Philip Marlowe's morality and chivalry remind us of the early American pioneer or the questing medieval knight, but amidst the corruption of modernity and overwhelming social forces, these classic notions of masculinity cannot be realized. In the crime-ridden

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modern city, where there are no innocents, the "damsel in distress" has become the "femme fatale," and the individual is crushed beneath overwhelming social forces, the hero as defender of justice and protector of the innocent is an anachronism.

Keywords: hard-boiled detective fiction, Raymond Chandler, masculinity, frontier, heroes in literature

บทคัดย่อ

ในขนบของนวนิยายสืบสวนสอบสวนแนวรหัสคดีบู๊ นักสืบเอกชนผู้สันโดษได้สะสางอาชญากรรมบนถนนแห่งความชั่วร้ายในสังคมเมืองสมัยใหม่ โลกแห่งความชั่วร้ายและคอรัปชั่นที่เขาเผชิญอยู่นั้นได้ท้าทายอัตลักษณ์ความเป็นชายและศีลธรรมของเขา บทความนี้ศึกษานวนิยายเรื่อง The Big Sleep ของเรย์มอนด์ ชานด์เลอร์ และบทบาทของนักสืบในอุดมการณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกัน บทความนี้ได้เสนอว่า นักสืบในนวนิยายแนวรหัสคดีบู๊ ได้เผชิญกับวิกฤตของความเป็นชาย การมีศีลธรรมและความเป็นวีรบุรุษของมาโลว์ได้ทำให้ผู้อ่านหวนระลึกถึงยุคบุกเบิกของอเมริกันหรือภารกิจของอัศวินสมัยยุคกลาง แต่ท่ามกลางคอรัปชั่นของสังคมสมัยใหม่และกระแสสังคมปัจจุบัน กรอบความคิดแบบดั้งเดิมเรื่องความเป็นชายนั้นดูเหมือนจะเป็นไปไม่ได้ ในสังคมสมัยใหม่ที่เต็มไปด้วยอาชญากรรม “ผู้บริสุทธิ์” ไม่มีอีกต่อไป สตรีผู้ต้องการความช่วยเหลือได้กลายเป็น “สตรีอันตราย” และความเป็นปัจเจกได้สลายไปท่ามกลางกระแสสังคมยุคนี้ วีรบุรุษในฐานะผู้ผดุงความยุติธรรมและผู้ปกป้องผู้บริสุทธิ์นั้นไม่มีอีกต่อไปแล้ว

คำสำคัญ: นวนิยายสืบสวนสอบสวนแนวรหัสคดีบู๊ เรย์มอนด์ ชานด์เลอร์ ความเป็นชาย พรมแดน วีรบุรุษในวรรณกรรม

"Hardly a Lady's choice"

> "He put his hand down behind the cushions of the car and pulled out an American magazine ' that monthly collection of mystery and sensational fiction published under the name of *The Black Mask.*
> 'Light reading for the masses,' said Parker.
> 'Brought by the gentleman in the yellow boots, perhaps,' suggested the Chief Constable.
> 'More likely by Miss Findlater,' said Wimsey.
> 'Hardly a lady's choice,' said Sir Charles, in a pained tone." (Sayers, 1964, p. 198)

The scene from Dorothy L. Sayers's 1927 novel *Unnatural Death,* supports Lewis D. Moore's remark that detective fiction is "a repository of largely unself-conscious attitudes toward gender." (2006, p. 29) This article explores these attitudes towards gender in crime fiction by focusing on competing notions of masculinity converging in and constructed by the genre. The emergence and inherent contradictions of the genre's prototypical lonesome private investigator, so the article's central argument, can be understood only by taking the contemporaneous sociocultural and ideological contexts into consideration. Against this backdrop it becomes apparent that the 1930s hard-boiled hero is not a nostalgic return to classic representations of manliness, but an expression of the crisis of modern masculinity.

Raymond Chandler holds a unique place in literary history through his portrayal of American life and culture. At the age of 44, he became a detective fiction writer. In his first and best-known novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939) Chandler introduces Philip Marlowe, who became an iconic new type of the fictional private investigator. Focusing on Chandler's *The Big Sleep,* the article shows that the socioeconomic

transformations taking place in early twentieth-century America render the ideal of the individualistic and self-reliant man pushing back the frontiers of civilization impossible. Contrary to interpretations claiming that classic American hard-boiled detective fiction reinvigorated this classic ideal, the article will show that the genre, in fact, exposed the sentimental view of the lonesome male hero as a myth.

Many early critics made a relatively simple appraisal of Chandler's protagonist, Philip Marlowe, depicting him as a modern urban version of the knight-errant of Arthurian legend, or the self-reliant frontier hero respectively. Philip Durham (1963) sees "Chandler's Knight" as an ambiguous, simultaneously modern and mythological figure. Beekman argues that Marlowe represents the archetype of a "sober knight on a never finished quest". (1973, p. 166) George Grella places him in the tradition of the questing hero of American romance, (1974, pp. 411-412) and John G. Cawelti sees a resemblance between Chandler's hero and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1976, p. 151). Grella's statement that Marlowe is, like the idealist medieval knight, "too good for the society he inhabits" (1974, p. 418) is emblematic of this approach. This somewhat simplistic view suggesting an unbroken line of tradition connecting the questing hero of medieval romance and his modern counterparts regardless of social change continues to reverberate in Chandler scholarship. (Hamilton, 1987, p. 155)

More recently, critics have tried to paint a more nuanced picture of Marlowe's character. Ernst Mandel compares him to the "bourgeois dilettantes" of golden-age British crime fiction and stresses that under a cynical surface he is a sentimentalist. (1986, p. 35) Mandel argues that the questing hero personality is simply implausible for this time period, and that Marlowe has "nothing to do with the social reality of the twenties and thirties." (1986, p. 36) Others, such

as Bethany Ogden, have countered such arguments and claim that the hard−boiled detective's obsession with corruption suggests an important social function, the detective as representative of normality in a world marked by constant transgressions and abnormality. Hard−boiled detective fiction, therefore, replaces the chivalrous, romantic notion of "me against the world" with an "us against them." (Ogdon, 1992, p. 84) Athanasourelis remarks critically that these simplistic characterizations of Philip Marlowe "are unremittingly negative and ultimately reductive" and that the "monolithic nature of such criticism" erases authors and genres. (2011, p. 5) He adds that, in recent years, attempts have been made to steer clear of "non−ideological structures found in myth−based criticism." (2011, p. 5) Giles Gunn (1992) for example, interprets Marlowe as a negotiator seeking to reconcile social differences while simultaneously guarding his individuality. Athanasourelis (2011) takes these views as a point of departure for his exploration into the way Chandler constructs a subject position of his hero free of the "rugged individualism" of the American frontier.

Leonard Cassuto (2009) places Marlowe outside the dichotomy of social agent and individualist hero by focusing on Marlowe's attempts to fix the Sternwoods' family problems. According to this reading, Marlowe is an agent of domesticity. The driving force behind his sentimental vision of community is however a personal one, and not due to social conscience. Cassuto also identifies a link between sentimental domesticity and the "spectacle of threatened manhood" of the Great Depression, when economic hardship led to the breakup of many families. (2009, p. 83) Cassuto points to the centrality of Marlowe's individuality and his quest to uphold individual male agency. That this agenda also includes another man, and that Marlowe is driven in his pursuit by the wish to "save General Sternwood's manly pride" is, however, unconvincing. (Cassuto, 2009, p. 83)

The following investigation will focus on the fluctuating relationships between individual, society, and gender. Marlowe's besieged masculinity forces him to oscillate between sentimental heroic individuality and social responsibility. Chandler seeks to defend masculine individuality by reinvigorating a chivalric tradition, upholding his hero's moral standards as well as his personal integrity. Finally, however, circumstances render this project impossible.

Focusing on Chandler's *The Big Sleep,* this article challenges the long-established view that hard-boiled masculinity is simply an attempt to retrieve classic notions of manliness. Hard-boiled detective fiction highlights the impossibility of maintaining notions of traditional manliness in the modern world. The private eye's overt toughness is not an expression of male dominance but mere appearance, the desperate expression of the protagonist's anxiety over the irreversible loss of male agency in the face of insurmountable social challenges.

The article is divided in several subsections. First, it outlines the rise of pulp magazines from which the hard-boiled detective novel emerged. Then there follows a reflection on hard-boiled detective writing as a distinct sub-genre of crime fiction. The next section provides a critical typology of the protagonist private eye as a synthesis of certain socio-cultural strains of American ideology. Finally, the article will explore the configurations of precarious masculinity through an investigation of key passages from Chandler's novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939).

A male genre: pulp fiction and the rise of hard-boiled detective fiction

The Black Mask: A Magazine of Mystery, Romance and Adventure was launched in April 1920 by H. L. Mencken and George

Jean Nathan to support the prestigious but money-losing literary magazine *Smart Set. The Black Mask* became an enormous commercial success. By December 1933, the magazine's circulation had risen to 103,000 copies at a cover price of 20 cents. (Hagemann, 1981) Over the years, the magazine's focus shifted. The first tough private detective story, "Three Gun Terry" by Carroll John Daly, appeared in the issue of 15 May 1923. What was later to become Dashiell Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest,* appeared originally in the magazine between November 1927 and February 1928 as a series of four complete adventures. (Thompson, 2007, p. 35) A year later, Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) followed. Raymond Chandler made his first appearance in The Black Mask in December 1933, with "Blackmailers Don't Shoot" followed by further stories featuring tough detectives named Mallory and Carmody, providing rough drafts of Philip Marlowe. (Marling, 2009) *The Big Sleep* is built from four of Chandler's *The Black Mask* stories, to which he added details, connections and repartee.

Pulp magazines not only served as a forum to publish and publicize hard-boiled detective fiction, they also shaped the genre and its style. Targeting a male readership that "did not want uplift or information," pulp magazines offered ways "to kill time with a good read," and to take their readers "away from the realities of their own lives" by way of adventure and romance. (MacShane, 1976, p. 44) The result was the characteristic "tough realistic surface and … highly sensational content" of the serialized stories that sought to grasp their readers' attention from one episode to the next. (Grella, 1980, p. 104) Although the magazine was simply moving to occupy a market niche with "stories of virile, realistic action" built "around masculine community and popular justice" (McCann, 2000, p. 44), it reflected the longing in America for a nèw type of hero.

The Black Mask was not the only magazine publishing such stories. Hard-boiled fiction in various forms had been appearing in a range of venues even before the creation of *The Black Mask.* (Breu, 2005, pp. 38-39) These magazines, while making the names of Chandler and Hammett, also became synonymous with a new type of detective fiction.

Aspects of an American genre

Hard-boiled detective fiction constitutes its own subgenre within crime fiction, differing substantially from classic British detective stories in the tradition of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. For example, writers of hard-boiled detective fiction openly disregarded the "rules" of mystery writing as defined by the London Detection Club. According to these rules, clues should never be withheld from the reader; authors should "observe 'a seemly moderation'" in the use of gangs, conspiracies, and ghosts; and above all, they should "honour the King's English." (Hone, 1979, p. 55) Hard-boiled detective fiction complies with none of these rules. Entire cities are overrun by rival gangs, as in Hammett's *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key.* Hammett's protagonist, Sam Spade, relies on his secretary's feminine intuition to solve the case in *The Maltese Falcon.* The Continental Op wrestles a ghost in *The Dain Curse.* Both Hammett and Chandler employ underworld slang bearing little resemblance to "the King's English," and Chandler often ridicules classic detective stories in his fiction, parodying the rational deduction of the British detective. (E. A. Smith, 2000, p. 40)

Whether or not the American hard-boiled school of crime fiction emerging in the 1920s was indeed a fundamental readjustment of the genre has remained a subject of controversy. Charles J. Rzepka speaks of the American school as a "direct challenge" to the classical

models with their "brusque, clipped and vernacular style" (2005, p. 179). Others have gone even a step further, describing the hard-boiled genre as "unmistakably American" and positioning it in opposition to the British tradition. (Adams, 1938, p. 288) By contrast, Andrew Pepper voices doubt concerning the distinctions between a supposed classical British model of detective fiction and the American hard-boiled variant, calling the very notion of a "hard-boiled […] genre or subgenre" into question. (2010, p. 142)

It is noteworthy that despite a number of indigenous elements springing up from specific factors of late 1920s and 1930s America, the British school of crime fiction also spawned American imitators such as S.S. Van Dine and Ellery Queen. American crime fiction was not a priori contrasted to the classical model, but hard-boiled detective fiction is what Horsley describes as the "distinctively American contribution." (Horsley, 2002)

Another distinguishing feature of American hard-boiled detective fiction is the implicit social commentary that runs through the key works. The emergence of the genre in the 1930s happens in the midst of major transformations of American society. According to George Grella, hard-boiled stories reflect "some of the tensions of the time" and were "endowed with considerable narrative urgency" as well as "imbued with the disenchantment peculiar to postwar American writing." (1980, p. 105)

In contrast to the small town or gentlemen's club setting of its British counterparts, the American hard-boiled detective emerged as prohibition, gangsterism, and the Great Depression transformed American society. A new type of crook such as the bootlegger Rusty Regan in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* entered the scene, gang wars were fought openly in the streets, and police corruption was rampant. While ordinary people suffered the effects of the Great Depression, some were

getting richer and richer through illegal activities. Crime ceased being a social abnormality, confined to a small group of criminals, but seemed to take hold in all segments of society. The cynicism which forms an important backdrop of many classic hard-boiled detective stories is a natural response to a new world of money-hungry immorality.

If British detective fiction writers tended to focus on the crime and its solution, the American hard-boiled writers focused on the detective himself. The lonesome private investigator on the mean streets of the modern city finds that the single crime he is hired to solve is overshadowed by the vice and corruption all around him. The resolution of his case seems insignificant, and this poses a challenge to his purpose and self-understanding. In such a corrupt environment, his magnanimity is not recognized or repaid, and his "damsel in distress" is unwilling to be rescued, so his quest cannot be fulfilled and his redemption is out of reach. In *The Big Sleep,* for example, Carmen is introduced as a naïve, childish character in need of protection, as illustrated in the stained glass window in the foyer of the Sternwood mansion. But it soon becomes evident that she does not fit the feminine ideal portrayed in that window, but is rather a burlesque of the damsel in distress. Meeting Marlowe the first time, she falls into his lap in an attempt to assess her sexual power over him. At their next meeting, Marlowe finds Carmen drugged and in the nude, having witnessed a murder while apparently posing for pornographic photos. Marlowe rescues her and takes her home. One moment Carmen seems an innocent, helpless little girl, and the next moment she is an hysterical nymphomaniac. Although Marlowe rejects her sexual advances, his chivalrous conduct toward her is a Quixotian quest, as though he serves an ideal that doesn't exist. Like Cervantes' knight, Marlowe's search for his lady is frustrated.

A new type of detective

Edgar Allan Poe established the prototype of the amateur detective, an eccentric mastermind working by the deductive method, and British detective fiction modeled its sleuth and conventions on Poe's example. Among these conventions are "a relatively closed setting where crime is not the norm, composed of a homogeneous selection of 'privileged characters,' a number of suspects whose guilt seems plausible, and a plot that develops so that the final revelation of the murderer is a surprise to characters and readers alike." (Coit, 2003, p. 7)

The American hard-boiled detective breaks with this tradition. The eccentric mastermind is replaced by a "frank, cynical, sharp-edged, and street-wise private investigator." (Coit, 2003, p. 8) The emergence of this new type of detective, though spurred by the sociocultural environment of 1930s and 1940s America, has roots that go back to the origins of the nation. Grella points out that James Fennimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales provided a model for the private eye of hard-boiled fiction, "another avatar of that prototypical American hero, Natty Bumppo, also called Leatherstocking, Hawkeye, Deerslayer, and Pathfinder." (1980, p. 106) This type of hero is central to American identity. A country that formed a "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (H. N. Smith, 1950, p. 251) spawned a hero that was half-savage himself. This dichotomy between moral integrity and corruption so central to the hard-boiled narrative is a mythological reinvention of this binary opposition.

Of course, given the ever-changing circumstances, the hard-boiled detective cannot be a simple continuation of the self-reliant hero on the frontier. Natty Bumppo, for example, ultimately leaves his hunting grounds for the western prairies. But the protagonists of Hammett and Chandler are trapped. Escape from the encroaching

forces of modernity had become impossible by the 1930s. The hard-boiled detective, therefore, represents a new conception of American manhood, a product of the rise of urban America and the end of the frontier days. The modern American male "is formed through the modernization and conflation of a set of earlier masculine icons, from the social bandits and crime story protagonists [...] to the gentleman detective, to the frontier hero," writes Christopher Breu. (2005, p. 59) However, the hard-boiled detective and the Leatherstocking archetype share a pronounced physical ability, a keen sense of morality, and a lonely isolation as they work outside the established social code, "preferring [their] own instinctive justice to the often tarnished justice of civilization." (Grella, 1980, p. 106) Chandler alludes to the tradition of the hero in his seminal 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder." In an oft-quoted passage, he characterized the figure of the private eye as follows:

> "But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor ' by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. […] if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things." (Chandler, 1988, p. 18)

Honor, integrity, and moral conduct are key features of this hero. Chandler's description of the hero as "ordinary" is important as well, as simplicity of life is a central feature of characters such as Leatherstocking, the hero of the wilderness and the frontier.

The "mean streets" of the hard-boiled detective stories are essential in developing the character of the modern private investigator. The urban setting creates the tension between the detective's heroic ideals and lineage, and the corrupt environment in which he lives. The city represents a wilderness, but one fundamentally different from that of the frontier. Controlled by crooks, dirty cops, and the degenerate rich, it is not a landscape in which the hard-boiled detective can realize his utopian dream. (Abbott, 2002, p. 6) There is a sense that he is trapped on all sides: by his environment, by the character of the femme fatale, which undercuts the purpose of his quest, and by his own ethical code. (Abbott, 2002, p. 7) This entrapment subverts his masculinity and his individualist ideology. Consequently, the striving for "an affirmation of a […] social order based on masculine authority" becomes impossible. (Nyman, 1997, p. 6)

This frustration of his quest is underscored by the setting. Los Angeles – the "last city," the frontier's end, the "city of angels" which embodies the utopian vision of thousands who pushed westwards, and which turns out for most to be the antithesis of utopia. The artificiality and external glamour of Hollywood merely covers the dark side of the human condition, making it a place of shattered dreams with screen heroes but no real ones.

Spade and Marlowe: varieties of the hard-boiled male

A cursory look at the protagonists of the best hard-boiled novels reveals significant differences among them. For example, at the end of Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Sam Spade decides to turn over Brigid O'Shaughnessy to the police. She asks him whether he would have treated her differently if he had received his money from the sale of the statuette. Spade replies, "Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be […] That kind of reputation might be

good business – bringing in high-priced jobs and making it easier to deal with the enemy." (Hammett, 1999, p. 583) His answer suggests, according to Horsley, "the ambivalent position of the archetypal hard-boiled investigator." Spade here "acknowledges that he is often seen as indistinguishable from the crooks with whom he has to deal." (Horsley, 2009, p. 23) Lehman goes a step further in his interpretation of the scene when he remarks that with Spade, who bases his cold moral calculations on shrewd self-interest, "it is never clear, [and] can never be clear, whether he would have acted differently if […] the temptation of money were added to the temptation of sex." (1999, p. 156) This view is supported by Spade's next line: "Well, a lot of money would have been at least one more item on the other side of the scales," (Hammett, 1999, p. 583) suggesting that he is not entirely immune to the corruption around him.

The contrast to Philip Marlowe couldn't be greater. Some have declared that compared to Hammett "Chandler comes off second best" and justified this assessment with the lack of toughness in the latter's writing. (Symons, 1985, p. 131) A closer look at the character of Chandler's hero seems to support such a view. Compared to other hard-boiled protagonists, for instance, Marlowe remains critical of violence. (Athanasourelis, 2011, pp. 178-179) Rather than the tough go-getter with his finger on the trigger, Marlowe is introverted and reflective. The fact that Humphrey Bogart was cast to play both types of hard-boiled private eye in the film noir adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Big Sleep* (1946) makes it difficult to "distill the cultural memory of Marlowe" from that of the Hollywood star and his gallery of characters. (Abbott, 2003, p. 306) Bogart's interpretation of Marlowe's character has shaped the popular perception of Chandler's hero as a clear-cut example of masculinity. (Abbott, 2003) But Chandler's protagonist calls for a more nuanced assessment of hard-boiled masculinity.

The Big Sleep: a (book of many plots)

As Chandler's novel begins, the oil millionaire General Guy Sternwood hires private investigator Philip Marlowe to find out who is blackmailing him with the gambling debts and nude photos of his daughter Carmen. General Sternwood also reveals that Rusty Regan, ex−bootlegger and husband of Sternwood's other daughter, Vivian, has been missing for a month, although the General does not ask Marlowe to look for him. Marlowe quickly tracks the blackmailer, homosexual pornographer Arthur Geiger, and tails him to his home. While staking out Geiger's house, Marlowe hears gunshots and sees the flashes as Geiger is murdered inside. Marlowe goes in to find Carmen Sternwood naked and drugged, having apparently been posing for pornographic photos, and takes her back to the family mansion. He returns later to Geiger's house to discover that Geiger's body, books, and the photo−graphic plates of Carmen's photos are missing. Marlowe then begins to track down those who might exploit the items. He learns the next morning that the Sternwoods's chauffeur, and Carmen's former lover, has been murdered the night before. He also learns that crates of pornographic books from Geiger's store have been taken by another of Carmen's former lovers, Joe Brody. Carmen then receives another blackmail threat over the photos taken at Geiger's place. While searching Geiger's place again, Carmen herself shows up in search of the photos. As they are leaving, the gangster Eddie Mars turns up and questions them at gunpoint about Geiger's murder. Marlowe then leaves to interrogate Brody. Brody admits to the blackmail but denies having killed Geiger. Carmen then appears at Brody's apartment armed with a pistol and demanding the return of her photos. After a scuffle, Marlowe manages to disarm everyone and get the photos from Brody. Brody now realizes his blackmail will not work because he is implicated in the murder of Geiger: Brody has taken all of Geiger's books to start his own business, and Carmen is ready to testify that

Brody killed Geiger. Marlowe leaves, but then Carlo Lundgren, the boyfriend of Geiger, turns up and kills Brody. Marlowe catches him and turns him over to the police, but agrees to a cover–up in which none of the murders are connected to the Sternwood family. He finally locates Geiger's body and turns the case over to chief inspector Bernie Ohls.

Marlowe's job is now finished, as he has found both black–mailers, now dead, and retrieved the photos, but he decides to look into the disappearance of Rusty Regan. Regan is an IRA veteran, ex–bootlegger, and husband of Sternwood's daughter, Vivian. Neither the police nor Vivian is willing to cooperate with Marlowe on his self–assigned mission. Vivian even tries to obstruct his investigation. She fears that Marlowe may discover that she too has gambling debts. Marlowe then "uncovers a social structure of indebtedness, in which money flows up while a crude sexuality flows down." (Marling, 1995, p. 201)

At Eddie Mars's Cypress Club Marlowe finds Vivian gambling at which she wins a large purse. Marlowe leaves the club and while taking a walk outside, sees Vivian being robbed. Marlowe rescues Vivian and drives her home. He refuses her sexual advances and instead tries to extract information, infuriating Vivian. When he finally gets back to his apartment, he finds Carmen waiting naked in his bed. He throws her out.

The next day Marlowe is tipped off to the whereabouts of Mona Mars, the gangster's wife, whom everyone suspects has run away with Regan. He follows the lead to the desert east of L.A. and locates the house where she is hiding. There he is ambushed and knocked unconscious by Eddie Mars's hired gun, Lash Canino. Marlowe wakes up in the house at the feet of Mona, who helps him escape. In the ensuing gunfight, Marlowe shoots Canino – the only man he ever kills.

Back at the Sternwood mansion, the General officially asks him to find Rusty Regan. On the way out the door, Marlowe takes the opportunity to return Carmen's gun. She asks him to teach her how to shoot. They go down to the abandoned Sternwood family oil field, and there Carmen turns her gun on Marlowe and tries to kill him. Marlowe, having loaded her gun with blanks, now knows that she killed Regan.

When Marlowe confronts Vivian with the facts, she admits that Carmen killed Regan because he had refused to sleep with her (just as had Marlowe). Vivian explains that she enlisted the help of Eddie Mars, and hid Regan's body in the sump of an old oil well. Eddie Mars then sent Mona to the desert to make it appear that Regan had run off with her. Mars then set up the General for blackmail, as a way of finding out if he knew of the murder. Marlowe agrees not to reveal Carmen's crime, on the condition that Vivian takes Carmen far away and gets her psychiatric treatment. He agrees not to tell the General about Regan because it would break his heart, and Vivian says he would certainly call the police and confess the crime. The novel ends with Marlowe's reflection about death – "the big sleep" – after which all these worldly worries, how one has lived and died, no longer matter.

A game for knights?

The novel's first scene introduces the image of the knight, which serves as a leitmotiv of the detective figure throughout the novel.

> "Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied

> to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying." (Chandler, 1986, p. 3)

The motif of the knight re–appears at several points in *The Big Sleep* and in some of Chandler's other stories. In *The High Window,* for example, Marlowe refers to himself as "shop–soiled Galahad." (Chandler, 1986, p. 483) In Chandler's first novel, the knight motif serves as a blueprint for the hero's conduct, a selfless quest for justice as protector of the weak and defenseless. Marlowe is that "knight in dark armor" above the foyer in the Sternwood mansion, but he never does rescue a lady in distress, nor does his journey through the "mean streets" lead him to the grail.

These early scenes foreshadow the impossibility of any chivalrous quest. On his way through the mansion to meet his client, Marlowe's eye catches a large oil portrait of an officer in full regimental uniform with "the look of a man it would pay to get along with." (Chandler, 1986, p. 4) The portrayal of military sternness in the Sternwood ancestor stands in stark contrast to the man Marlowe is about to meet, the broken, bloodless general in a wheelchair. The military heritage encapsulated in the family name has given way to the "soft wet heat" of the greenhouse with its orchids redolent of "the rotten sweetness of a prostitute." (Chandler, 1986, p. 7) The heroic masculinity of the Sternwoods, steeled in the Mexican–American war, has been replaced by speculation in the oil business. The greenhouse "jungle" where Marlowe meets the General foreshadows the wildness

of the crime−stricken and corrupt world into which Marlowe is about to descend.

The meeting with the General seems to leave the private eye cold. When the General asks Marlowe to describe himself, he avoids any suggestion of heroic qualities, and presents himself instead as an underdog and entirely ordinary.

> "I'm thirty−three years old, went to college once and can still speak English if there's any demand for it. There isn't much in my trade. I worked for Mr. Wilde, the District Attorney, as an investigator once. […] I'm unmarried because I don't like policemen's wives." (Chandler, 1986, pp. 7−8)

Marlowe also tells the General, not without a certain pride, that he lost his job in the District Attorney's office due to insubordination. His self−portrait reveals his contempt for pretentious talk and formal education. What he knows he has learned on the streets and on the job, and for Marlowe, experience ranks higher than education. The passage also gives an insight into Marlowe's view on personal relations and social conventions, as well as his modus operandi. Not bound by family bonds or duties, he adopts the role of the lone wolf, distrusting others and their motives. In his quest, he does not rely on a network of supporters but on himself. His reference to "policemen's wives" expresses his low opinion of the women that policemen marry and by extension a jab at the police as an institution, often an active part of the corrupt reality the private eye faces.

On the outside, Marlowe tries to appear assertive, the stereotypical tough guy, always cool and unshaken by anything. But in his private narrative, the protagonist, who is also the first person narrator,

reveals a very different personality. According to Cawelti, Marlowe is "disturbed to a point of near–hysteria by the moral decay he encounters," which he tries to overplay with "wise–guy coolness and wit." (1976, p. 176)

Marlowe's moral code places him in stark contrast to his environment and he seems an increasingly anachronistic figure, living the ideals of a bygone era. His heroism consists in his reliance on principles that are disrespected or ignored by everyone he encounters. His principles preserve him, and preserve his integrity, but he is a modern Sisyphus, the lonesome hero where there is no use or place for heroes.

Half–way through the novel, Marlowe returned to this point explicitly in a conversation with the District Attorney, Taggart Wilde, who expresses his bewilderment at Marlowe's willingness to get himself "in Dutch with half the law enforcement" out of loyalty to his client. Marlowe replies

> "I don't like it […] But what the hell am I to do? I'm on a case. I'm selling what I have to sell to make a living. What little guts and intelligence the Lord gave me and a willingness to get pushed around in order to protect a client. It's against my principles to tell as much as I've told tonight, without consulting the General. As for the cover–up, I've been in police business myself, as you know. They come a dime a dozen in any big city. Cops get very large and emphatic when an outsider tries to hide anything, but they do the same things themselves every other day, to oblige their friends or anybody with a little pull. And I'm not through. I'm still on the case. I'd do the same thing again, if I had to." (Chandler, 1986, p. 77)

As the knight's quest must be a just one, Marlowe's loyalty is second only to his sense of justice. On the "mean streets," however, there is little room for idealism and little chance justice will prevail. Corruption has permeated all areas of life, including the law, as part of the turf wars raging among the criminal elements of Los Angeles. The day after Marlowe kills Canino, Captain Gregory, head of the Missing Persons Bureau tells him, "Being a copper I'd like to see the law win," but adds resignedly, "You and me both lived too long to think I'm likely to see it happen. Not in this town, not in any town half this size, in any part of this wide, green and beautiful U.S.A. We just don't run our country that way." (Chandler, 1986, p. 137)

According to Leonard Cassuto, Marlowe balances "a certain professional distance from the case and its principals, to maintain a stance of disinterest' while at the same time caring a great deal about the work and the people he's doing it for." (2009, p. 99) Marlowe's simultaneous distance from and identification with his work creates a self-contradictory identity, and the lack of justice, or any prospect for it, tends to undermine his identity as the questing knight and devotee of chivalry.

The female threat

Marlowe's weakened self-identity is further and more explicitly threatened by his encounter with the femme fatale. Here American hard-boiled detective fiction breaks with the gender ideology of the classic whodunit. For example, the women in most Sherlock Holmes stories are either victims, or need the help of the omni-competent, asexual male detective to get to the bottom of the mystery. (Smith, 1991, p. 79)

Marlowe, however, is confronted not with innocent damsels but with sybaritic and dangerous women. In Marlowe's first encounter with Carmen, she shows no restraint or feminine modesty. She acts in a childlike way, while testing his reaction and trying to seduce him. She pursues this line with increasing vigor later in the novel, revealing ever more disturbing signs of her nymphomaniac insanity.

Whereas Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* has no scruples to go to bed with Brigid O'Shaughnessy, whose threat of treachery may even enhance his sexual appreciation of her (Lehman, 1999, p. 157), Marlowe's "notion of masculinity utterly depends on hermeticism," on remaining free from the femme fatale's contagion. (Abbott, 2003, p. 307) Hard−boiled masculinity relies on the defeat of the femme fatale.

In his first encounter with Carmen, Marlowe has no difficulty maintaining his defences. He dismisses her advances and remarks to the Sternwood butler that he should "wean her." (Chandler, 1986, p. 5) Later, however, when Marlowe returns from Eddie Mars' Club to his apartment, he finds Carmen in his bed. Marlowe is on the verge of losing control, dropping his guard and externalizing his emotions.

> "The bed was down. Something in it giggled. A blond head was pressed into my pillow. Two bare arms curved up and the hands belonging to them were clasped on top of the blond head. Carmen Sternwood lay on her back, in my bed, giggling at me. The tawny wave of her hair was spread out on the pillow as if by a careful and artificial hand. Her slaty eyes peered at me and had the effect, as usual, of peering from behind a barrel. She smiled. Her small sharp teeth glinted. […] She lay there on the bed in the lamplight, as naked and glistening as a pearl." (Chandler, 1986, pp. 104−105)

Initially, Marlowe maintains his indifference' "That's nice […] But I've already seen it all. Remember? I'm the guy that keeps finding you without any clothes on." (Chandler, 1986, p. 105) He is aware of the danger she represents, describing her gaze as "peering from behind a barrel" and explains his refusal with a reference to his "professional pride." Marlowe then turns his attention to a chess problem, and here the motif of the knight reappears. It seems, at first, as if the naked Carmen represents a moral test, similar to the one mastered by Sir Gawain in the Arthurian legend. But glancing at the figures of the board, Marlowe realizes that in this situation there will be no reward for chivalrous conduct.

> "I looked down at the chessboard. The move with the knight was wrong. I put it back where I had moved it from. Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights." (Chandler, 1986, p. 105)

Marlowe is still caught in the dilemma of the chivalrous code, however. Rezpka points out the resemblance between Marlowe's credo "the client comes first" (Chandler, 1986, p. 143) and the knight's obligation as a result of his *comitatus*, the fealty oath taken by a feudal lord's retinue subordinating them to the will of their lord. (Rzepka, 2000, pp. 698, 703) Marlowe's sense of duty requires that he resist her, but he recognizes the ultimate futility of his idealism. As the "knight," he is dominated by the "kings" and "queens" on the chess board, those who are richer, more powerful, and more unscrupulous than he. Marlowe's reflections also reveal the divide between him and Carmen. She has made it impossible for him to "rescue" her, fulfilling his knightly role, because she refuses to play her assigned role. Her nymphomaniac self-indulgence makes a mockery of the

feminine modesty portrayed in the stained−glass of the family mansion, and renders impossible Marlowe's attempts to realize the chivalrous ideal.

The transformation of Carmen from a harmless flirty girl to femme fatale is complete when she shows her serpent−like features – "Her teeth parted and a faint hissing noise came out of her mouth. […] She stood there for a moment and hissed at me, her face still like scraped bone, her eyes still empty and yet full of some jungle emotion." (Chandler, 1986, pp. 106−107)

Marlowe takes her invasion as a violation of his well−protected self−identity.

> "[…] this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of a home. In it was everything that was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. Not much; a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that. Nothing. Such as they were they had all my memories. I couldn't stand her in that room any longer." (Chandler, 1986, p. 106)

Carmen's invasion defiles what is for Marlowe a sacred space, separate from the corrupt world in which he must work. This perhaps explains his furious effort, after she leaves, to "decontaminate" his apartment.

> "I walked to the windows and pulled the shades up and opened the windows wide. The night air came drifting in with a kind of stale sweetness that still remembered automobile exhausts and the streets of the city. […] I went back to the bed and looked down at it. The imprint of her head was still in the pillow, of her small corrupt body still on the sheets. I put my empty glass down and tore the bed to pieces savagely." (Chandler, 1986, p. 107)

The climactic encounter in which Carmen tries to kill Marlowe not only closes the case but, in a surprising twist, resolves Marlowe's dilemma. Again, it is Carmen clenching her teeth and starting to "hiss" that announces her onslaught. (Chandler, 1986, p. 147) But Marlowe's "hunch," loading the gun with blanks, has disarmed her. (Chandler, 1986, p. 152) His precaution allows him to regain the superior, traditionally male, controlling position.

> "The gun pointed at my chest. Her hand seemed to be quite steady. The hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. […] I laughed at her. I started to walk towards her. I saw her small finger tighten on the trigger and grow white at the tip. I was about six feet away from her when she started to shoot." (Chandler, 1986, p. 147)

Carmen's epileptic fit enables Marlowe finally to assume the role of chivalric protector. As she thrust herself upon him in a coquettish way at the beginning of the novel, she now collapses unconsciously into his arms.

> "I caught her as she fell. She was already unconscious. I pried her teeth open with both hands and stuffed a wadded handkerchief in between them. It took all my strength to do it. I lifted her up and got her into the car […]." (Chandler, 1986, p. 148)

Through this re-enactment of Rusty Regan's last moments, Marlowe realizes that Carmen committed the crime. At the same time, it becomes apparent that Carmen is not truly malignant but rather a victim herself. In her insanity she becomes the vulnerable captive depicted in the stained-glass window. With the femme fatale collapsing into unconsciousness, Marlowe is able to step in and rescue her. At this point, it seems as if the detective and the moral code he represents have regained control over the immoral milieu and the destructive female.

Conclusion

Chandler's work is one of several American novels of the late 1930s in which individual characters face tests of honor and integrity while struggling against overwhelming social forces. Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) depicts the struggle of the individual against corporations, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1939), the struggle against Fascist governments. In Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) farmers crippled by the depression, struggle against the effects of corporate capitalism.

All these works address the fragmentation and alienation of the individual in the modern world. The protagonist's dilemma in Chandler's novel is only partially resolved, and he regains his agency in a superficial and transient way. He has solved the second case, but as in the first one, justice cannot be achieved. As Rzepka puts it, "Chandler's gumshoe Galahad never measures up to his ideal prototype." (2000, p. 720) Marlowe's regaining control comes at the price of covering up the real crime. The criminal is a semi–lunatic who requires rescuing not punishment, and the brutality, corruption, and injustice of the world continues unchecked, beyond the control of the detective or any other moral force.

The novel's end highlights this ambivalent interplay of reality and aspiration. When Marlowe leaves the Sternwood estate, his isolation from everyone is complete, and he returns to being the lonesome hero, indeed, a tragic hero, for his quest seems pointless:

> "I went quickly away from her down the room and out and down the tiled staircase to the front hall. I didn't see anybody when I left. I found my hat alone this time. Outside the bright gardens had a haunted look […]. I got into my car and drove off down the hill." (Chandler, 1986, p. 154)

In the novel's final pages, Marlowe reflects over drinks in a downtown bar. The "Big Sleep" is the only escape from the conflict between his common man idealism and his profession, resolving the problems of the rich, powerful, and often corrupt elites. Marlowe realizes that the private eye's occupation draws him inescapably into this world, and that he cannot avoid contamination – "Me, I was part of the nastiness now." (Chandler, 1986, p. 155)

This conflict is not only Marlowe's, but a larger one between "the cultural fantasy of masculine autonomy and the emergence of mass and corporate culture." (Breu, 2005, p. 60) The socioeconomic conditions facing the hard-boiled detective differ from those of his gentlemanly counterparts across the Atlantic. The closure of the frontier, accelerated urbanization, the transformation of U.S. capitalism from individual entrepreneurship to corporate trusts, and the rapid growth of the culture industry, reduces the individual to a consumer, giving him the illusion of choice when in fact all choices have been predetermined by market forces. These circumstances pose an unprecedented challenge to the possibilities of individuation and heroic conduct on the part of the American private eye. Marlowe personifies the attempt to revitalize the heroic ideal: he stands up against vice and corruption, shows courage in the face of invincible evil, and is willing to sacrifice himself for the social good. It is ironic that mass culture and its new tools of dissemination—pulp magazines, film, and popular fiction—inspired the attempt to recreate the individual hero. But Marlowe and the hard-boiled investigators are shown to be powerless in the face of corrupt society and the corporate and commercial powers that created them.

The crisis of traditional notions of masculinity and the loss of male authority and autonomy result from social changes in which social and corporate forces seek to turn the individual into an interchangeable, and ultimately disposable, instrument. But this revival of the traditional individualistic hero through American hard-boiled detective fiction fails to reinvigorate masculinity, as these notions of masculinity amount to mere nostalgia for a time when a man could realize his full potential. In a world characterized by "massification," the hero is emptied of substance, a Don Quixote figure tilting at windmills with no prospect of success in his knightly quest.

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