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SOMETHING MORE THAN NIGHT: FORMS OF EXISTENCE IN
AMERICAN HARD-BOILED CRIME FICTION

by

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Abstract

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Hard-boiled crime fiction in America has had an unexpectedly lasting influence. Crime fiction communicates a feeling of exclusion, alienation and loss of identity which it couples with the rewards of membership in a class which sustains its subscribers despite their own individual fragility. Crime fiction in the time of the pulp magazines, the early period of the hard-boiled style, was supposed to help people identify with those who would redeem society. The redeemers' ability to succeed in their missions depended on a deep knowledge of their subjects which guaranteed a degree of complicity in all they sought to reform. A certain courage is required of hard-boiled heroes who set about unmasking the hidden in both the great houses of the wealthy and the "mean streets" of the anonymous poor. Preserving or challenging genre is thus not only the situation in which hard-boiled crime fiction finds itself as a literature but also is the situation, broadly defined, which drives its plots and figures forward in what often resembles a romantic quest. The picaresque qualities of both the knights and the rogues complicate the scenarios, often resulting in flashes of insight in which characters must acknowledge the breadth of their own mythmaking while continuing to operate successfully in their trumped-up roles.

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Introduction: Existential Questions

The physicist Stephen Hawking recently recanted the idea that information cannot escape a black hole. It seems that there are particles which pop into existence very briefly only to pop right out of existence just as rapidly. We wonder what purpose could they possibly serve during their brief tenure. Does awareness of their having been count for anything in the grand scheme of things?

It is the same question literary critics must ask of the briefly illuminated world of hard-boiled crime fiction, because a cult of the ephemeral has had an unexpectedly lasting influence. As the original publications decay and fester in locked vaults at the Library of Congress, too fragile in many cases even for the careful hands of scholars, the plots and the themes and the atmospheric settings are revived again and again in new works of art, literature and film. What is most unique to the genre has persisted as well - a paradoxical longevity for a type of character whose tenure is by design brief and uncertain, whose functions as good cop, bad cop, femme fatale, or grifter are fulfilled and then fade into oblivion as their usefulness runs out.

These "noir" characters will not go away, however, perhaps because the "objectness" or "thingness" of the text

itself is a significant part of its resistance to the forces of despair of which it speaks. Crime fiction communicates a feeling of exclusion, alienation and loss of identity which it couples with the rewards of membership in a class which sustains its subscribers despite their own individual fragility. The fetishism associated with pulp magazines and paperback publishing is redemptive in this instance because it assures the individual longevity through the accretion of ritualistic acts of writing and reading according to a well-known form. In other words, the anxiety about the loss of identity and the real fear that an individual is not so unique that he cannot be easily substituted for another are simultaneously confirmed and denied by the standards of the genre itself. Negating identity only serves to reinforce the power of the genre to preserve it.

Crime fiction in the time of the pulp magazines, the early period of the hard-boiled style, beginning in the 1920's and ending around the time paperbacks became dominant in the 1930's, was supposed to help people identify with those who would redeem society.¹ Yet these redeemers were not strictly romantic figures who would ride

¹ The famous editor of Black Mask was explicit about this and many of the early stories adhere to such a moral vision, despite their sensational content.

into town on shiny white steeds to save the masses from themselves. They were most definitely of the communities they were called to salvage as Christ-like bricoleurs. In fact, their ability to succeed in their missions depended on a deep knowledge of their subjects which guaranteed a degree of complicity in all they sought to reform.

This emphasis on complicity is central to the moral vision proposed by the hard-boiled world. It is equally important to those heroic characters who seek to come to terms with their complicity and those debased individuals who seek to avoid any association with a troubling and persistent awareness of it. The idea that one has a choice about it is a powerful theme in the fiction as a whole and was at the time quite contemporary, as fascist ideology, particularly fascist aesthetic ideology, seemed to offer a form of group identification which replaces the complex relationships of individuals in everyday life with a charismatic order which absolves the individual of personal responsibility.

This invocation of an often contested sense of individual responsibility in the stories is what often prompts a comparison with existentialist literature in France. Critics and readers, even today, are inclined to describe hard-boiled fiction as existentialist. Imprecision.

aside, calling the admittedly noir world of hard-boiled crime fiction in America existentialist is an obscuring gesture because it allows us to skirt the issue of how production of genre is taken up as a subject in the stories themselves. On the other hand, opening ourselves up to this kind of comparative reading provides insight into how specific physical and critical acts of production respond to the most trying moral questions which existentialism itself isolates but does not attempt to answer.

Both existentialist literature and hard-boiled fiction deal explicitly with morality as a problem for individuals. The perceived freedom to act is set against the limits posed by a lack of self-concept, social and cultural alienation, and often a desire to feel more "response-ible" towards others; nevertheless, the two literary contexts are fundamentally different. In the nationalistic fervor of 1930's Europe, the specular society - that is, the fascist notion of the national aesthetic identity - is supposedly produced both by the state and by the deeply-entrenched actions and beliefs of the citizens. To resist any of the trajectories suggested by the state or by the mass citizen-subject is to act in direct opposition to the "project." One seeks to interrupt a route which is determined to run in one direction only. At the same fateful moment, the

Americans face a more diffuse hegemony, one equally powerful but harder to see, and therefore harder to definitively interrupt. For the hard-boiled writers, it was not enough to simply resist the imposed cartographies of 1930's America, the 1930's world. Rather, both the heroes and the villains are charged with finding ways to reconfigure their small worlds so that they achieve greater mobility and at the same time greater involvement with a community that feels authentic rather than manufactured.

Existentialist literature relies more on a critique of interiority, partly as a response to fascist literature which may have seemed futuristic and innovative,² and partly as a need to expose everyday life as an uncertain theater of risk and cowardice, as well as of blind faith. Existentialist fiction highlights the mundane, the ordinary, the quotidian, and what is repeated so often as to be invisible; it drags these gestures and rituals out into the open, forcing us to acknowledge the absurdity of our uncritical acceptance of them as the facts of life. At the same time, the fiction denies the reader the dubious pleasure of identifying with a character's innermost thoughts, suggesting rather flatly that this desire is

² Louis Ferdinand Celine, for example, is still today cited as a major influence by writers like Kurt Vonnegut, who try to separate his exciting stream-of-consciousness style from the explicitly anti-semitic content of his novels.

creative on the reader's part but in no way corresponds to reality.

The flatness of affect in the narration of both hard-boiled and existentialist novels seems similar, but while it "looks" the same the device works for very different ends. Reading the novels more carefully helps to dislodge this misconception and also confirms that existentialist fiction is openly allegorical in its invocation of the "I" and that hard-boiled fiction on the other hand presents allegory as part of a complex lyricism in its representation of the self. These different approaches reflect not just stylistic differences between philosophical fiction and genre fiction, but extremely different political contexts as well.

In Albert Camus' The Stranger, a novel which is often brought up in discussions of the existentialist character of hard-boiled fiction, the accused murderer Meursault is detached from the world around him in a way which simultaneously inspires empathy and revulsion. And it is revulsion of his apparent emotional barrenness which gets him in the end. After being literally substituted for by his lawyer, who uses the pronoun "I" to describe Meursault's actions and feelings regarding the murder he has committed, Meursault is scheduled to be *decapitated* "in

the name of the French people." (p.135)

The decapitation is symbolic of his having his identity as an individual substituted for by an alternative identity as a deviant personality who has sinned against the nation-state. The emphasis Camus places upon this trope throughout the novel is a sophisticated response to a time in France when identifying Nazi collaborators made it easier to let go of a sense of collective guilt which threatened to sully the image of the great nation. That the story takes place in a tense colonial context makes it even more sensitive to this issue. While Meursault is obviously guilty of murder, it is also clear that he is being literally defaced because of his incapacity for history. As he puts it himself:

I didn't feel much regret for what I'd done...I have never been able to regret anything in all my life.

I've always been far too absorbed in the present moment, or the immediate future, to think back.

(p.126-7)

The meaning of the simple past tense which gives the narration its elegant spare quality goes far beyond a stylistic association with the similarly clipped syntax of American crime fiction. Here, there is a difficult examination of the question of how to confront and

represent a present which is always already becoming the past and therefore somewhat irretrievable and uncertifiable.

The hard-boiled narrator also has moral responsibilities towards the elusive recent past from which he has to cobble together some coherent vision. The referentiality of his self, however, is not interrupted or even corrupted by the Law the way it is in existentialist fiction but is rather a problem he must resolve on his own in order to maintain a clear line of sight. A detective like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe or Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade has a moral responsibility to preserve a perceived integrity of his own character yet there always exists an intriguing tension between the perception and the reality. In hard-boiled crime fiction, then, the allegorical self is less of a functioning structure with which to produce an identity than a set of questions which the reader is encouraged to pursue almost endlessly, as the unbounded fertility of the genre suggests.

Fear of history and the changes time brings are common themes in hard-boiled crime fiction and both of these are especially interesting as they occur in series fiction, which tends to reinforce a notion of the agelessness of the recurring characters. But these figures, unlike Meursault

with whom they otherwise share so many features, are deeply regretful of almost everything they have done and continue to do. Philip Marlowe, for example, derides himself continuously and in The Little Sister famously describes himself as "an ectoplasm with a private license." (p.88) Marlowe continually challenges himself to be more human, to identify more with the people he knows he is called to serve. But his disgust, particularly poignant in The Little Sister, at the exact center of the series, is palpable. He lashes out at all the social classes one by one throughout the novel, each time checking himself and regaining his composure which threatens to dissolve in the face of a frank misanthropy. But Marlowe, who, for many reasons which will become obvious to the student of the hard-boiled story, is the most important character in the whole of the literature, cannot afford that luxury. He overcomes a paralysis of his spirit in order to do the right thing at the right time.

It is precisely this decision to be more than the sum of his disparate parts, to be fully "engaged" in the struggle against exploitation and corruption despite his frequent encounters with the absurd, that prompts the comparison with Sartre. This humanistic strain in what appears to be Marlowe's existentialism is less in tune with

Camus' portrayal of an alienated consciousness and more in keeping with Sartre's notion of a committed moral stance. Yet Raymond Chandler's Marlowe, once called Mallory in an early story, is, despite his elegant and Arthurian knightly tendencies, a man of the streets whose unforgettable wit and candor come to life not in the high literary magazines fashionable at the time but in between the sordidly decorated covers of cheap detective magazines printed on the cheapest wood pulp available.

There was always something paradoxical about the fragility and frank disposability of pulp fiction, especially that of the magazine Black Mask which was taken so very seriously by its famous editor, Joseph "Cap" Shaw, and the writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler who gave it its unforgettable place in history. How could something so explicitly commodified be at the same time so moving? And does this paradox share with existentialism an essential distrust of what is being "sold" by the dominant culture?

In Sartre's novel Nausea, we see the scholar Roquentin dealing with the effects of a creeping and apparently nauseating awareness of how his own subjectivity is dependent upon objects which have no consciousness of their own. He reels from the responsibility he feels in naming

things. As he explains:

Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. They demand nothing, they don't impose themselves: they are there. (p.125)

This is not just a testimony. He means for us to see that it is the "I," his "I," which exists in the midst of such grotesquerie. And, of course, the drama in the novel comes from Roquentin's deft rendering of the people he encounters into so many droll objects who "demand nothing." The "patronne," the "Self-Taught Man," even his beloved Anny who to his dismay is subject to the effects of time, who refuses to be petrified by memory.

Hard-boiled crime fiction does the same thing as a matter of course, as an essential feature of the genre which must be expressed in order for the narrative to begin. And even the most casual reader will find pathos in the portrayal of such figures as Hammett's Continental Op who remains nameless, Patricia Highsmith's architect turned murderer Guy Davenport who wishes to redraw himself as a

new edifice, and Raymond Chandler's many femmes fatales whose chicanery devolves in each story into desperate games of hide-and-seek in which even they lose touch with their own identities. Yet in hard-boiled crime fiction there is always present an awareness that within what we might term a reification of souls is a critique which forces us to ask questions of the alternative. An "inauthentic" interiority is far less desirable, this literature suggests, than an account of what happens to those who set themselves on a path to seek truth in a labrynthine house of mirrors.

A certain courage is required of hard-boiled heroes who set about naming the obscure and unmasking the hidden in both the great houses of the wealthy and the "mean streets" of the anonymous poor. Sartre actually hints at the value in this at the end of Nausea when Roquentin experiences a revelation while listening to a jazz record he has already listened to many times before. He understands for the first time that while the copy of the song, the recording, is worn and decayed, "the melody stays the same, young and firm, like a pitiless witness." He compares the songwriter, who he identifies as "the Jew" and the singer whom he calls "the Negress" to the "heroes of a novel." (p.177) As the novel ends, Roquentin is overjoyed at the idea that he, too, may produce something which will

be reproduced (a novel perhaps!) It is an ironic moment for Roquentin who is satisfied with the idea that the reproducible item has a greater reach than that which is unique and singular, but that copies too are fragile and will perhaps someday become scratched like a record, irretrievable. Being able finally to sustain this irony is what releases Roquentin finally from his debilitating nausea.

Hard-boiled crime fiction extends this irony further because not only does it take up the subject of the ephemeral but it IS ephemeral. It is the nature of the beast. The connection between the medium and the message is essential in this case. The unreality of the unrelenting pace of production and reproduction of genre fiction, particularly pulp fiction, is disorienting for the reader who seeks the "truth" in individual works by writers whose frank formulaic prose can frustrate such a sensitive customer. And then there is as well another kind of unreality associated with the situation - the awareness of an extra-textual context for characters and even places that seem to exist in a liminal but not forgotten space between the series of books in which they live.

Not all crime fiction is written in series form but it is important to recognize that even that which is not

shares a certain generic quality which suggests one book may be substituted for another. The economics of the literature's production is somewhat responsible for the sense that one good story must necessarily be followed by another equally as compelling and similar enough to the first to satisfy the repeat customers. But we should never overlook the extent to which this mode of production is thematized in the literature itself. The alternate ontology constantly predicated by the figuration itself has a curiously superficial quality which awakens a vigilance towards artificiality on all levels.

This trope is so deeply embedded in the literature that it functions on the sentence level. Raymond Chandler, for example, is famous for his grim, overarching use of simile. In his first novel, The Big Sleep, the detective compares orchid stalks in a greenhouse to "the newly washed fingers of dead men." (p.7) And in his second book, Farewell, My Lovely, an outrageously dressed man on the street is "about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food." (p.4) The effect is disorienting, because the rightness of the juxtaposition is confirmed at the same time that our attention to the versimilitude required of the reader if not Marlowe himself is irreparably harmed. As a straight literary device, it is horribly overdetermined

but as a clue to the ontological questions with which hard-boiled characters struggle, it is a door opening.

Contemporary readers may be surprised by how paradoxically unrealistic hard-boiled fiction can be. On the one hand, the invitation to enter into the seamy side of life in the American metropolis suggests a desire to show life as it really is and not the way it is portrayed in idealized examples of modern American life, or in classic detective fiction which portrays crime as rarified and intellectual. But the dark side we glimpse in crime fiction is incredibly contrived at the same time. What we perceive if we read closely is what Raymond Chandler constantly referred to in his novels - the duality of good and evil as romance and not as the more diffuse and contested representations seen in the modern novel.

In Chandler's fiction, of the many well-documented and studied references to Arthurian romance, we have only to cite a few to see what he was getting at there. Marlowe is often referred to as a knight, his first prey in The Big Sleep, the sleazy gay pornographer Arthur Gwynn Geiger, is clearly a conflation of Arthur and Guinevere, and one of his most compelling novels is titled The Lady in the Lake. But what we really see throughout hard-boiled fiction, even in the works of writers who were not as explicit as

Chandler about literary allusions, is a delineation of stock characters into types which can be replayed over and over again in different stories with only slight variations. This objectification of humanity is a striking extension of the existential anxiety about the erosion of free will in a society in which subjectivity is circumscribed and defined by established linguistic structures.

Preserving or challenging genre is thus not only the situation in which hard-boiled crime fiction finds itself as a literature but also is the situation, broadly defined, which drives its plots and figures forward in what often resembles a romantic quest. The picaresque qualities of both the knights and the rogues complicate the scenarios, often resulting in flashes of insight in which characters must acknowledge the breadth of their own mythmaking while continuing to operate successfully in their trumped-up roles.

The economic success of the stories and books as commodities mirrored this achievement: The literature was able to advance during its years of mass distribution a cultural criticism which took advantage of the cloak of anonymity which books sold in bus stations possess. It is time now to lift this cloak and read more carefully,

particularly because of the sophistication of the critique found within those brittle pages.

In The Maltese Falcon, the most famous of the hard-boiled detective novels and clearly one of the best by any criteria, Dashiell Hammett was clearly imploring us to pay attention to his creature Joel Cairo, a mysterious and shifty-eyed villain known only as a "levantine" who is in murderous pursuit along with his German boss of a falcon from Malta which no one has actually ever seen. The falcon is like Cairo himself, a dangerous emblem of a hybridization of culture and mythology to which people attach way too much importance. The reluctant knight, the hero-detective Sam Spade, finds himself facing either the threat or the promise of nationlessness or cosmopolitanism. The fact that he does not attach a clear value to these, that he reserves judgment throughout the novel, preferring to fulfill his duties according to duty rather than sentiment, is a resounding indictment of those who fell prey to the emotional appeal of fascism and national socialism.

In hard-boiled crime fiction, this moral awareness is expressed in literary terms as well as in a performative context unique to the work's status as genre fiction. The pleasure of reading texts which combine escapism with

reminders of our own complicity in drawing our worlds depends upon an identification which is more cinematic than literary, more tied to each unique occasion of reading. Raymond Chandler wrote in 1950 that the power of the fiction depended upon:

...the smell of fear which these stories managed to generate. The characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction, and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night. The mystery story grew hard and cynical about motive and character, but it was not cynical about the effects it tried to produce nor about its technique of producing them. A few unusual critics recognized this at the time, which was all one had any right to expect. The average critic never recognizes an achievement when it happens. He explains it after it has become respectable. ("Introduction," The Simple Art of Murder, p.vii)

Now that hard-boiled crime fiction has become respectable in a way, we should transcend the average criticism and try

to look further than the ascension of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe to the acid-free pages of The Library of America. Because, after all, for hard-boiled crime fiction the technique to which Chandler refers in the above passage is dependent upon the physical, tangible means of its delivery as pulp fiction. Reading anthologized stories which were originally published in pulp magazines like Black Mask or Dime Detective or thumbing through the pages of an elegantly presented hardback collection of classic hard-boiled fiction makes it too easy to lose sight of the fact that the "feel" of pulp fiction and paperback originals spoke volumes about the nature of the contents therein.

An existential, and specifically an early twentieth century, awareness of book as object will yield a great deal more insight into hard-boiled literature than will a more limited study of the texts as garish artifacts of a pulp entertainment industry. Yet the books themselves are somewhat resistant to being read as conceptual works whose material existence is as much of a challenge to the reader as the tough talk therein confounds those in search of a straight version of events. That is why it is important to understand the nature of this tension in the production and consumption of this literature, or, in other words. in its

creation and reception.

Even the plots, which are supposed to be the "point" of detective fiction, resist both easy classification and modernist critical interpretation. The chain of events which unfolds in front of our eyes, often through an intimate first-person view, is often so bizarre and unstructured in the fiction that the reader reaches a point of uncertainty about what has happened in the book so far. A unique feature of the fiction as crime fiction is that, more often than not, no one volunteers to tie up the loose ends and solve the mysteries with which we as readers have been struggling, and it is the same for many of the hero-detectives and the down-and-out anti-heroes who would also like to know what is going on around them. In a "straight" modern novel, this kind of ambiguity is par for the course, but in a crime novel it goes against the grain and thus pushes to the forefront serious questions about who exactly is charged with sorting out not only who is responsible for "cause" but also for whom the "effect" will continue to matter, perhaps for a long time.

Choosing Genre

Both detective fiction and the type of crime story that has no detectives in it are genre fiction by definition, and considered to be equally hard-boiled forms by fans and critics alike, because they both follow a format which can be copied by conserving in a new story the traditional elements of the model form. Not surprisingly, this commodification of genre was an effective marketing model during the heyday of pulp publishing in the 1930's and 1940's which has persisted to this day; however, the literature's status as "genre fiction" rather than "straight fiction" was a powerful critical edge as well as a market share.

It is easy to overlook this unless we recall that many who chose genre as their *métier* wrote in an explicitly hard-boiled style without ever having labored for the pulps or the paperback market. Although Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, David Goodis, and John D. MacDonald are just a few of the major stars who *did* hone their skills in the pulps and the paperback market, often under a dizzying array of pseudonyms, James M. Cain, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Patricia Highsmith *did not*. Yet they all wrote genre fiction quite deliberately.

Since both the detective and the genre are forms that can easily (and perhaps endlessly) be reproduced, one senses in series fiction particularly that proper moral behavior can be acquired through practice. The detectives and the characters alike are constantly being presented with choices. Should they act honorably or serve their own desires? How to reconcile these two? By acting generically, following a preordained form, the individuals are spared a great deal of the soul-crushing inertia such a situation can instill in their beings, but the pathos of the situation comes through and becomes after the fact the subject of many hard-boiled narratives.

The two idealized forms are, of course, the knight-errant who comes to save the day by bringing his shining light into the darkness and on the other pole, the rogue who is of that very darkness and whose trajectory is mapped according to the precepts of picaresque behavior. In hard-boiled crime fiction, the individual characters will always exist with a feeling of anxiety about being able to fulfill the roles set out for them. Quite often, they feel compelled to fulfill both of these. In fact, a dialectical relationship between the idealism of the knight and the in-your-face realism of the crime story *picaro* drives the

process by which hard-boiled narratives expose the precariousness of our moral institutions.

The hero-detective does his duty yet it is not always what he really wants to do. The point is that he does it anyway, like Sam Spade in Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon who sends his girl up for murder. The fact that he loves her is irrelevant to what he will do, because as he says, when "a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it." (p.438) He will, nevertheless, suffer over having made that decision and the novel ends on an extremely unhappy note.

Equally unsatisfactory is the knowledge that this pattern does not require that the moral turn is always taken. Some crime novels are narrated by the bad guys, the itinerant picaresque figures, and it is tempting to consider these a different genre altogether; yet these stories were also written deliberately as an alternative to the straight novel, the high literary form to which so many writers aspired. They were published in the same magazines and printed by the same publishing houses as the hero-detective driven fiction and are today always lumped together under such vague descriptors as *noir* fiction. What really allies these crime stories with the detective novels of the same period is the consciousness of form which is

deeply embedded in the figures which dominate the narratives.

Reproduction, echo and reverb are prominent as literary devices in these novels and the books themselves, though not series fiction, are clearly the same type of story with little variation. As in the detective novels, the protagonists in these novels find themselves at frequent crossroads where moral choices are presented. Failing to act morally again and again is as consistent an act in these books as acting morally repeatedly is the signature of the hero-detective. They both act according to the precepts of the fictive worlds in which they live rather than facing each situation as unique.

What is unique is the way each of the following writers faced their own fictive worlds and made hard-boiled fiction a thematic as well as a formal designation. Finding out why they did it in the first place is revealing to say the least.

Hammett

If Dashiell Hammett had not contracted tuberculosis during his service in the First World War, then perhaps he never would have written any literature. Without Hammett, there would still have been a hard-boiled style of literature and even tough guy detectives in the pages of

Black Mask. But without Hammett the quality of that fiction would have been very different. Dashiell Hammett was an innovator and as Raymond Chandler famously wrote in The Simple Art of Murder: "Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse..." (p.190) Perhaps he could do this because he knew what he was talking about. Dashiell Hammett was a Pinkerton National Detective Agency operative for years and he drew upon this experience in every story and novel he wrote.

Why did he do it? He did not have to write detective fiction and he did not have to write for the pulps. His first story actually appeared in Mencken's Smart Set. Hammett clearly wanted to write detective stories and wanted to place them where those who read detective fiction would encounter his fine, dry prose. He tells the reader in the introduction to the 1934 edition of his most famous novel, The Maltese Falcon, that:

...your private detective does not---or did not ten years ago when he was my colleague---want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent by-stander or client.

The shiftiness in particular comes through in Hammett's characterizations of his detectives. His first detective, the Continental Op, featured in many stories and in the novel Red Harvest, does not even yield his name. He remains a mysterious cipher throughout the stories. His willingness to be conflated with the identity of the institution he represents in Red Harvest - "When I say *me*, I mean the Continental." (p.30) - is the only bit of pathos in a ruthless and cynical portrait of a city in whose corruption every citizen seems to play a part.

Hammett's writing and the situations he describes seemed incredibly realistic to readers even though he used a minimum of words to get his point across. This, for example, is what happens to Ned Beaumont in The Glass Key after he is punched in the stomach:

He went down the stairs, loose-jointed, pallid, and bare-headed. He went through the downstairs dining-room to the street and out to the curb, where he vomited. When he had vomited, he went to a taxicab that stood a dozen feet away, climbed into it, and gave the driver an address in Greenwich Village.

(p.465)

It certainly seems realistic, because as Geoffrey O'Brien puts it "Hammett rarely dilates an instant of

consciousness." (p.67) Everything is reported as it happens, almost in real time. The action, however, has no emotional complement. We learn what the characters do but not what they feel, which gives them a two-dimensional quality which Hammett exploits to great effect in the fiction.

Hammett's men and women act according to type and the emotion comes from those moments in the texts which point to the individual's frozenness in the role he or she plays. Sam Spade in The Maltese Falcon is so wedded to his role as a detective who must avenge the death of his partner that he denies himself the woman he loves because "it's bad business to let the killer get away with it." (p.438) It does not really bother Spade that his lover Brigid O'Shaughnessy killed his partner. He could not have cared less for his partner, as he explains to Brigid, but after all that is not the point. He must play according to the rules of his economic relationships rather than his emotional ties.

This shocking objectification of a character's purview as an actor in a novel, especially a detective novel, reflects in an ironic way the role played by the whole of detective fiction at the time. Hammett's writing came out in the pulp magazines and then later in hardback before

gaining wide popularity in paperback reprints. The power of the stories he wrote and others as well derived from the strict guidelines superimposed by the rules of genre. The limits made the genre but there was always a price paid for membership and for Hammett that came in the form of ransoming subjectivity for the greater good. There is a haunting, Orwellian quality to Hammett's narratives which evokes successfully the atmosphere of dread in which they were conceived.

Cain

James M. Cain knew that he was writing genre fiction, yet he resisted being thought of as part of a school of fiction, especially since he never published in the pulp magazines and did not count Dashiell Hammett as an influence. In the introduction to his novel The Butterfly, Cain makes himself clear with the following:

I belong to no school, hard-boiled or otherwise, and I believe these so-called schools exist mainly in the imagination of critics, and have little correspondence in reality anywhere else...and although I have read less than twenty pages of Mr. Dashiell Hammett in my whole life, Mr. Clifton Fadiman can refer to my hammett-and-tongs style and make things easy for himself. (p.352)

In any case, the characters in his novels who operate in the absence of a hero-detective seem to choose the wrong path again and again, making the stories distinctly hard-boiled in their *mise-en-scenes*. Although there are detectives on the job trying to solve the crimes committed in Cain's novels, the seeing-eye of the novel is usually the one who has committed the crime and is on his way to committing more and more crimes despite a keen moral consciousness which makes the inevitable death spiral all the more tragic.

According to his biographer, Roy Hoopes, Cain's interest in genre fiction was inspired by his sense that he could not write fiction in his own voice but needed a proxy complete with a different dialect to tell the stories he longed to write. (p.180) Cain, however, was not attempting to break with high culture in the same way that other crime fiction writers, the majority of whom wrote for the pulps, were and he never explicitly found a refuge in a type of fiction. Perhaps this is what inspired Raymond Chandler's famous contempt for Cain as "a faux naïf, a Proust in greasy overalls, a dirty little boy with a piece of chalk and a board fence and nobody looking." (Selected Letters, p.23)

Yet it was precisely this quality of "faux naïf" language which makes Cain's choice of genre so compelling. In his narratives, repetition and doubling are constant motifs. The stories are confessions of past events and the significance of this format is not lost on the critics who remember Cain's Irish-Catholic background. Direct experience is rarely as powerful in Cain's stories as is a second attempt at action or dialogue which has the benefit of hindsight. In that sense, it is referentially related to the original event but it is never the same, and like genre fiction itself, Cain's narrators are seen as compelled to repeat the patterns of thought and behavior they conceive of in their basest moments.

In The Postman Always Rings Twice, for example, not only does everything seem to happen twice, offering the sinners a kind of practice run before they commit themselves by performing unpardonable acts, but the dialogue itself is written in a call and response style which constantly underlines the struggle between compulsion and free will. Cora, Nick Papadakis' ambitious young wife, and Frank, the aimless drifter who lands by chance at their lunchroom (appropriately titled Twin Oaks) and falls hard for Cora on first sight, become convinced that the only way out of their predicament is to murder Nick Papadakis. At

first, they try to kill Cora's husband and make it look like an accident, but they come very close to being caught and Nick survives what he really thinks was an accident. Frank is relieved that he did not murder Nick after all and he convinces Cora to simply leave Nick and join him on the open road. Cora tells Frank:

"He's coming home tomorrow. You know what that means?"

"I know."

"I got to sleep with him, stead of you."

"You would, except that when he gets here we're going to be gone."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"Just you and me and the road, Cora"

"Just you and me and the road."

"Just a couple of tramps."

"Just a couple of gypsies, but we'll be together."

"That's it. We'll be together." (p.22)

Earlier, when they were initially planning the murder, Frank tells us that Cora's eyes "were shining up at me like two blue stars. It was like being in church." (p.13) By echoing each other, Frank and Cora gather strength which they would not have as individuals with inert, unspoken

desires. Their ritualistic mirroring of dialogue implies that repetition itself is emboldening.

Chandler

Raymond Chandler was another who did not think much of the detective novel. Yet he chose it as his medium for experimentation with what he termed the "American language." Out of work during the Depression, perhaps a bit demoralized in the interwar Los Angeles, Chandler became captivated by the language in which the stories published in the pulp magazines, particularly *Black Mask*, were written. Unlike other pulp writers who wrote a great many stories very quickly in order to maximize income, Chandler was slow and methodical; he spent several months working on his first story. He taught himself to write by doing pastiches of his favorite writers. Erle Stanley Gardner, who wrote the Perry Mason stories at a furious clip, was a particular favorite and Chandler spent more time analyzing, outlining and dissecting one of his stories in order to perform the educational pastiche he required to teach himself how to plot than Gardner ever spent writing one from scratch; however, Chandler right away became far more concerned with language, atmosphere and character than with plot development, perhaps because he associated clever plotting with the type of detective novel he despised. The

kind of detective story which became well-known in the pages of *Black Mask* under the editorship of Joseph "Cap" Shaw was lean, spare and "hard-boiled" - different enough from the classic English type to interest and challenge Chandler.

Having earlier given up his literary pretensions when he moved to America from London, Chandler was not planning on becoming the important writer he may have dreamed of being as a young man, yet he was intrigued enough by the effects of this new language to commit himself to writing full-time and trying to make a living as a writer for the pulps. As he explains in a 1945 letter to his editor at Houghton Mifflin, Dale Warner:

All I wanted to do when I began writing was to play with a fascinating new language, to see what it would do as a means of expression which might remain on the level of unintellectual thinking and yet acquire the power to say things which are usually only said with a literary air. (Gardiner and Walker, p.214)

Chandler reveals in this letter to his editor his feelings about the *potential* of this "new language," not its effectiveness as it stood in the pages of the pulps before his arrival on the scene. What motivated Chandler was not an uncomplicated admiration for the form or content of

detective stories, or of other types of "hard-boiled" writing published in the pulps, but rather the idea that there were possibilities for expression in this genre which were unexplored and fascinating.

MacDonald

John D. MacDonald agreed. He was often explicit in his belief that writing fiction was a way of entering into the day to day life of moral problems in America. Genre fiction, which was for John D. MacDonald a well-researched and deliberate choice, provided an appropriate venue for these concerns because it was itself an elusive artistic category, both defined by its categorical status and at the same time always exceeding the limitations of its boundaries unapologetically. Like Raymond Chandler, John D. MacDonald saw in popular genre a way to communicate significant ideas in a format which was consumed rather than fetishized and circumscribed as high culture. MacDonald employed the limits of genre fiction for both the creativity the situation generated for such a prolific writer (more than seventy novels!) and also for the wide readership it afforded him.

Genre allowed him to do something more as well. Tucked carefully between passages full of action, adventure and horror are long soliloquies - deeply moving reflections on

all of the issues in which MacDonald was personally invested. It is in these quiet passages that we find the most direct expression of MacDonald's moral philosophy. By far the most influential of these reveries were the ones about the natural Florida and its imminent destruction by unscrupulous developers and the demands of the great crush of retirees from up North hoping for an edenic existence. Carl Hiassen, a writer and native Floridian, suggests that:

MacDonald wanted his readers to do more than see Florida. He seemed to want them to care about it as deeply as he did; celebrate it, marvel at it, laugh about it, grieve for it, and even fight for it.

("Introduction" A Deadly Shade of Gold, p.x)

Hiassen also reminds us that this naturalist point of view was not the usual domain of the "hard-bitten sleuth" and that MacDonald was really getting away with something by inserting "diatribes" like the following piece about the fate of the Everglades into the pages of a crime novel:

Now, of course, having failed in every attempt to subdue the Glades by frontal attack, we are slowly killing it off by tapping the River of Grass. In the questionable name of progress, the state in its vast wisdom lets every two-bit developer divert the flow into the draglined canals that give him "waterfront"

lots to sell. As far north as Corkscrew Swamp, virgin stands of ancient bald cypress are dying. All the area north of Copeland had been logged out, and will never come back. As the Glades dry, the big fires come with increasing frequency. The ecology is changing with egret colonies dwindling, mullet getting scarce, mangrove dying of new diseases born of dryness.

But it will take a long time to kill it. And years from now foolish men will still be able to kill themselves off within miles of help, hopelessly lost among islands which all look exactly alike. It is a black land, and like every wilderness in the world, it punishes quickly when a mistake is made, quickly and with a casual, savage indifference. (Bright Orange for the Shroud, pp.58-9)

MacDonald's special talent was for slipping these commentaries seamlessly into the narratives. These mini-lectures are always ascribed to sympathetic characters, and they never seem superfluous to the action, of which there is plenty in MacDonald's novels. Rather, they contribute to MacDonald's characterizations of his heroes as refugees from a culture which denies them opportunities to question.

That is the way they should be read, because these self-conscious interludes are more than special treats for

his fans. The novels depend on them because they are necessary for the development of his characters. A person without a sense of "place," for example, is always an unreliable character in the novels. Moral behavior is only possible, MacDonald's stories teach again and again, if one has a measure of self-knowledge and this awareness only comes if one can see beyond the man-made facades and "mythologies" with which we support our incursions into what MacDonald represented as both a natural and a spiritual wilderness. Of course, this is not easy and in this deft way, using passages about the environment as well as several plots about the avarice of plundering land developers, MacDonald links the paradox of self-knowledge with the paradox of perceiving nature.

MacDonald's environmentalism is part of the history of the Florida he loved, as Hiassen likes to remind us, but it also has a critical literary function in his fiction. This is obvious in the way that MacDonald links the degradation of the environment with the invention of pseudo-cultures with mythical pasts. The plight of the Seminoles, "the great enduring myth of the Seminole" in his words, he found particularly ironic. He describes them in Bright Orange for the Shroud as:

...roadside merchants of such a vast gypsy cynicism that of all the artifacts they manufacture and sell to tourists - not one bears any relation to their customs, habits, or prior way of life. They are the carnival Indians, degraded by commerce, curious heirs to the big colorful lie that they were never whipped, never made a truce. They are the comedy Indians who, never having used tomtoms in their history, never having used the tomahawks or bows and arrows like the Plains Indians, now make vast quantities of each and sell them to people from Ohio. (p.58)

Yet the assault on the natural world, as he represents it, is itself dependent on an idealized past - a wilderness untouched by man - dark, primordial, fertile and in MacDonald's view, punishing. This irony at the core of his fiction is perhaps the secret to his productivity and to his love affair with genre. In all of the narratives, there is always someone pointing to the ways that morality in America depends upon our paradoxical ability to represent ourselves, in all of the legal, aesthetic and linguistic manifestations of the term.

Highsmith

Patricia Highsmith, another enormously gifted writer who explicitly chose to write crime fiction, even to write

a series, made this paradox her subject matter. Although at first, after she published Strangers on a Train and it was made into a film by Alfred Hitchcock, Highsmith was concerned about being identified as a thriller writer because of the limitations it could place on her career, she ended up writing a great deal of crime fiction throughout her life. It was, for her, an incredibly fertile genre in which to explore questions of personal and cultural identity. In her novels, murderers are not as repugnant as they are fascinating for the way that they are able to make the most of their human relationships. How they present themselves is an art which is not simply artificial but actually transformative. Serious phenomenological questions are forced upon the reader by the shocking ways in which her characters choose to act upon the world, in effect engendering a reality which could not exist without the force of will.

Strangers on a Train, for example, is a novel about an architect and a lonely young man who meet on a train by chance. The lonely rich boy feels attracted to the architect, Guy Haines, who has an estranged wife who is expecting another man's child. Charley Bruno, the dandy, despises his father and decides that he and Guy could each murder each other's victims, thus committing the perfect

crimes. In the famous Hitchcock film, of course, Guy is horrified by this proposal and shocked when his wife is murdered. In the novel, however, Guy does kill Charley Bruno's father. He feels compelled to do so, just as Bruno feels compelled to murder Miriam. The novel constantly juxtaposes scenes of free will with those suffused by a feeling of predestination.

What is most striking in the novel is Charley Bruno's feelings of envy for Guy, because Guy is able to lend form to his visions, quite literally as an architect and more symbolically through his second marriage to a woman he loves. Charley Bruno, who is obviously gay, lacks the capacity to enter into relationships with either men or women. He is cut off from humanity and thus feels incredibly attracted to Guy as a symbol of what role he, Bruno, could play if only he were allowed. The name Guy itself implies a generic character who is yet unnamed and the vampire-like Bruno lives vicariously through his victim, essentially robbing him of his human dignity, especially his sense of free will.

Highsmith's famous series about Tom Ripley, beginning with the well-known The Talented Mr. Ripley is about a similar character-snatching person, Tom Ripley. He is a murderer and a con man and who feels most comfortable and

free when playing that he is someone else. In the first novel of the series, he actually murders a man in order to take on his identity, economically as well as socially, in a brilliant turn of events which makes it all possible. Then his serial adventures begin and despite his evil character, Ripley is a sympathetic figure in the novels. One identifies with his creativity and resourcefulness in fashioning an identity which suits him better than the one into which he was unfortunately born.

According to the writer Marijane Meaker, a contemporary and sometime romantic partner of Highsmith's, Ripley was very much a self-portrait of the writer's. While the crimes themselves were clearly fantasies (we hope), the dreams and desires of Tom Ripley, his point of view with which we can clearly identify, mirrored Highsmith's very closely. One idea we can gather from this is how easy it must have been for Highsmith, who was reluctant to be known as a thriller writer, or as a lesbian writer, to decide to go ahead and be a crime fiction writer without giving up a sense of herself as maintaining control over a deliberate choice of identity.

Hughes

It was with such calculating deliberation as well that Dorothy B. Hughes chose to be a mystery and crime fiction

writer. Like Highsmith, she was a young writer with great literary ambitions. Like Chandler, she was a poet, but unlike Chandler, her poetry was judged to be rather good (she was the Yale Younger Poet of 1931). Also like Chandler and MacDonald, Dorothy B. Hughes saw in mystery and crime fiction possibilities unavailable to her in the "straight" novels she had been struggling with for years.

Although Hughes became quite well known in the 1940's for her atmospheric *noir* fiction, especially for The So Blue Marble, In a Lonely Place, and Ride the Pink Horse, what is not well known about her is that she brazenly tried to insert fantasy into the established hard-boiled novel. She tried, but she did not succeed, and the only evidence we have of her late genre-bending is the sorry state of the plot of her first published mystery The So Blue Marble. In her excitement over being published for the first time, Hughes agreed to cut 25,000 words! Most of those words were unacceptable to the publisher because they concerned characters with supernatural powers and physical events not ever found in realistic fiction, especially not mystery fiction with its strong emphasis on plausibility. In the end the novel was published in a highly edited form which satisfied the publisher and pleased the public as well. We will never know what effect Hughes' innovation could have

had upon the genre because she could not find a publisher willing to take such a risk at the time and she chose not to try again. Market forces prevailed as well against her going back to her earliest ambitions as Hughes explains:

And why didn't I return to writing straight novels?...

It was like this. In those days a contract called for two mysteries a year, as did each renewal of contract.

This keeps a writer busy, out of sidelines. By the time you've finished the one, you're champing at the bit to start the next one which has been flooding you with its ideas from the wings. And so you become a mystery writer. And it's a lot of fun. ("My First Book?" p.78)

Despite her early plans to write what she called "family sagas in fine civilized prose," ("My First Book?" p.76)

Hughes embraced mystery and crime fiction both for its surprising versatility (if she followed the rules) and its burgeoning market share.

Hughes never wrote a series and there is no white knight in her fiction charging into the half-light to rescue the corrupted masses; nor does the traditional tension between the police and the hard-boiled hero, established so clearly in Hammett and Chandler's works, exist for her. Instead, what defines Hughes' fiction as

genre rather than "straight" is the feeling of abject fear she manages to conjure again and again. Her characters begin with some moral compass, even if they are members of the underworld, but as the narratives gather steam the view becomes ever more obscure. The worst thing that can happen to her characters, their worst fear, is that they will lose touch with their own identities and thus lose all of their objectivity.

One of her more haunting representations of this is in Ride the Pink Horse. The seeing-eye of the novel is a grown-up juvenile delinquent known only as "Sailor" who clings desperately to a sense of himself as someone who has "made it" in his criminal organization. Sailor is so unsettled by the New Mexico town he finds himself in that he reacts to the strangeness by insisting that everything and everyone be named as he calls them. An Indian man he thinks of as Mexican who befriends him becomes Pancho Villa. The senator who has set him up for a life of crime in Chicago is "the Sen." He is profoundly unsettled by the detachment he perceives in Indians. It creeps up on him like a sickness:

And standing there the unease came upon him again. The unease of an alien land, of darkness and silence, of strange tongues and a stranger people, of unfamiliar

smells, even the cool-of-night smell unfamiliar. What sucked into his pores for that moment was panic although he could not have put a name to it. The panic of liveness: of himself the stranger although he was himself unchanged, the creeping loss of identity.

(p.45)

No wonder Sailor takes comfort in labels, no wonder he takes comfort in a generic universe where an identity can be stamped out like a coin with all of its attendant exchange value.

The representation of this disintegration of identity and the vertigo which follows is the hallmark of Hughes' writing. One cannot even think of the crime films of the 1940's and 1950's without immediately knowing this sense of generalized anxiety and so we see how grand her influence was, even if she did not contribute to the mythology of the hero-detective and his prey. The irony is, of course, that these novels and films which tried to "put a name to" the prejudice invoked by seeing everything and everyone in terms of class or type became instantly recognizable types themselves and much of the subtle criticism therein is lost on readers and spectators. Only the style remains.

Goodis

David Goodis' contribution to this ironic form of criticism also came in the form of an instantly recognizable prose style yet his downfall was not in the cooptation of his style by those who made films from his work as much as from the unfortunate obscurity in which he lived and died. Most of his novels were completely out-of-print until quite recently and still few who admire Delmer Dave's *Dark Passage*, Francois Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, or Jacques Tourneur's *Nightfall* even realize that these films were careful adaptations of Goodis' best novels. Although there are many reasons for this obscurity, Goodis' own characterization of it as the result of his commitment to writing genre fiction rather than "straight" is interesting, even if the logic is faulty.

In a letter dated August 16, 1966 to his friend William Sherman not even a year before his death at age 49 from a heart attack, Goodis reflected thus:

At first I wanted to write very solemnly and handle only the important issues. But I quickly found that the most important issue was putting food in one's belly, and in order to do that I deviated from the track most of the time and complied with the wishes of the various editors and publishers. I admit this was a

weakness. I should have taken a job digging ditches, and because I was too lazy to do that, I threw away a lot of valuable time, especially in Hollywood;

although I must say I had a lot of fun in Hollywood.

The "weakness" Goodis refers to here is the same impulse which propelled other writers to fame during the era of paperback originals. For Goodis, however, when he finally succumbed to a depressing, cloistered life writing paperbacks in his parent's house after years in New York and Hollywood, it was after his early success in hardback (*Retreat from Oblivion* (1939), *Dark Passage* (1946), *Nightfall* (1947)) and after a profitable stint in New York writing for the pulps under many pseudonyms to maximize exposure and income. He also enjoyed some success as a screenwriter in Hollywood (*The Unfaithful* (1947)) and his novels were the basis for many wonderful films. Somehow this was not enough for Goodis. He felt at the end of his life that first of all he had failed to live up to his potential as a writer and that second the fault lay not in circumstance but in his own flawed character. That this became the underlying theme of the majority of his tragic, fatalistic narratives is no accident.

Ralph, an unemployed dreamer who lives with his parents and hangs out with other bums in front of a candy

store in Philadelphia in The Blonde on the Street Corner is treated to an analysis of the situation. His best friend's predatory wife, with whom he has just begun a tawdry affair, tells him:

We give ourselves the idea we can do better than we're doing, and some days we get bright ideas and try to put them into play. But it's no go. You can't get off a ferris wheel when it keeps going around and around.
(p.153)

When she interrogates him about the monotony and purposelessness of his life he confesses "It gives me very little to worry about. I don't have to think about losing it. There's nothing to lose." (p.152) She regards him with sympathy and a feeling of kinship. It is not that he cannot step off the ferris wheel but that he would have to face daily the fear of losing what he might achieve.

In some of Goodis' novels, the tragic characters' fall from grace is presented not as their own fault but as the result unbelievably bad luck. In Down There, for example, Eddie, the "piano man" in a bar, has a previous life as a concert pianist, during which he was betrayed by his manager whose actions led to his wife's suicide. He toils listlessly in obscurity despite his former fame and the talent which must still exist within him. But the past is

too painful to dwell upon and he has even adopted a new identity and a new way of speaking which better fits his station in life. Eddie/Edward explains to himself that the way a person talks could reveal a great deal about his or her background, but switching and passing are easily done:

The way a person talks has little has little or nothing to do with the schooling. You ought to know that. Just listen to the way you talk.

What I mean is, the way Eddie talks. Eddie spills words like "ain't" and says "them there" and "this here" and so forth. You know Edward never talked that way. Edward was educated, and an artist, and had a cultured manner of speaking. I guess it all depends where you're at and what you're doing and the people you hang around with. The Hut is a long way off from Carnegie Hall. Yes. And it's a definite fact that Eddie has no connection with Edward. You cut all them wires a long time ago. It was a clean split. (p.171)

Goodis, too, tried to make that "clean split" when he retired to his parent's home in Philadelphia to write paperback originals. Like Eddie the piano player, Goodis could not simply erase his past experience by becoming a hack writer, no matter how hard he tried. For one thing, to his dismay, his depressing stories of men stuck in

Sisyphean predicaments impressed the French who hailed him as an "existentialist," especially following the release of Tirez sur le pianiste in 1960.

As a writer who cranked out paperbacks in his childhood bedroom, Goodis really hit upon a quality in hard-boiled fiction which defined it as a genre. As Geoffrey O'Brien describes it "A single page of his work is instantly recognizable, as much for its prose style as for its recurring obsessions." (p.90) David Goodis proved that crime fiction did not have to be written in series form to harness a critical power beyond the individual novel. Each David Goodis novel shared metonymically in the concerns of his work as a whole, while they all strained to distinguish themselves as unique signature stories.

Perhaps this is the gift of genre. If "production demands a form that can be produced," then it must also be true that this form can be reproduced. By working in the genre, neither Hammett nor Chandler nor anyone who happens to come along can "wreck" the genre, to use Chandler's term, but what they can do is to demonstrate that once an original form is understood as such, it can be improved upon. The "hidden truth" might have a social character and Chandler implies that Marlowe, despite his best efforts, cannot pull back the curtain by himself. His solitude is a

screen: behind it we see the corrupt society complete with its self-destructive narratives leading the way.

Moral choices may seem to be the work of an individual, yet Chandler's stories suggest that we never really work alone. Marlowe is an ironic model of American self-consciousness about individual moral responsibility. He plays chess by himself, for example, always by himself, yet he always follows a script with an imaginary partner. In fact, the games he plays are written down in a book and have always been played already countless times. They can be reenacted forever, like the detective novel. In the end, it is this reproducibility, this font of experience, which creates hope for the kind of person who might take it upon himself to make things happen.

Reproducibility

Fans of hard-boiled crime fiction love to point out the "fact" that Albert Camus based The Stranger (1942) on James M. Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice (1934). People suggest the same kind of thing when they imply that Jean-Paul Sartre borrowed the narrative style of hard-boiled fiction for his seminal existentialist novel Nausea. This awareness has led to a fertile cross-cultural climate in which readers are comfortable identifying Albert Camus' novels as "hard-boiled" and David Goodis' novels as "existentialist." It is almost impossible, however, to prove such connections, even if one were able to track down the mostly anecdotal sources of such knowledge.

A comparative analysis could yield some important insights, but this makes it too easy to frame the texts in a historical context in which the earnest, philosophical literature of postwar France finds its form, if not also its content, presaged in America's mass-marketed genre fiction of the 1930's. The desire amongst critics and fans of the hard-boiled to underline this connection reveals an anxiety about how seriously Americans take our own paeans to alienation, our own nihilist anti-heroes, our own response to an era of both economic and spiritual bankruptcy. If this literature takes up the same problems,

the same questions, as does existentialist literature in France, then what does this tell us about the significance of identifying writing by genre? Why is hard-boiled crime fiction, which is a loose category at best, in need of uplifting by contemporary critics who want to place it upon an exalted pedestal which would once and for all identify it as "literature" and not just "writing?"

The most important difference is this: existentialist fiction is presented as philosophical. The simplicity of the syntax, the straightforwardness of the narrative, the lack of self-reflexiveness on the part of the characters is always perceived as a part of the philosophical presentation. It is understood as mediated. Simplicity hints at the depth in this genre. The straighter the line, the more it means to signify. These are the hallmarks of the genre, the clues to the reader about the brain work he will try his best to do, for as the intended reader, he is already complicit in the enterprise, having desired a more sophisticated presentation, one which acknowledges the difficulties involved in such a gesture.

Hard-boiled fiction, on the other hand, makes no such appeal. The pared down language and the relentless pace of the narrative are not perceived as ironic, nor do they signify absence in the way that an abstract painting can

hint at the deleted figure. The reader, who is a consumer of a commodified form of literature, whether it is "pulp" fiction (usually stories) or "pocket" paperback fiction (usually novels), is complicit not in an intellectual-dialectical relationship but rather in an economic-transactional one. His expectations of the genre must be met for him to achieve satisfaction.

According to the editors of a collection of hardboiled stories called Hard-Boiled: An Anthology of American Crime Stories, a hard-boiled story is one which possesses enough of the elements commonly recognized as belonging to the genre and none which would exclude it from admission to the club. They explain:

The hard-boiled crime story deals with disorder, disaffection, and dissatisfaction. Throughout the genre's seventy-year history, this has remained a constant and central tenet. The typical hard-boiled character (if not the typical hard-boiled writer) has a jaundiced view of government, power and the law. He (or, sometimes, she) is often a loner, a social misfit. If he is on the side of the angels, he is likely to be a cynical idealist: he believes that society is corrupt, but he also believes in justice and will make it his business to do whatever is

necessary to see that justice is done. If he walks the other side of the mean streets, he walks them at night; he is likely a predator, and as morally bankrupt as any human being can be. In the noir world, extremes are the norm; clashes between good and evil are never petty, and good does not always triumph, nor is justice always done. (Pronzini and Adrian, p.3)

Without this flavor which Pronzini and Adrian so skillfully describe, a story would not be considered hard-boiled enough to satisfy one who has come looking for just this kind of story. A classic detective story would fail on all counts, not on its own merits, but in trying to fulfill the desires of the customer who knows what he wants and where he can get it.

Woody Haut, in his book Pulp Culture: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War, suggests that this distinction is class-based. On the one side we have literary "artists" and on the other we have literary "workers." (p.3) The workers' produce is separated from that of the artists and as a result is not entitled to (or in Haut's thinking, spared from) literary criticism. The workers accept their position for two reasons: steady pay and the promise of "mass readership." Haut thinks this felt dangerous, even subversive at the time, because of the potential for people

outside the purview of the "educated middle class" to have a genre of their own in the paperback original. (p.5) This emphasis on how the work was being consumed rather than how it was conceived intellectually points to the significance of the terms of a transaction between parties (writer and reader) rather than the structure of a dialogue.

Pulp fiction was certainly popular before the Second World War, before paperbacks took over where the magazines left off, and one story of the origins of the pulp magazine most associated with the hardboiled genre, The Black Mask, later known simply as Black Mask, illustrates this bias perfectly. H.L. Mencken actually bought The Black Mask in 1920, which was at the time an undistinguished detective story magazine, and then sold it at a huge profit in less than a year. He did what he perceived as distasteful work to raise capital to support his "highbrow" magazine The Smart Set. In a letter to Fielding Hudson Garrison in December 1920, he writes:

The Black Mask is a lousy magazine - all detective stories. I hear that Woodrow reads it. Reading mss. for it is a fearful job, but it has kept us alive during a very bad year. The Smart Set makes expenses, but very little else. (Letters of H.L Mencken, Guy Forge, ed., p.216)

It was a different situation for those writers who charged by the word for stories published in "pulp" magazines, so named for the cheap paper on which they were printed. They were well paid if they wrote a great many stories and most of them resorted to publishing under multiple pseudonyms to facilitate the process. One issue of Black Mask could contain several stories by the same writer under different names. It was only after these writers became very well-known that the magazine's would advertise a "brand-name" story such as a Chandler or a John D. MacDonald.

Also very well paid were those who wrote paperback originals for Gold Medal. This group, comprised of many of the masters of the hard-boiled style, made much more money than the "artists" who published only in hardback. The high rate of pay, of course, came with all kinds of editorial indignities, not to mention a certain lack of respect, but according to Marijane Meaker, who wrote for Gold Medal primarily under the pseudonym Vin Packer, it was absolutely worth it. She tells us:

At last, the writer was getting a good break. No longer would hardcover publishers rake off the huge share of paperback royalties; Gold Medal was publishing paperback originals, and paying very nice

advances...a typical paperback printing was 400,000 copies. As a new Gold Medal writer, you might get \$2000 down and \$2000 on delivery of your manuscript...You were paid on print order, a penny a copy...it was a very sweet deal. ("Gold Medal Days," p.341)

This economic incentive had an enormous influence on the development of the *noir*¹ novel. It affected those who did not write for the pulps and the paperbacks as much as those who did, because the style was so pervasive. The packaging - understood as both the literal, rather lurid formats, and the figural aspects of the "pocket" book - made its mark. Consider that before the crime story was considered the stuff of paperback originals hawked at newsstands, drugstores and bus stations, there was a push from publishers to market all kinds of literature in paperback form. The idea was not to publish original literature in that format but to reprint in a more affordable, more portable, and more pleasing format the good literature which would now enlighten a far greater number of Americans than ever before. When Pocket Books began publishing in 1939, the innovation was in the packaging, not the content.

¹ The term *noir* is used interchangeably with hard-boiled in criticism, although there are lots of people who insist that there is a difference. Discussions of this issue can be found on the popular listserv *rara-avis*. The term probably dates from the first use of the term *film noir*, many of which were based on hard-boiled stories.

Now anyone could afford books and after the war began soldiers could take them overseas and seed Europe with American ideas. It was not until later, as paperback publishing evolved into a highly competitive business that the idea of publishing original work in disposable format came around.²

Not all crime writers wrote for the pulps and the paperbacks, of course. Even Raymond Chandler, who started deliberately in the pulps and rose to prominence in Black Mask as Dashiell Hammett's heir, was not exactly a workhorse. He himself never made enough money from his early publishing because he took so long to write a story and completed a total of seven novels in his lifetime, none of which was a paperback original.³ Yet Chandler's stylish innovations in both plot and prose wear the aura of cheap ephemera - a literary experience which is programmed to decay rapidly.

Here we see the *logos* of hard-boiled fiction at work: the physical, tangible state of the media themselves and the ways they were consumed by the public were central to the development of the themes and figures of the literature

² For a comprehensive history of how paperback novels became associated with the hardboiled, see the expanded edition of Geoffrey O'Brien's Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir (1997)

³ Chandler did finally make enough money to live on in Hollywood for studio-sponsored script writing work. His situation was far from unique as James M. Cain, Jim Thompson and David Goodis, among many others all were on the film studio payrolls at one time or another.

itself. The concreteness of the texts as objects and their widget-like reproducibility is reflected in the characterization, setting and plot lines which signify hard-boiled material. The mode of production is translated readily into a mode of figuration in the narratives.

This conceit is found on every level in the fiction, which is why careful, even heavy-handed readings of hard-boiled narratives yield such fascinating rewards. Digging for objects is an especially revealing activity. In Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon, for example, the plot is driven by a murderous quest for a garishly jewel-encrusted sculpture of a black bird. The murder turns out to be very real but the identities of the characters and the authenticity of the object are never verified. A similar uncertainty colors Dorothy B. Hughes The So Blue Marble, whose mysterious shape-shifting characters and elusive magic blue marble are not what they seem. Raymond Chandler also toys with the deadly effects of coveting unique objects in The High Window whose plot concerns a special doubloon which may or may not be the real "one!" And then John D. MacDonald gets into the game by showing the evil let loose by the desire to own a one-of-a-kind postage stamp valued by collectors in The Scarlet Ruse.

Production, however, has no capacity for its objects to wrest power from their maker, to resist becoming what they are intended to be in the grand scheme of things. Figuration, on the other hand, provides an out because its very nature creates doubt about the referentiality of its objects. This applies not just to the more or less tangible objects highlighted above but also to the people represented in the stories and to the places where they live.

What seems at first to be an existential crisis in the literature is revealed as one of mimesis, and what is most at stake in this mimetic crisis is a casting of the individual as a participant in the creation of the reality in which he "swims." It is a reality brought into existence not by the mute proxy implied by alienation so much as by the process of being a part of it. Let us listen, for example, to the peculiar complaint of one of John D. MacDonald's bad guys who has broken out of prison and is planning a devious burglary:

Mullin felt as though he walked on thin places. When he walked across the room he had the curious feeling that the rug was unsupported, that it would sag under his weight and drop him into darkness. He seemed to feel a trembling under his feet. Everything around him

had an odd fragility. The world did not have the substance or purpose he remembered. It had been this way since he had escaped. He found himself touching things to test their hardness and reality. He felt at all times as if, directly behind him, there might come without warning a hideous ear-cracking scream, a great yowl that would collapse everything around him, the way he had heard that a violin can shatter a wine glass. (April Evil, p.129)

In Mullin's cosmos, he is the center from which the real emanates. There is a sense that if he melted into the thin air, he would take the world with him. Although it is tempting to see this as pure self-centeredness, it is worth recognizing this ontology as a critical element of MacDonald's *mise-en-scene*.

Dorothy B. Hughes evokes a similar cosmology in her novel The So Blue Marble. A young actress in New York City is being stalked by two murderous men who appear to be identical twins but one is fair and one has a dark complexion! That this is impossible but also undoubtedly true completely unhinges the young woman who begins to doubt her own ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. How could the freakish twins be identical but not the same?

The young woman Griselda acts like a good philosopher and clings to names as proof of singularity, finding comfort for a time in the knowledge that she is Griselda Satterlee, that the twins are the Montefierrows and that the mild-mannered professor who lives next door is known as "Gig." When she realizes how tenuous and provisional these labels are, Griselda begins to panic. Hughes handles the semiotic question cleverly as the referentiality of these signifiers erodes in turn for quite different reasons.

Confused also by her younger sister's claim to not know the twins after Griselda saw them together, Griselda is hardly reassured when her older sister explains the situation thus:

"She said she didn't know them, you know..."

"Yes, I know."

"But it seems she did. She just didn't know our pronunciation. Isn't that amusing? The Italian of their name is so different. She told me what it was."

(p.39)

The explanation just makes things worse for Griselda, but the distinction in pronunciation is important because it echoes the way in which the twins themselves are known to correspond - identical but not the same.

Representing the real and determining authority often compete as disciplines in the hard-boiled world. The work of both the hero-detective and the criminal depend on a functional ontology, one whose rules allow them to perform their roles correctly. There is, however, a built-in escape from determinacy. In much of hard-boiled fiction, interpretation is not simply the means to solve the mystery. Rather, its often stymied and pained expression is the main event of the novel.

This was a huge departure from earlier models of detective fiction. Although Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin was mainly concerned with the power of interpretation, he is an armchair detective, detached and unaffected personally by the events he analyzes. Sherlock Holmes is far more active physically in his pursuit of the solution to a mystery; nevertheless, he is often not visible to the reader throughout the stories and the narration is performed by Watson who rarely understands what Holmes plans to do. Finally, Agatha Christie's detectives were the media for a disembodied interpretation which was supposedly available to all takers.

Raymond Chandler thought this a very unwise enterprise and this explains why he became the most sophisticated if not the most productive hard-boiled

writer. His handling of this delicate hermeneutic crisis epitomizes the hard-boiled mode of operation. Although Chandler found it annoying in a Christie when the murder could not be solved by the reader, he was more irritated and bored by the long list of conditions, coincidences and circumstances which led to the final scene in which all was revealed by the smarty-pants detective. He learned something from these novels which he explains in a 1940 letter to George Harmon Coxe, a fellow Black Mask writer. Chandler gives his impressions of And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie and then concludes:

...I'm very glad I read the book because it finally and for all time settled a question in my mind that had at least some lingering doubt attached to it. Whether it is possible to write a strictly honest mystery of the classic type. It isn't. To get the complication you fake the clues, the timing, the play of coincidence, assume certainties where only 50 per cent chances exist at most. To get the surprise murderer you fake character, which hits me hardest of all, because I have a sense of character. (p.17, Selected Letters)

An "honest mystery" in Chandler's view would be more plausible but more importantly would place more emphasis on the problem of knowing what is real and what is true.

Chandler's knight-errant certainly had a great deal of trouble trusting any one version of events or projected personal identity. In fact, the "sense of character" Chandler claims for himself is what truly distinguishes the Marlowe novels from earlier detective novels. This is because in the life of Philip Marlowe, interpretation is a problem, not a security blanket. Chandler's plots, which are notoriously hard to follow, unfold as Marlowe's own desire to understand what is happening to him grows stronger. There is nothing reassuring about Marlowe's need to understand what he is being faced with moment to moment, and characterization is particularly significant because his ability to "read" others is key to his survival as well as the revelation we hurtle towards as the plot winds on.

The solution to the mystery depends not on the plot but upon the hermeneutic skills of one person - Marlowe - who has a tendency to be emotional and often absurdly sentimental. Interpretation for him is not solid ground but rather a fragile hold on reality, a way to keep sane in a world determined to rob him of his clearsightedness.

In The Little Sister, Marlowe sinks into a bitter interior monologue which lasts several pages and has the refrain "You're not human tonight." The following excerpt is the most wrenching:

Who am I cutting my throat for this time? A blonde with sexy eyes and too many door keys? A girl from Manhattan, Kansas? I don't know. All I know is that something isn't what it seems and the old tired but always reliable hunch tells me that if the hand is played the way it is dealt the wrong person is going to lose the pot. Is that my business? Well, what is my business? Do I know? Did I ever know? Let's not go into that. You're not human tonight, Marlowe. Maybe I never was or ever will be. Maybe I'm an ectoplasm with a private license. Maybe we all get like this in the cold half-lit world where always the wrong thing happens and never the right.

(p.89)

Marlowe interprets; therefore, he exists; yet he lives in constant fear of erasure, of being only a specter of life in Los Angeles, a makeshift character in a drama whose subject is always a life in which he can never truly play a part.

Marlowe is often found experiencing such feelings of marginalization and exclusion. When women make passes at him, for example, it is always - in his mind anyway - because they are substituting him for someone whom they cannot have. It is tempting to view Marlowe's attitude towards the women he meets as a form of misogyny, perhaps

because he has almost no sexual adventures; however, his response to his only lover's proposal of marriage is telling. He refuses Linda Loring after they've slept together and explains to the reader, "She wasn't in love with me and we both knew it. She wasn't crying over me." (The Long Goodbye, p.299) After she leaves, he misses her and feels terrible; then he "pulled the bed to pieces," a somewhat violent act which recalls the way he responds in the first novel to finding the rabid nymphomaniac Carmen Sternwood in his bed. Earlier that evening, he declined her older sister's open invitation because he became suspicious of her being too "easy to take." He knew there was an ulterior motive and he himself couldn't stand to feel used. After he explains to Carmen that she does not care for him and is just being naughty lying naked in his bed, he gets her to leave with some difficulty and then he says he "tore the bed to pieces savagely" (p.159) as if trying to erase her image. He is tempted by both Anne Riordan in Farewell, My Lovely and Eileen Wade in The Long Goodbye. The first he implies is simply lonely and undersexed; the second, a homicidal maniac, gets him mixed up in her head with her former lover whose initials match his. None of these women wants him as himself, the one and only Philip Marlowe, and none stands a chance.

Marlowe's alienation is useful, however sad it is, because it creates a powerful tension in the novels. The reader must question why, according to Chandler's formula, Marlowe can be a discrete individual with a "personal conscience" if the other players are stripped of dimension, their actions as "dames" or "grifters" determined by their predetermined roles in the melodrama. Chandler's answer is to provide an out for his characters by having them turn out to be fakes, rarely the people we at first think they are. While this is nothing new in detective fiction, in Chandler's fiction the characters' ability to develop a moral consciousness is not eroded by their deceit but rather their opportunities are multiplied.

The vacuousness of the characterization can easily be misunderstood as a barrenness, or a blankness, where nothing can take hold, but quite the opposite is true. These characters are differentiated to start out with as players in a melodrama. They have a specific role to play. Chandler then gives them the opportunity to de-differentiate, to become, in a sense, progenitor characters whose possibilities for action are limitless. In order to act, however, these characters must re-differentiate, stepping firmly into the roles made for action. This dance of dissociation and identification is performed regularly

throughout the seven novels and is an important feature of the contemporary private eye fiction inspired by Chandler. It is compelling evidence that the hard-boiled world is not a nihilist landscape but rather a creative, generative space.

It is generative because the more detached from reality the characters become, the more plastic their identities are, the more chance there is for them to play a positive role. Like the American language, the people are hardly constrained by what already exists, yet they know how to exploit the currency of "types." So it is not surprising that how well the characters manage to "spend" this currency becomes an issue in the fiction right from the start.

One way in which this issue is presented has to do with the great tension in much of the fiction between the desire to be grounded in a specific place and the equally fervent desire to lead an unfettered, itinerant existence. This is, of course, reflected in the situation of the hard-boiled novel itself. Being a part of a school can seem confining yet the desire to break free of the generic always puts one back into the reach of the referential subtext defining the ethos of the storyline. For or against, it is all relative, and taking advantage of the situation means being able to

spend both sides of the coin at once and coming away with something of value, not just a shadow of a self.

A crisis presents itself as the knight-errant becomes complicit in a picaresque worldview which challenges his own idealism. One could say that the knight-errant values the transformative power of language while the *picaro* puts stock in the linearity of narrative. The trick, of course, is to retain the light poetry brings to dark places without rendering those dark places insubstantial or dreamlike. Hard-boiled fiction seems to try to reconcile these wishes but as Philip Marlowe puts it, what can he do when he finds himself "a part of the nastiness" he has been hired to expunge?

Sorting this out is challenging, especially because hard-boiled characters typically awaken - called to life like a shapeless golem - in the space of the narratives they inhabit. So it follows that by the very gesture with which they try to deracinate themselves, to be more original and more spontaneous than that which came before them, the writer and his subjects become ever more firmly planted in the gardens in which they grow. The irony of the many small acts of resistance thus inspired is not lost on the characters whose struggle to distinguish themselves within the broad strokes with which they are drawn often

seems hopeless. Yet, as the genre writers know, the limits themselves provide for a creative freedom unimagined outside the garden walls.

John D. MacDonald seems to have hit upon this irony best with the living situation of Travis McGee, his beach bum Don Quixote. Although McGee lives permanently on a houseboat which he won in a poker match, he occupies the same slip in the same marina throughout the years represented in the series. He does take a few trips on *The Busted Flush* during the course of his mad adventures, but apparently Travis thinks there is no place like home and home is slip F-18, Bahia Mar, Fort Lauderdale.⁴

The significance of this rootedness may be lost until the reader realizes that for McGee, the houseboat is a figure which not only represents a means of identification for a rather lonely type but it also represents quite literally capital for McGee. Travis McGee keeps all of his money, which is in cash only, in a secret hidey-hole on the boat. Since McGee makes his money as a self-styled "salvage consultant," recovering money for those poor souls who have been wronged by evildoers but for one reason or another cannot legally pursue the question, he relies on his crude

⁴ Adoring fans show up to this day at the real Bahia Mar to see slip F-18 which is adorned with a plaque honoring MacDonald. The author never actually lived in Fort Lauderdale, preferring the less developed west coast of Florida.

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I don't *like* all this! My God, when it got so you couldn't rent a car or check into a good hotel without a credit card, I had to sign up. I had to have a bank account to get the credit cards. I keep getting into more and more computers all the time. Boat papers, city taxes, bank records, credit records, IRS, army records, census records, phone company records...God damn it, I feel like I'm getting more and more entangled. Like walking down a dark corridor into cobweb after cobweb.

(p.140)

Meyer, who is a Sancho Panza-like sidekick if there ever was one, reassures our disappointed knight that his anonymity is not lost. Rather, Meyer explains, the dispersal of McGee's and all modern Americans' identity across so many planes amounts to a kind of bureaucratic hedge against ever being found:

Think of it this way, Travis. With each new computer that goes into service, your identity becomes more and more diffuse and unreal. Right now today, if every man, woman, and child were put to work ten hours a day reading computer printouts, just scanning the alphabetical and numerical output of the printers, they could cover about one third of what is being produced. Recycling of computer printout paper is a giant

industry. We're all sinking into the oblivion of profusion, and one day soon we will all be gone, with no way to trace us. (p.141)

According to Meyer, this is good if you value privacy above all else and it is obviously great for someone who does a form of detective work which requires him to assume false identities from time to time.

McGee's own identity is often contrasted with the tenuousness of the characters he portrays in his line of work. It becomes clear after a while in many of the novels that what makes Travis McGee a legitimate knight-errant, fighting on the side of the angels, is solid only in relation to its flip-side, the traffic in disguise, impersonation, subterfuge and pretense which serve his goals as a salvager of capital which has been stolen from its rightful heir. McGee is portrayed as unflinchingly authentic even as he pretends to be everything he is not. Even the capital as a literary figure in the stories is often ironically frozen in place, unable to either express itself or unwilling to render itself vulnerable to the uses people would make of it, the transformations they would demand it perform.

Travis McGee's hidey-hole stash is one such figure, but one of the most interesting of these comes from an earlier

novel. In April Evil, an old man in small Florida town keeps his substantial fortune in cash in a safe in his house. He is a retired doctor who knows the town's populace intimately. After suffering the tragic loss of his wife and child, he has retreated into his house to live a quiet but not completely joyless life. One of the things which seems to give him the most pleasure is the conceit of having locked up his capital in cash, effectively eschewing a role in the town's economy. He explains to his young friend why he keeps the money in a safe like this:

My dear, you can call it affectation. And a gesture of defiance. I treated their bodies for years, the people in this town. I knew their bodies well. The laboring lungs and the overworked hearts. The cancers and the infections. There is something impressive and awe-inspiring about the resiliency of the human body. I couldn't treat their bodies without learning about their minds, the way they thought. Bitterness and envy and greed. Dirty little machinations to gain this advantage and that. And their sorry little god was and is money.

(p.41)

So Dr. Tomlin "imprisoned the god," as he puts it, and lives off capital exclusively, earning no interest from his stash. What is remarkable about this gesture is the way in

which the old doctor becomes identified as the owner of the god the people worship. Even as he seeks to defuse its power by not letting it grow and spread like the diseases he tried to control in his professional life, it comes to define him and to overwhelm any trace of his former identity as a member of the community. Eventually, Dr. Tomlin becomes the victim of a gang of calculating criminals who break into his house hoping to get away with all of the money. If one were to read this story as a parable, then one could infer that locking up a god is itself a god-like act which undermines the very thing one is trying to accomplish. If we read the parable as speaking about figuration in a broader sense, then the lesson is indeed intriguing.

This kind of story, a story about the power of figuration, and the struggle to control the process, reveals the heart of the hard-boiled plan to triumph over the nothingness of everyday life. And there is something about the parable as form which expresses relationships in the fiction unlike any other device. Perhaps this is because the parable is essentially a juxtaposition rather than a substitution. It often surprises readers of mystery fiction, for example, to what extent hard-boiled crime fiction deemphasizes its plots. One would not go so far as

to say that the plots are irrelevant but one would do well to realize that all of the musings and speeches, the plants and the rocks so vividly conjured, the car rides as well as Marlowes "clocks,"⁶ contribute definitively to the ideas the hard-boiled writer is committing to the page. The ever present parables, then, demand attention not because they are essential to the plot's more or less linear progression but because they illustrate the moral principles at stake in the hard-boiled world without attempting to enact those principles. A parabola, after all, is a shape made by drawing a line in an arc between two spaces; it defines the relation, the places where the twain shall meet. A parable is nothing special if it exists in the absence of a moral principle to which it can refer. A juxtaposition exists so that one may compare and that comparison will ideally yield study, interest and most importantly critical judgment.

We have seen how figuration in crime fiction provides an opportunity for creativity in characterization and role-playing, often in the service of moral behavior, but could we go further and presume that figuration is itself a process which depends upon critical judgment, itself a prerequisite for morality? Could the knight and the *picaro* be united in a parabolic relationship which speaks of the

⁶ The designs on his socks of which he is so proud. See the first page of The Big Sleep.

challenges involved in representing humanity's dark side without suggesting that one mode precludes the other? Since parables are figures which stand up for the issues they seek to represent rather than standing in for them, the embedding of parables in crime fiction, in the narratives and also in the relations between figures, implies that one can entertain theoretical questions about reproducibility which can inspire rather than deflate us.

Hammett, who was fond of embedding a hermeneutic "key" to his fiction within his tightly plotted narratives, suggests we consider this question with his Flitcraft parable in The Maltese Falcon. Seemingly out of the blue, Sam Spade tells his young client Brigid O'Shaughnessy the story of Flitcraft, a man whom he was hired to find some years back. It seems Flitcraft, a run-of-the-mill successful businessman of the middle class, was walking to lunch one day when a falling beam narrowly missed him as it crashed to the sidewalk. Spade explains that Flitcraft "felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works." (p.335) After lunch, Flitcraft decides to abandon his well-ordered existence and his perfect family at random. He disappears and by the time Spade finds him on behalf of his "widow" who wants him declared dead for insurance purposes, he has readjusted to a well-ordered

existence, owning a business and leading a very similar middle-class family life of the comfortable and predictable variety. The man had no regrets and did not perceive the irony of his situation. Spade suggests that the man "adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling." (p.336) The story ends there, quite abruptly, and The Maltese Falcon goes on as if uninterrupted by Spade's parable.

What are Brigid and the reader supposed to make of this story within a story? Does it clearly illustrate some moral principle or is it a lament about the futility of meaningful action in a random universe? It is, after all, a story about a pattern which is broken and then slowly, insidiously and irremediably reestablished. Perhaps Hammett is implying that railing against a generic pattern by instituting a detour is not the creative path it might seem. Interrupting the rhythm of everyday life yielded not insight but more blindness for Flitcraft, who was now even less cognizant of the consequences of his actions in his business and emotional worlds. The Flitcraft parable is rarely read as a lesson concerning a moral consciousness. More often, it is read as an existential lesson about man's inability to effectively influence the amoral dramas of his

own life story. The Maltese Falcon, however, is a story about doing the right thing despite one's baser instincts. It is also a story about a passion for a singularity - an object which supposedly exists as one but whose power grows weak as multiple copies of the "one" put the existence of the original in doubt. The falcon is a literary object in the story. The thing which actually shows up in the novel is revealed as a fake and the "real" falcon is known only through stories. The despicable criminals in the narrative are the sorry victims of figuration, which has cast them out with a referent they will pursue forever but never fix. Like Flitcraft, the weasely international criminals never catch on to the irony. That is our job as readers who are invited to develop a consciousness about figuration without fleeing its "dangerous liaisons."

Of course, there have always been social experiments bent on infusing everyday life in the modern metropolis with a moral consciousness. The Paris Commune and urban renewal are examples of such, but these failed to redeem the cities with their psychogeographical strategies. The hard-boiled moralist succeeds in a different way: he transforms the mean streets themselves into the vehicles of salvation. Rather than interrupting the flow of traffic, he becomes a part of it without giving himself up to its

amoral, blinded rhythms. He preserves, after all, an interiority which requires judgment, if not justice itself.

A Time to Act

The idea that hard-boiled crime fiction was supposed to be morally instructive and uplifting may seem absurd today as we are currently awash in amoral interpretations of its recycled themes and figures, but in the early days of Black Mask, it was explicitly so. Joseph "Cap" Shaw, intrepid editor of the famous magazine, insisted that this was the case when he was criticized for publishing a serialization of Hammett's novel The Glass Key, a story in which a gangster is the sympathetic hero. Obviously offended by the notion that he was contributing to an aggrandization or glamorization of criminals, Shaw states unequivocally:

Black Mask never has and never will make money or attempt to make money by appealing to the appetite for stories which present crime and criminals in a prepossessing and alluring light: our policy is and always will be the exact opposite - to appeal to those who hate crime and criminals and who get pleasure from reading stories in which they can identify themselves with the detective or other officers who are solving crimes and capturing criminals. (Letter to the editor, Writer's Digest, 1930)

Shaw seems to think that profiteering by pandering to such instincts is an even worse crime than simply allowing the writers the license to make the call themselves. This attitude does explain, in any case, why James M. Cain, a contemporary of Hammett and Chandler, never published in the pulps and especially not Cap Shaw's Black Mask.

What it fails to explain, however, is why one should think of crime stories like Cain's, which are narrated by or focus on the movements of a criminal, as less interesting to those who identify with the detective heroes in the more traditional stories. The novels written by James M. Cain, Patricia Highsmith, Dorothy B. Hughes and David Goodis mainly starred characters with whom one fears to be identified. But, of course, it could happen if life took one on a series of bad turns. That implication, always just barely under the surface in these crime stories, contributes to their charged moral atmosphere. The consequences of having made the wrong choices in life are paraded in front of the readers who presumably recoil from the irremediable evil the characters embody in their actions. Yet it is obvious that these same readers, as the writers know very well, are those who see themselves in the dark brooding thoughts and in the obsessions and compulsions depicted so vividly in these characters' mental

states. That, too, is a kind of pleasure, one which Cap Shaw oddly does not acknowledge.

The difference between the two types of identification makes it easy to divide the literature into two camps but in reality all of hard-boiled crime fiction turns upon moral questions about action and responsibility. And the knight and the *picaro* coexist in both the debased dreams of the detective hero and the tragic longings of the itinerant n'er-do-well who walks the same mean streets in hope and fear. In both, it is the bid to reconcile these ways of representing themselves as well as the objects of their desire, whether to redeem or revile, that drives them forward in their anxious adventures. For Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and John D. MacDonald, the detective hero struggles with a self-improvement program bent on discovering the secret to a decisive moral character. Deep uncertainties and self-loathing complicate their attempts to establish themselves as exemplary figures. For James M. Cain, Patricia Highsmith, Dorothy B. Hughes and David Goodis, the fallen men and women who animate their nightmare scenarios struggle as well. For their people, a sense of self, which they very much desire to cultivate, is at odds with the need to escape responsibility for the evil acts they authorize. Identity is a dangerous game for them

and their attempts to secure its rewards without suffering its consequences lead to dramatic tricks of representation, some of which are more appropriate for romance than the picaresque. But they, like the detective heroes, are beholden to both and thus they tear desperately at the very fabric from which they try to piece together a coherent existence, a consciousness without a conscience.

That was not a concern of Dashiell Hammett's, a writer who actually was a detective; rather, the important thing to him was that his fictional detectives, whether the nameless Continental Op or the private eye Sam Spade, act realistically. Despite this bias towards accurate representation, of which the other detective story writers felt blissfully free, what Hammett created in his narratives was a literary world ruled by figuration and not by history. Often, the moral codes by which his stalwart detectives abide seem unrealistic in their artificial strength, their imperviousness. The people seem to chafe within the confines of their clearly delineated roles, yet they never truly resist or trespass; nevertheless, Hammett did succeed in implying that this was an uncomfortable and often anguished position in which to find oneself. The scenes in which this mood is represented are some of the most uneventful yet at the same time most violent of hard-

boiled fiction. They are Hammett's inimitable legacy to this fiction.

The most famous example of this, and perhaps the most influential for writers who followed, is Sam Spade's position on turning over Brigid O'Shaughnessy for murdering his partner in The Maltese Falcon. He tries to explain to her why he has to do it despite being in love with her. Spade puts it into terms of what is "natural" for a detective:

I'm a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go. It can be done, all right, and sometimes it is done, but it's not the natural thing. (p.438)

Later on Spade's secretary, with whom he has a close relationship, expresses her horror at what he has done. He tells her "Your Sam's a detective." (p.440) This reminder does nothing to console her, and she recoils at his touch. He seems surprised by the rejection and the novel ends abruptly as his dead partner's wife, who is also in love with him, is about to enter the room. It is clear that Spade suffers for his loyalty to his role. The implication is that such suffering, while painful and demoralizing, is also the price one must pay to maintain any semblance of

integrity. A lack of such integrity, Spade suggests, is possible but it is both unnatural and bad for business.

Hammett might as well be critiquing the crime fiction industry and it is easy to read The Maltese Falcon as a thinly veiled critique of detective fiction in particular. Perhaps Hammett was as concerned as "Cap" Shaw about the inevitable direction in which crime fiction would evolve as he has Spade warn Brigid "Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be." (p.439) Hammett's characters sacrifice much for upholding the values of their profession, of their proper function in the particular type of narrative in which they exist. The implication, which we see in the fiction and may identify as a "tough guy" quality, is that personal motivation is always suspect and not trustworthy as a moral compass in the "business" of life in America. One might also read into Hammett's critique a cynical view of the worker's capacity for free will in a capitalist system which continually undermines his opportunities for self-expression.

Hammett's views on genre fiction are not as famous as his leftist political views, but he is quite well-known for having written several groundbreaking detective novels and then abandoning his own fiction for many years. He was much admired in Hollywood writer circles for having refused to

name names during the notorious witch hunts of the McCarthy era and for choosing to go to prison rather than comply with the request for information. His detective-heroes also seem to prefer to suffer the consequences rather than compromise the principles by which they must live. The only catch is that they have not chosen these roles for themselves and the moments in which they feel temptation to escape their confines are poignant, perhaps the most dramatically tense and emotional moments in the stories, whose terse and formulaic narrative style does not allow for much bubbling over of sentiment.

A good example of this phenomenon is found at the end of The Glass Key, a novel largely concerned with the responsibilities of friendship in a world in which everyone is taking advantage of everyone else. The gangster, Ned Beaumont, who becomes the sympathetic hero of the book, ends up alienated from the underworld which was once his home. His best friend, who ran the local political machine, was dating a senator's daughter to gain political advantage. Now that it is all over between them, Ned is leaving town with the senator's daughter in tow. He does not have to reveal this bit of information to his friend Paul Madvig when he comes to say goodbye, to see if anything in the friendship is worth salvaging. But he does,

calling her out of the bedroom, and what results is a painful confrontation between the two lovers, both of whom are hurt by Beaumont's set-up. When Madvig leaves, however, Beaumont does not take the woman in his arms in a conventional romantic ending. Rather, he "stared fixedly at the door." (p.588) Perhaps Ned Beaumont is feeling what Sam Spade expresses when he tells Brigid again why he will not save her life by shielding her from justice. He says:

I won't because all of me wants to-wants to say to the hell with the consequences and do it-and because-God damn you-you've counted on that with me the same as you counted on that with the others. (p.439)

Beaumont and Spade are both charged with a romantic mission, to bring some order and some honor back to places where the darkness threatens to overwhelm. Neither one of them labors under the illusion that he arrives at that with a pure heart, because it is not their hearts that keep them pure; rather it is their jobs and it is the way they are supposed to act "naturally," according to type.

An interpretation of the dream from which the title of The Glass Key is derived gives us more information about what we are to infer from such situations in Hammett's fiction. In the novel, the senator's daughter Janet Henry tells Ned Beaumont that she has had a dream about the two

of them. In the dream, they wander, starving, until they encounter a locked house. They see tables loaded with food through the windows and wonder how to get in. Then, they think to check under the doormat and find a key. They open the door but have failed to notice hundreds of snakes slithering about on the floor. Then, Janet says, they climb on to the roof while the snakes leave the house. Then:

We lay holding our breath on the roof until the last of the hundreds and hundreds of them had slithered out of sight into the forest. Then we jumped down and ran inside and locked the door and ate and ate and ate and I woke up sitting up in bed clapping my hands and laughing. (p.563)

Ned Beaumont tells Janet Henry that he thinks she is making it up, that her version of the dream could not be true because:

It starts out a nightmare and winds up something else and all the dreams I ever had about food ended before I got a chance to do any actual eating. (p.563)

Janet is nonplussed but later on in the story, when things have gone very badly for them, Janet confesses:

In that dream-I didn't tell you-the key was glass and shattered in our hands just as we got the door open,

because the lock was stiff and we had to force it.

(p.586)

She tells him that the snakes overwhelmed them and she "woke up screaming." (p.586) Typical of Hammett, he does not allow the characters to explain this obvious parable. It is, nevertheless, an important "key" to the meaning of the story as a whole and to Hammett's ideas about detective fiction.

The first thing a person has to know, Hammett suggests here, is that one has to know in what kind of story one exists. Blending elements of nightmare and wish-fulfillment, as in Janet's recounting, is not credible. But Ned Beaumont is sensitive to the fact that Janet would like to imagine that things are not as bad as they are, that somehow through a clever interpretation or a rearranging of the facts her fears will remain unfounded. Hammett may also be suggesting here that detective fiction must remain true to life if it is to be taken seriously. Before Hammett came along, of course, verisimilitude in detective fiction was not much of an issue, although the pleasures derived from the classic type did depend somewhat on the idea that the outlandish events and coincidences certainly could have happened. Perhaps. Hammett thought that people writing detective stories should at least have some knowledge of

the subject. He wrote in a review of one of S.S. Van Dine's stories, "The Benson Murder Case," that the detective Philo Vance's:

...exposition of the technique employed by a gentleman shooting another gentleman who sits six feet in front of him deserves a place in a *How to be a detective by mail course*." (p. 159)

The glass key version of Janet Henry's dream is more disturbing and also more in keeping with the nightmare genre. Hammett, too, kept things and people going along in the genre into which they were cast by their creator. The unbelievably bleak resolutions of his stories and novels remind us that this is never easy, even though it has to be done.

In the same vein, but with a more explicitly romantic sensibility, Raymond Chandler saw that there was a problem with the realism required of detective fiction, even though it was something important to strive for in a genre so often demeaned and debased by its practitioners. He maintains the following in his essay "The Simple Art of Murder":

If the mystery novel is at all realistic (which it very seldom is) it is written in a certain spirit of

detachment; otherwise nobody but a psychopath would want to write it or read it. (p.2)

The moral dilemmas born of this "certain spirit of detachment" are at the heart of this unintellectual enterprise with a high-class agenda. In Chandler's stories, detachment is a way to resist alienation, to preserve insight so that, paradoxically, when it is time to act, to be, according to Philip Marlowe "a part of the nastiness," one's moral character might retain the force necessary to do the right thing. This sensibility infuses the characters, the tangled plots, the livid, overgrown settings and Chandler's theories of genre with a sense of confused urgency coupled with inertia; it is also the inexhaustible subject of what Chandler likes to call the "not very fragrant world" of the private eye.

For Chandler, this rhetoric of acuity sharpened by distance must have been a truly fascinating subject because it so clearly reflected his cultural situation as an American who was raised and educated in England by his Irish mother after his American father abandoned the family. The writer came back to the United States mostly because he could, and out of economic necessity, and though he lived his life in America as an American from that point on, he often confessed to feeling like an interested

outsider. An outsider, of course, cannot be implicated in the sins of the insiders he watches from afar, yet Chandler never tried to escape complicity by masquerading as a non-American. He was simply both American and British at the same time. When he needed to act as an American acts, he did so without question.

The mechanics of this cultural switching out of identities is subtle and confers on the "switcher" great advantages. Raymond Chandler claimed similar advantages for his brand of genre fiction, a literature which was simultaneously common and arcane. Perhaps this is why Chandler was always wary of literary critics, especially the ones who would tell him that he was good enough to write a "real" novel. At the same time, he found it irritating to be presented as a writer with a social rather than a literary agenda. In a letter to Dale Warren, written in the wake of the publication of his essay "The Simple Art of Murder" in The Atlantic Monthly, Chandler protests:

I didn't really care what kind of story I wrote; I wrote melodrama because when I looked around me it was the only kind of writing I saw that was relatively honest and yet was not trying to put over somebody's party line. So now there are guys talking about prose and other guys telling me I have a social conscience.

P. Marlowe has as much social conscience as a horse.

He has a personal conscience, which is an entirely different matter. (Gardiner and Walker, p.214)

Philip Marlowe, Chandler's detective-hero, is without a doubt an empathetic and sentimental character, even in his tough moments, and Chandler does not mean here that Marlowe is oblivious or uncaring. The character exhibits throughout the seven novels in which he lives a powerful and unshakable "personal conscience" in his one-on-one relationships, yet Marlowe's attitude towards the amorphous masses is less sympathetic.

As Chandler explains towards the end of the same letter to Warren:

There was even a bird who informed me I could write a good proletarian novel; in my limited world there is no such animal, and if there were, I am the last mind in the world to like it, being by tradition and long study a complete snob. P. Marlowe and I do not despise the upper classes because they take baths and have money; we despise them because they are phoney. (p.215)

What Marlowe finds "phoney" about the upper classes is not their privilege, which is authentic because of their money and position, but rather their myth-making about their own origins. In The Long Goodbye, Marlowe and the reader are

treated to the millionaire Harlan Potter's critique of a world run amok with moral decay. Potter's philosophizing is worth quoting at length; he tells Marlowe:

Man has always been a venal animal. The growth of populations, the huge costs of wars, the incessant pressure of confiscatory taxation - all these things make him more and more venal. The average man is tired and scared, and a tired, scared man can't afford ideals. He has to buy food for his family. In our time we have seen a shocking decline in both public and private morals. You can't expect quality from people whose lives are a subjection to a lack of quality. You can't have quality with mass production. You don't want it because it lasts too long. So you substitute styling, which is a commercial swindle intended to produce artificial obsolescence. Mass production couldn't sell its goods next year unless it made what it sold this year look unfashionable a year from now. We have the whitest kitchens and the most shining bathrooms in the world. But in the lovely white kitchen the average American housewife can't produce a meal fit to eat, and the lovely shining bathroom is mostly a receptacle for deodorants, laxatives, sleeping pills, and the products of that confidence

racket called the cosmetic industry. We make the finest packages in the world, Mr. Marlowe. The stuff inside is mostly junk. (p.191)

Potter's attempt to distance himself and those he calls "people of my kind" from the poor yahoos who are the victims of planned obsolescence and "confiscatory taxation" is treated suspiciously by Marlowe. He gives Potter his analysis:

You don't like the way the world is going so you use what power you have to close off a private corner to live in as near as possible to the way you remember people lived fifty years ago before the age of mass production. You've got a hundred million dollars and all it has bought you is a pain in the neck. (p.192)

Yet we hear Chandler's own voice in Potter's earnest speech and get an idea of the complexity of the author's view of his role as a popular writer who could speak through his various characters and scenarios, especially interesting here as The Long Goodbye is the story of a successful and self-loathing alcoholic writer of popular fiction who is murdered by his wife and more indirectly his New York publishers.

Marlowe's excoriation of the isolated rich man parallels Chandler's critique of the detective genre. In

both corners, Chandler implies delusions of innocence and also the chance to act honorably and have great influence over a world in trouble. His comments in "The Simple Art of Murder" have had a lasting impression on private-eye fiction, especially the idea that the hero of this fiction could redeem the cities for the people, if only in spirit. Chandler describes the situation quite beautifully as follows:

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man. 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 the world and a good enough man for any world.

(p.20)

Chandler goes on to explain that this detective must also be poor, because otherwise why would he bother being a detective at all? He also describes the man as lonely, proud, witty and fluent in contemporary argot which emphasizes his commonness or ability to pass as such. It is a striking portrait, especially the final reflection with which Chandler concludes the essay. He suggests:

If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in. (p.21)

One might say the same about Chandler's stories.

If we are to understand redemption as a kind of exchange or transaction between parties in which one corrupted group is absolved of responsibility by the sacrifice of the redeemer, then this portrait of the private eye makes perfect sense. It is important that he is an individual without social ties; his separateness, his detachment from others, is what preserves his power to redeem in a world which will remain endlessly, eternally evil and diseased. Should he have any ideas about social change or politics to the rescue, his tenure would be greatly limited and his activities thwarted by his myopic perspective on people and their problems. Perhaps a "personal conscience" provides the necessary acuity whereas

a "social conscience" clouds the insights the detective and the reader gain from the unfolding narrative. Yet Marlowe is obviously in a paradoxical situation at all times, operating both as the redeemer who will make the streets safe for society and the lonely, idiosyncratic knight whose quests always end in frustration.

One of the reasons this latter-day Don Quixote fails in his quests is that he is often fooled by the way people speak. He is unusually perceptive of people's choice of words, even their diction and inflection, yet sometimes he is duped into thinking that they are represented faithfully by their speech. Marlowe should know better, but in The Long Goodbye, he goes out of his way to help his new friend Terry Lennox leave the country illegally because he appreciates the British patterns of his syntax and because he has always been polite(!) The first time the detective meets Lennox he has to drive him home because the drunk Lennox has been dumped by his date outside an expensive nightclub. Since the pitiful guy passes out, Marlowe decides to bring him to his own house first to try to sober him up. When his houseguest wakes up, he is unfailingly gracious and Marlowe asks him "You English?" He replies "I've lived there. I wasn't born there." (p.4) In this case, Marlowe is responding to the phrasing and vocabulary

available to Lennox, not something as recognizable as an accent. Why Marlowe prefers British English is unknown, yet it is obvious that this increases his regard for the man he has dragged home to sober up and send on his way. Chandler, of course, lived in England but was not born there, so this characterization of Terry Lennox echoes his own vagueness about being English.

Chandler implies in his characterizations that moral behavior is a choice and an opportunity always available to those who desire both its rewards and responsibilities. As Marlowe has this to say about Terry Lennox once he knows a great deal more about him and regrets having fallen for his act: "He was the kind of guy who always wants to do the right thing but somehow ends up doing something else." (p.306). Later on when he realizes he has spoken these words to the "real" Terry Lennox, also known as Paul Marston, now sitting in his office playing another role altogether (it is dizzying) transformed by plastic surgery into a flamboyant Mexican known as Senor Maioranos, Marlowe admits to him directly:

For a long time I couldn't figure you at all. You had nice ways and nice qualities, but there was something wrong. You had standards and you lived up to them, but they were personal. They had no relation to any kind of

ethics or scruples. You were a nice guy because you had a nice nature. But you were just as happy with mugs or hoodlums as with honest men. Provided the hoodlums spoke fairly good English and had fairly acceptable table manners. You're a moral defeatist. I think maybe the war did it and again I think maybe you were born that way. (p.310)

Marlowe's disgust with his friend (the only friend Marlowe ever has throughout the novels) has a tragic quality; he remains confused as to Terry's ability to choose an ethical life despite the damage done by the war or by the accident of his birth. Terry's "personal" standards were not the sort that would make the world "a safe place to live in," like those Chandler's idealized hero possesses.

Chandler's understanding of genre fiction is built upon a similar paradox. The fact that the form of detective fiction can be reproduced endlessly without betraying (or escaping) its essential formula inspired him as much as it frustrated him. Chandler admired Dashiell Hammett for his realism and originality yet even of his work Chandler remarks: "With all this he did not wreck the formal detective story. Nobody can; production demands a form that can be produced." (*Simple* p.17) It is this question about the function of literary genre which Chandler raises when

he announces that he chose melodrama for its honesty. This, we presume, is an honesty in terms of faithful reproducibility of type, not a mimetic honesty. Chandler does not choose melodrama for its realism but rather for its definitively established form - one concerned with the universe of human emotions and the limited set of circumstances in which these stock sensations are to be produced and set into motion. Chandler acknowledges that it is impossible to "wreck" a genre, yet he holds out the possibility that a tired old formula can "acquire the power" to communicate a fresh critical perspective. Chandler's conflation of the problem of humanity at a moral crossroads and literary expression stymied by the nexus of form and content is a startling confirmation of Chandler's suspicion that literature may just matter after all.

Chandler realized the potential of popular genre was considerable and that "straight" fiction with its modernist lack of boundaries and conventions would not provide him with the creative discipline nor the kind of readership which would make it all worthwhile. Melodrama in the form of detective fiction, then, was an excellent medium for Chandler to use to trounce the hypocrisy he associated with social realism and "proletarian fiction."

Chandler opens the door here to the possibility that detective fiction can be great, even if it is about murder, which, as he puts it in "The Simple Art of Murder", "lacks the element of uplift." (p.2) It is not quite enough, however, for detective fiction to be properly concerned with murder. In Chandler's opinion, Hammett did well by making certain that the murders in his stories were plausible ones. As Chandler explains:

Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people who commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes. (*Simple*, p.16)

Chandler is, of course, especially impressed by Hammett's use of language, yet in the essay he mostly criticizes poor examples of the genre for not being realistic enough in their portrayals of both how murder can be committed and how one can get away with it without being caught by the police. He manages to simultaneously criticize them for failing to be "about" murder, which Chandler's arguments imply is the true subject of detective fiction, and also for not having enough realism in their language and their

settings to be convincing to the reader. Chandler allows the following:

...if the writers of this fiction wrote about the kinds of murders that happen, they would also have to write about the authentic flavor of life as it is lived. And since they cannot do that, they pretend that what they do is what should be done. Which is begging the question - and the best of them know it. (p.13)

He protests that these detective novels are not realistic enough, yet his answer is a use of slang which is often contrived. Because of this, Chandler's use of American slang in his novels is the most revealing aspect of his paradoxical attempt to inject realism into the detective novel.

Marlowe and his interlocutors avail themselves of a lexicon of slang which appears authentic in its vividness and poetry, yet most of it Chandler made up on his own. He was fascinated with the American capacity for neologism which he compared to the remarkable flexibility of German, a language which he spoke fluently as a young man. Chandler comments on the American language in his notebooks:

Its slang, at its best superb, is invented by writers and palmed off on simple hoodlums and ballplayers and

often has a phoney sound, even when fresh. (Gardiner and Walker, p.81)

This situation intrigued him and he explains his unique between two cultures perspective in a 1949 letter to Alex Barris, a correspondent for *New Liberty Magazine*:

I had to learn American just like a foreign language. To learn it I had to study and analyze it. As a result, when I use slang, colloquialisms, snide talk or any kind of off-beat language I do it deliberately. The literary use of slang is a study in itself. I've found that there are only two kinds that are any good: slang that has established itself in the language, and slang that you make up yourself. Everything else is apt to be passé before it gets into print... (Gardiner and Walker, p.80)

The deliberateness of Chandler's use of slang in his novels is obvious and it extends to his characters' using slang selectively with a great deal of self-consciousness. Their speech may have that "phoney sound," yet it is that very "inventedness" which creates the possibility of characters who are in control of what Chandler termed:

...a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction, and was learning to use it with

all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun. ("Introduction," *The Simple Art of Murder*, p.vii)

The following scene, in the beginning of Raymond Chandler's first novel, *The Big Sleep*, serves as an allegory of this hermeneutic approach to the quest for character. In terms of the narrative, it is the genesis of the series, but we find Marlowe *in medias res*, being interviewed by a prospective client in an unbearably hot greenhouse full of dripping, wet orchids and their cloying scent. Although he is very uncomfortable, Marlowe is not annoyed by the situation but finds himself being rather solicitous to the old man who is obviously dying and who, in his own words, "has to indulge his vices by proxy." (p.9)

General Sternwood addresses Marlowe as "sir" and invites him to take off his coat, drink his brandy and smoke - all pleasures no longer available to the invalid who says his "sleep is so close to waking that it is hardly worth the name." (p.9) Perhaps because of the respect with which he is treated, Marlowe does not mind when General Sternwood asks him about his life, and he is pretty straightforward about it in his brief biography:

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. His chief investigator, a man named Bernie Ohls, called me and told me you wanted to see me. I'm unmarried because I don't like policemen's wives. (p.10)

Marlowe's glib explanation of his marital status may be a poor excuse, and is especially amusing as he delivers it in the midst of Sternwood's somewhat sinister, hyper-sexualized greenhouse, but his implication that the everyday language of his workaday world in Los Angeles is not English is intriguing. If it is not English, then what language does he speak while he works at his "trade," and should we assume that the work of a private detective always precludes educated speech?

The interview with Sternwood gives us more information about what Chandler is getting at here as the general tells Marlowe about Rusty Regan, the ex-IRA bootlegger who was his older daughter's third husband and who has since disappeared without a trace:

I'm very fond of Rusty. A big curly-headed Irishman from Clonmel, with sad eyes and a smile as wide as Wilshire Boulevard. The first time I saw him I thought he might be what you are probably thinking he was, an

adventurer who happened to get himself wrapped up in some velvet. (p.10)

Marlowe's response deserves attention: he says to Sternwood

"You must have liked him...You learned to talk the language."

(p.10) Chandler's own feelings towards the detective novel were similar. He, too, "learned to talk the language" even as that language frustrated him with its opacity and foreignness, because like Sternwood, like his readers, he saw the value of mimicking the words and the actions of those who would be our heroes with their moral certitude. "Talking the language" and playing the part of a moral character opened the door to the possibility of justice being done, but only, as Chandler later explained, if someone takes it upon himself to make that happen. In a later introduction to "The Simple Art of Murder," Chandler tells us:

As to the emotional basis of the hard-boiled story, obviously it does not believe that murder will out and justice will be done - unless some very determined individual makes it his business to see that justice is done. The stories were about the men who made that happen. (p.viii)

Of course, Sternwood dying slowly in his greenhouse is not such a man; yet, by speaking Rusty's language, Sternwood

invokes his proxy by ventriloquism. In other words, he reproduces his character, and thus gives credence to all that for which Rusty stands: friendship, steadfastness, loyalty. Whether Regan embodied these qualities or not does not matter to the old man. If these were the values Sternwood has assigned to his son-in-law, then it is these which the stern general sends Marlowe out in the rain to recover.

Sternwood, however, does not send Marlowe out on a mission to find Rusty, as everyone else in the story suspects, but rather to stop a blackmailer who has knowledge of some of the naughty Carmen's bad debts. Marlowe goes out in defense of honor and pride and in the end, he does not only talk the language but also becomes an irrevocable part of it. The end of The Big Sleep sets the tone for the next six novels in which Marlowe plays the redeemer. Marlowe discovers that the mentally disturbed, foaming at the mouth Carmen has killed Rusty Regan, who is now moldering in the sump at the oil wells which are the source of the Sternwood fortune, when he refused to sleep with her and that her sister has been trying to protect her ever since. He declares to the reader:

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead?

In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high

hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. Far more a part of it than Rusty Regan was. But the old man didn't have to be. He could lie quiet in his canopied bed, with his bloodless hands folded on the sheet, waiting. His heart was a brief uncertain murmur. His thoughts were as gray as ashes. And in a little while he too, like Rusty Regan, would be sleeping the big sleep. (p.231)

The general never finds out that Regan is dead and Marlowe lovingly keeps it from him. Being "a part of the nastiness" is simultaneously the fulfillment of Marlowe's desire to have knowledge of the "hidden truth" which Chandler identifies as the goal of the hard-boiled hero and a fall from grace. Chandler, too, struggled with this situation as he sought to maintain his outsider status, both as a not-quite American and as an ultra-sophisticated pulp writer whose novels reference romance in a way sure to elude the general audience of Black Mask and Dime Detective.

One person, we know, did understand the role of romance in Chandler's work and that was the writer John D.

MacDonald who obviously saw much unfinished business in Chandler's handling of the ironic model. In MacDonald's novels, many such conflicted characters emerge alongside the detective-hero who make use of both this white knight mythology and a generalized, creeping awareness of the folly involved in such an enterprise. Their struggle to reconcile these incompatible worldviews is played out both in both the ubiquitous quiet musings which are MacDonald's signature and in the high-energy plots which reward those who maintain a clear line of sight.

This backdrop of psychic drama, however, seems at odds with MacDonald's general theory of personality. MacDonald's curious faith in genre, in its profound fertility, extends to his faith in character. The flip side of Chandler's theory of character is MacDonald's belief in the fixedness of original character traits. The types who populate his narratives do not vary much from novel to novel and tend to recur as different people in different books with their physical characteristics nearly intact. Phrenology comes to mind as it seems their forms can be reproduced endlessly; each is his own genre whose characteristics a MacDonald reader learns to identify after having read only a few of the novels.

The women in the novels, for example, are generally either petite assertive brunettes, repressed, sensual blondes who tend to be rather tall or, best of all, great big women (usually dark-haired and pale) who are described as robust, childlike, greedy and turn out to be frankly homicidal. One of these big, dangerous ones in The Scarlet Ruse (1973), who goes by Mary Alice McDermitt, makes this first impression on the hero:

Anyone would probably mention that she was tall enough for me. In hardly any heels at all, she came close to six feet...Her glossy black hair bounced to her free stride. Her fair skin had taken a tan the color of weak butterscotch. Her face had good bones, but it was slightly plump, and something about her expression and the way she dressed made me think of a very large twelve-year-old girl. (p.59)

This girl-child lived ten years earlier in The Drowner (1963) as Angie Powell. She is introduced in much the same way:

Angie Powell was six feet tall in flats, a big glowing, earnest, pink and white girl in her early twenties with lavender eyes, large shiny teeth and dark golden curly hair. She was a superb swimmer, diver, bowler, water skier, tumbler, skater, dancer

and secretary. And she was overpowering; there seemed to be so very much of her. (p.27)

Both of these women fool the hero with their apparent wholesomeness and both try to kill him after having murdered others. Their very wholeness belies the schizophrenia he diagnoses for the morally cock-eyed, those who are so fully schooled in illusion that an authentic experience of life is no longer available for them. The Scarlet Ruse, which is a novel about high stakes stamp collecting, teaches vigilance and suspicion concerning facsimiles. The hero's ability to distinguish between types is frustrated by an economy in which almost invisible aberrations signify the greatest variations in value. Rather than perfecting themselves through reproduction, the stamps in The Scarlet Ruse are revered for a resemblance which emphasizes their difference from a presumed original, a difference which is achieved while striving for identity. After one encounters the easily recognizable types of people in MacDonald's catalogue a certain number of times, a similar divide is recognized. Resemblance is the system by which a phylogenic hermeneutics is assured and yet it is at the same time the figure which undermines its legitimacy.

Although this approach to character may seem confusing, it makes perfect sense if the reader picks up on MacDonald's natural dichotomy of man. Certainly, bad people are bad and good people are good, forever, and this is the way they started out and this is the way they will end up. MacDonald's narratives frequently highlight social change but never ever moral rehabilitation. In his world, that simply does not exist; but still his "people" are not simply divided into good guys and bad guys. Rather, they are divided into the self-aware and the not so self-aware. MacDonald's stories suggest, over and over, that one can act morally only if one is first an ethical character and second conscious of one's ethical core.

Those who lack an ethical core, however, are never represented as confused about their own identities. There are villains in MacDonald's world who are totally self-aware and completely evil. Of all of these characters there is none which is as recognizable as the quiet, smiling, feline villain who lies in wait for prey, the hunter who hunts for pleasure only.

MacDonald's evocation of evil always depends upon physical description. In Cape Fear, originally titled The Executioners before the movie came out, Max Cady is a convicted child rapist who was sent to prison during the

Second World War after a JAG witnessed him raping a fourteen-year-old girl in Melbourne late one night. Cady was court-martialed and spared the death penalty. Instead, he was sentenced to a life of hard labor. Now the JAG who put him away, Sam Bowden, a lawyer in North Carolina, is being stalked by Cady, who was let out of prison early, and his memory of the way Cady looked then is still vivid in his mind:

He remembered how the sergeant had looked in court. Like an animal. Sullen, vicious and dangerous. And physically powerful. Sam looked at him and knew how lucky the punch had been. Cady had looked across the court at Sam as though he would dearly enjoy killing him with his hands. Dark hair grew low on his forehead. Heavy mouth and jaw. Small brown eyes set in deep and simian sockets. (p.6)

Later on, Bowden tells his wife that Cady has confronted him in town "grinning" and moving "like a cat." (p.8)

MacDonald's villains almost always share characteristics of both apes and cats, which the author offers up with a marked preference for simile.

In Bright Orange for the Shroud, we are introduced to the beast as Boo Waxwell, a vicious, sweet-talking redneck from Florida who "prowls" the area looking for women to

savage and who kills when he tires of his prey. The first time the hero-detective, Travis McGee, sees Waxwell, who is described as dark, hairy and sallow, he recognizes him for what he is. Travis tells us:

In posture, expression, impact, he had that stud look, that curiously theatrical blend of brutality and irony. Bogart, Mitchum, Gable, Flynn - the same flavor was there, a seedy, indolent brutality, a wisdom of the flesh. Women, sensing exactly what he was, and knowing how casually they would be used, would yet accept him, saying yes on a basis so primitive they could neither identify it or resist it. (p.89)

Travis gets into a fight with Boo, whose indolence yields to "cat-quick" movements. Later, Travis looks around Boo's house and sees his bedroom, where the villain has been sleeping with an obedient fifteen-year old girl he calls "fat stuff," as "a predator's cage, a cell for the cat carnivore."

This stock character is pure evil and is thus the most improbable of them all; yet MacDonald's argument for him is strangely compelling and tells us much about the author's moral theory. The following appeal to the reader is inspired by Junior Allen, another of the grinning, feline hunter-villains from The Deep Blue Good-By:

Love him, understand him, forgive him, lead him shyly to Freud, or Jesus.

Or else take the contemporarily untenable position that evil, undiluted by any hint of childhood trauma, does exist in the world, exists for its own precise sake, the pustular bequest from the beast, as inexplicable as Belsen. (p.85)

MacDonald clearly takes the "untenable position" in his representation of evil characters, yet he never denies that good is often an elusive, unknown quantity.

In the novels, there are people who are good in the essential way that his villains are bestial and wholly unredeemable, yet they often appear to be fleeing their stations. Their own identities, potent symbols constructed so carefully from human relationships and experience over time, become simultaneously the sign of their bad faith, their infidelity, their constant flight from recognition. For MacDonald, for his characters who struggle to understand how to act ethically, the flight is itself proof of a true purpose, a real personality, a verifiable history. In other words, something pure had to exist before it was corrupted. MacDonald's characters take the corruption as proof of an authentic pre-lapsarian state,

and it is upon this foundation that MacDonald's moral philosophy asserts itself.

In the same way that MacDonald idealizes nature as a pure origin, a true antecedent and source of what we see today, he promotes the idea of pure character, of people being true to type despite their attempts to disguise this or to refuse their destiny. MacDonald's good people prepare to act honorably by peeling away palimpsestic layers of experience which obscure their original characters.

While he works on himself, often full of self-doubt and often self-loathing, the hero-detective in a MacDonald novel must turn his hermeneutic gaze outwards to read other people properly, despite the challenges present. When he fails, violence and betrayal are the result.

Failing to recognize the true nature of a Boo Waxwell would be trouble indeed, and Travis McGee, MacDonald's hero-detective from his hugely successful series, is good at his job because he is unusually perceptive. He tells his friend, who has been swindled out of his life savings by the members of a crime syndicate who made use of Waxwell to do their dirty work:

He's devious, not in any reasoned way, but by instinct. He has that bluff, battered soldier-of-fortune look, and a ton of ironic charm in that grin,

and he makes me think that under other circumstances he'd be the man I'd want to go ashore with in a strange port where there would be good booze and a chance of trouble. But that would be wrong. The essence of him is feline, and not house-kitty. A bigger predator. I wonder how many people he's conned with that swampy folk-talk which isn't even very consistent. It's a good cover. His way of life is a predator way of life, a cat-habit. He has his home range, most of four counties to roar around in that abused Lincoln, whipping the other males so ruthlessly nobody challenges him, bringing prey back to the den, protecting the den violently and instinctively, and ready at any time to fade back into the Glades.

(Bright Orange for the Shroud, p.102-3)

This is not to say that Travis himself is never fooled by someone with a good cover, and he excels at using covers himself; nevertheless, it takes him far too long to unmask the bouncy girl-child, Mary Alice McDermit, in The Scarlet Ruse. He comes to depend upon an awareness of duplicity which is more physical than intellectual. Here's how he explains it to himself, reflecting on a night in bed with the homicidal Amazon during which he suddenly finds himself impotent:

...last night some strange kind of survival instinct had taken over. The body seems to have its own awareness of the realities. In the churny night, the tangly bed, abaft that resilient everlasting smorgasbord, body-knowledge said "Whoa!" And whoa it was, abruptly. One just doesn't do this sort of thing with monsters. Not with a big plastic monster which would kill you on any whim if it was certain it would never be caught, and if it anticipated being amused by the experience. (p.246)

Travis McGee, who unlike Philip Marlowe, has many relationships with women throughout his tenure, survives as a result of an acute attention to detail, both in his awareness of what is going on around him and also what he is feeling within from moment to moment. MacDonald implies that self-awareness is a pre-requisite to hermeneutic skill for his heroes, and because this is not always as easy as it sounds, Travis and the heroes in the other novels sometimes fail and suffer severe consequences.

The Dark Past

Not all hard-boiled fiction is narrated by the knightly heroes galumphing blindly forward on their shining white steeds. The very same fate and the very same pitfalls await the largely itinerant picaresque narrators in hard-boiled fiction, perhaps because they are so mired in the day-to-day that they lack the insight provided by distance which the detective-hero enjoys in his lonely singularity.

In James M. Cain's novels, for example, the detectives are not particularly heroic. More often they are represented as shysters waiting for a big break. But the regular guy who finds himself in compromising circumstances needs to draw on similar skills. Cain evokes this with a minimum of verbiage in the opening pages of The Postman Always Rings Twice. There the drifter Frank Chambers makes his ill-fated decision to stick around the Twin Oaks lunchroom he has happened upon when he gets an eyeful of the Greek proprietor's wife. He is completely taken by her, even though he admits that "she really wasn't any raving beauty" and he is surprised by her acute anxiety about her cultural and racial identity. When Frank compliments Cora on her enchiladas by saying "You people sure know how to make them," she becomes enraged and lets him know in no uncertain terms that she's not "Mex." (p.5) Cora confronts

Frank about what he may be thinking in the following dialogue:

"You think I'm Mex."

"Nothing like it."

"Yes you do. You're not the first one. Well, get this. I'm just as white as you are, see? I may have dark hair and look a little that way, but I'm just as white as you are. You want to get along good around here, you won't forget that."

"Why, you don't look Mex."

"I'm telling you. I'm just as white as you are."

(p.5)

At this point, after she has repeated the phrase "just as white as you are" three times in a short dialogue, Frank Chambers begins to understand Cora's fear of losing her white privilege and also begins to see how it could be useful to him in her seduction. He explains to the reader, after she indicates that he may call her Cora instead of the more polite Mrs. Papadakis:

I knew for certain, then, what I had just taken a chance on when I went in there. It wasn't those enchiladas that she had to cook, and it wasn't having black hair. It was being married to the Greek that made her feel she wasn't

white, and she was even afraid I would begin calling her Mrs. Papadakis. (p.5)

Frank uses this knowledge to manipulate Cora into having sex with him and she in turn uses his awareness of her predicament as Mrs. Papadakis to persuade him to help her murder her husband. After the initial attempt fails, Frank is incredibly relieved and urges Cora to run away with him without resorting to any violence, but Cora persists in her plans because she tells Frank that Nick wants a child and she can't bear the thought of giving birth to a Greek's child. (p.31)

Frank Chambers' terrible mistake is in underestimating the complexity of Cora's situation. Because he is a hobo who lacks the desire to have a steady job, to own property, or to be fixed in one location, he is slow to understand what is at stake for Cora as the wife of a businessman. For Cora, the possible erosion of her privilege as a white American as a result of her marriage to the Greek Nick Papadakis is a risk she is willing to take in exchange for the chance to pursue a life won through hard work and self-reliance as a business owner. She is a caricature of Yankee values as she willingly plots a cold-blooded murder but feels she cannot take the "shame" of the hand-to-mouth nomadic existence Frank clearly enjoys. Cora packs up and

leaves with Frank only to change her mind within walking distance of Twin Oaks. She tells Frank:

I told you I wasn't really a bum, Frank. I don't feel like no gypsy. I don't feel like nothing, only ashamed, that I'm out here asking for a ride. (p.23)

Later on, after the murder is a success and they very nearly betray each other, Cora resists Frank's entreaties to sell the business and start a new, uncertain life together. Instead, Cora wants to build up the business by taking out a beer license. She says:

I told you. I'm not a bum. I want to be something. We stay here. We're not going away. We take out the beer license. We amount to something. (p.74)

Cora's identity depends as much on her position vis-à-vis capital as it does on her perception of who is white like her. She is revolted by the concept of working for someone else and she wants Frank to understand the difference as well. Cora is this an appropriate precursor to Mildred Pierce, Cain's other caricature of a successful American businesswoman, who pounds the pavement looking for work during the Depression while the men in her life persist as slothful, parasitic sex interests. Cora and Mildred are the ones who suffer an identity crisis, not the men who are

content with their contingent roles, both economic and sexual.

Although the women who plan the crimes in Cain's fiction are motivated by the idea that they can reinvent themselves through the profits taken as a result of their murders, the men who are inspired by them and who gladly assist them with the killings are not represented as complete innocents caught up in a passion which overwhelms them. Rather, they are given chances to resist, to except themselves from the crimes the women design so vividly.

Nowhere in Cain's fiction is this more obvious than in Double Indemnity, a novel about an insurance salesman who conspires with the wife of a client to murder him for the proceeds of an accident insurance policy which pays double if the accident occurs on a train. Walter Huff knows where his affair with the wife, Phyllis Nirdlinger, is heading and he has opportunities to step away from "the edge." But he does not, as he tells us after the fact:

I lit a fire and sat there, trying to figure out where I was at. I knew where I was at, of course. I was standing right on the deep end, looking over the edge, and I kept telling myself to get out of there, and get quick, and never come back. But that was what I kept telling myself. What I was doing was peeping over that edge, and

all the time I was trying to pull away from it, there was something in me that kept edging a little closer, trying to get a better look. (p.14)

Since the novel is presented as a statement written after the fact, there exist many opportunities in the narrative for Walter Huff to explain himself. Phyllis is revealed as a monstrous *femme fatale* who is motivated by both greed and an exceedingly morbid fascination with death. Walter knows this in advance of their crime as Phyllis describes it to him:

I think of myself as Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night. I'm so beautiful, then. And sad. And hungry to make the whole world happy, by taking them out where I am, into the night, away from all trouble, all unhappiness...Walter, this is the awful part. I know this is terrible. I tell myself it's terrible. But to me, it doesn't seem terrible. It seems as though I'm doing something that's really best for him, if he only knew it. Do you understand me, Walter? (p.19)

Walter does not, and tells her so, but this odd revelation does not deter him from their plans to murder her husband. But presenting the horror of the former nurse Phyllis' fantasy of herself as an angel of death, bringing oblivion

to those for whom she cares, is useful for Walter because it makes him seem more rational and, most importantly, more worldly in his desires.

By having his characters write the story of their crimes after the fact, Cain inserts a good measure of irony into their picaresque storytelling. The bad grammar Walter uses when describing his everyday life, such as "I keep a Filipino house boy, but he don't sleep there," (p.14) makes him seem more naïve and ill-prepared for his encounter with the scarlet shroud, but as Chandler points out, it's a false naivete which stands awkwardly by the sophisticated plans Walter makes for the murder. Yet it is precisely this awkwardness in the account of the crime which offers not absolution but a certain sympathy for his difficulty in trying to patch together a coherent narrative from wildly divergent views of what is ethical and what is to be desired.

Double Indemnity is not a psychological novel about duplicity; rather, it is an ironic, critical study of our daily grovelings which depend upon duplicity to support the twisted values upon which they are constructed. Walter departs from his picaresque devotion to action when he tells us that he sees himself primarily as a croupier. He chides the reader:

If that seems funny to you, that I would kill a man just to pick up a stack of chips, it might not seem so funny if you were back of that wheel, instead of out front. I had seen so many houses burned down, so many cars wrecked, so many corpses with blue holes in their temples, so many awful things that people had pulled to crook the wheel, that that stuff didn't seem real to me anymore. (p.24)

The unreality of "Hollywoodland," as Walter refers to the Nirdlinger's neighborhood, has become a justification for murder which does not seem real. The line between seeming and being grows taut in this story which is revealed in the last pages as not a novel but rather a secret, signed confession which the insurance company plans to retain privately so as to avoid financial embarrassment.

Responsibility for having said or done something remains vague in Cain's fiction, not just because of the deferred confessions with which his criminals tell their versions of their stories, but also in the simple way Cain presents dialogue. He deliberately leaves out tags such as "she said" or "he muttered." Rather, the dialogue simply sits on the page nakedly as if the novel were performing itself visually before our eyes. An apt example from Double Indemnity is the following scene in which Walter and

Phyllis acknowledge to each other that they plan to follow through with their murderous plans:

"But we're going to do it."

"Yes, we're going to do it."

"Straight down the line."

"Straight down the line." (p.18)

This echoing of speech, which is also quite prominent in The Postman Always Rings Twice, has a paradoxical effect on the reader. It is at once a clear reflection of how the characters' resolve is strengthened through their relationship and at the same time a blotting out of the motivation and psychological tone which usually provide clues about characterization.

The author's avowed penchant for ventriloquism - that is, pretending to be someone else when he wrote in the first person - is best seen as a critical move which reminded him and continues to persuade us that what seems real is often an illusion. In much crime fiction, this knowledge gives way to a paranoid perspective on all situations but in Cain's fiction it provides a way out for his doomed narrators. The linguistic doubling, along with the trope of things happening twice throughout the novels, introduces a sense of unreality in the texts. On the one hand, Cain's fiction with its picaresque directness and

coarse sexuality is supposed to be wonderfully realistic. On the other hand, this stab at realism, if that is what it is, reminds us of how easily anything can be copied and thus substituted for the original. It is especially illuminating to pursue this line of thought with Cain's work because he so often links repetition with compulsion, and compulsion to crime.

Since Cain's two most famous crime novels, The Postman Always Rings Twice and Double Indemnity, are confessions after the fact, the reader who is awed by the materiality of the super-realistic dialogue and thought processes of the characters must also acknowledge the unreliability of the same as narrators. It is this knowledge and not just the sordidness of his people's conduct which gives Cain's fiction its distinctly hard-boiled quality. In The Postman Always Rings Twice, for example, Frank Chamber's accounts of the dark side of his and Cora's attraction to each other was what shocked readers at the time. The first time he and Cora acknowledge their feelings for each other is far from sweetness and light. According to Frank, it went like this:

I took her in my arms and mashed my mouth against hers
.... "Bite me! Bite me!"

I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth. It was running down her neck when I carried her upstairs. (p.9)

Scenes like this which occur at regular intervals throughout the story give the reader a vertiginous feeling; one begins to wonder if Cora in fact gave such echoed commands to Frank or if Frank simply heard them in his head. Leaving out the subject and casting the verb adrift in the dialogue contributes to this ambiguity. As the novel ends, Frank is in prison awaiting execution because he has killed Cora in a car accident and then as a result, their murder of her husband is found out. But Frank makes it clear that Cora's death was a tragic accident and he is concerned that she may have had her doubts. Just before the accident, they are swimming in the ocean talking about the child they will have. Cora reassures Frank with an odd moral arithmetic. She tells him that they "took a life" and "now we're going to give one back." (p.89) Frank was pleased but after the accident he worries that "it went through her head, when the car hit, that I did it anyhow." (p.94) Frank's dying wish for an afterlife in which he can make his intentions clear is an ironic nod towards the extra-textual consciousness Cain denies his readers of

crime fiction, reminding us yet again that judgment requires faith in representation.

Patricia Highsmith did not use first-person narration in her crime novels to emphasize this predicament as Cain did, but she was nevertheless uniquely successful at conjuring such dramatic crossroads in her stories. Patricia Highsmith's characters, not just her readers, find themselves charged with testing this faith at every corner. Her criminal characters go to great lengths to do more than flee unsatisfactory or inconvenient identities; they strive to effectively annihilate the consciousness of a past in which these personae lived and breathed their complicit, guilty lives. In Highsmith's world, responsibility for a crime depends upon motivation as well as action. As her plots develop, however, motivation and evidence become harder and harder to pin on specific individuals. The nebulousness of her characters' identities, particularly apparent in the way that they insert themselves expertly into various exclusive social networks, works to counteract both any sense of guilt they might feel and at the same time the "stickiness" of the charges against them.

One could say the same thing about the author herself, whose fans decry her status as a crime novelist rather than a "serious" novelist while finding it difficult to deny

that almost all of her plots involve a murder and a bid to avoid capture.¹ Highsmith's writing is elegant and sophisticated. It is true that she never uses the kind of street language that Chandler and Cain, for example, exploit to such advantage. Her characters are, however, extraordinarily attuned to the patterns of speech of their interlocutors which often reveals the deliberateness of their own linguistic posturing as someone who "really" knows how to speak. Tom Ripley's disgust with Marge, his female competition for the attention of Dickie Greenleaf, the man whom he later murders in order to steal his identity, is acutely snobbish in this regard. When Marge shows Tom a photograph she carries in her wallet of her family's house back in Ohio, he snickers silently at the way she pronounces "clapboard." Highsmith describes Tom's amusement as follows:

It was just a plain clapboard house, but it was home, Marge said with a smile. She pronounced the adjective "Clabbered," which amused Tom, because that was the word

¹ Russell Harrison, in a brilliant study of Highsmith's work, writes that viewing her work as "crime or suspense fiction" is "not a valid categorization." He concedes that her "work does bear some similarities to those genres." Harrison is particularly interested in the fact that Highsmith regarded herself as a "serious" novelist and was subsequently treated as such in Europe where she made her home for most of her life. See the preface to his Patricia Highsmith, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997. Harrison's argument is not particularly convincing. The same evaluation is made of Raymond Chandler's work all the time yet, although his work is taken quite seriously, it will always be regarded as crime fiction. The difference might be in Chandler's willingness to be regarded as a crime writer while Harrison is especially sensitive to Highsmith's apparent desire not to be regarded as such. But one must wonder why someone who wanted so badly not to be identified as a crime writer wrote such darn good crime fiction which is truly indistinguishable from that which it apparently is not.

she used to describe people who were drunk, and just a few minutes before she had said to Dickie, "You look absolutely clabbered!" Her speech, Tom thought, was abominable, both her choice of words and her pronunciation. (p.219)

Tom's acute attention to detail here is coupled with an intense self-consciousness which only leaves him when he steps out of the "role" of Tom Ripley and pretends to be someone else. Perhaps it was also easier for Highsmith to write crime fiction while pretending, or rather believing wholeheartedly, that she was not. Whatever her intentions, however, this identity crisis concerning genre is a dominant theme in her fiction, if we interpret genre broadly as "type" or "category" or even more appropriately, "class."

The treatment of "queerness" in Highsmith's novels is especially unusual and contributes to our sense of the amorphousness of the characters' identities, and to their ability to escape a feeling of responsibility for their actions. In both The Talented Mr. Ripley and Strangers on a Train, the criminal character is portrayed as uninterested in the opposite sex and unusually attached to men. A superficial reading might convince the reader that Highsmith wants us to know that these characters are gay.

But a closer reading reveals that Tom Ripley and Charley Bruno are not attracted to the men with whom they become so involved. Rather, the feeling is described in terms of an ideal mirroring and self-fashioning which precludes the object of desire as a real person. Highsmith's readers must make a distinction between this trope in the crime novels, which is a literary and philosophical exploration, and the positive portrayal of a same-sex love relationship in The Price of Salt, also known as Carol, which Highsmith published under a pseudonym precisely because she did not want to be known as "that lesbian writer."

In The Talented Mr. Ripley, Tom is accused of being "queer" by Marge and Dickie. This infuriates him and brings back memories of his aunt's having referred to him as a "sissy." Dickie tells Tom that Marge thinks he is "queer" because of "the way you act." (p.227) It is an ironic moment in the novel because it comes just moments after Tom, in a fit of jealousy, has dressed in Dickie's clothes and with the aid of a mirror pantomimed a row between Marge and Dickie. Tom, playing Dickie, says all of the things to the mirror that he thinks Dickie should say to Marge, such as "Marge, you must understand that I don't love you!" (p.226). Tom's fascination with Dickie is not exactly affection, not exactly admiration. What Tom would like is a

new, improved version of Dickie, one who is more fun-loving, more intelligent, and to boot, a better artist. Yet Tom maintains an absolute love affair with Dickie's possessions. The critic Russell Harrison has argued that Highsmith's characters are all commodity fetishists, more interested in objects and especially houses than any of the people with whom they must interact. In The Talented Mr. Ripley, Tom has assumed the patterns of Dickie's behavior and is thus accused of being queer by Marge and then by Dickie. Yet it is Dickie who loves Tom as a partner, who enjoys rich relationships with other men, who loves Marge as a friend but cannot bring himself to sleep with her. If Tom, rather than Dickie, is "queer," then it is a queerness born of his almost instinctive disingenuousness and his penchant for pantomime and acting. When we first meet Tom in the first pages of the novel, he is involved in a scam to defraud freelance artists of money by claiming to be an agent of the IRS. He admits that he does it for the pleasure of it rather than for the money, because he does not dare cash the checks he receives under an assumed name.

Highsmith makes a clear distinction between love relationships and the kind of role-playing which binds people together in perverse webs of desire and obligation. Tom Ripley suspects that Dickie himself is guilty of such

games in his leading-on of Marge, whom he respects and values but with whom he does not intend to intensify his relationship. The same critique seems to hold in Strangers on a Train, in which readers at first identify Charley Bruno as an effeminate mama's boy, a rich dandy who hates his father and idolizes his mother. His strong, instantaneous attraction to Guy Haines, a young architect he meets by chance on a train, also seems to point to a romantic interest. But soon it becomes clear that Bruno sees the "guy" as an emblem with whom he identifies as a partner or counterpart. Bruno is, like Ripley, an asexual figure who forms strong emotional attachments with those whom he can use as a "dark mirror," one which will reflect an image of himself which is more substantial, more alive and more masterful than the provisional, often tenuous self-image previously available to him.

Bruno is so caught up in that kind of thinking that he is able to murder Miriam, Guy's first wife, with no feeling of remorse or guilt. In his mind, he is acting on Guy's deepest desires by proxy but since he is not Guy himself, neither he nor Guy is responsible. Bruno calls it the "perfect murder" because they have severed motivation from action by trading murders. In Bruno's eyes, he is accomplishing something very good by murdering Miriam

because her death will materially benefit Guy, who is an up and coming architect. Bruno feels that Guy is "the most worthy fellow he had ever met." (p.61)

The true mystery in the novel is Guy's reluctance to turn on Bruno and what is especially inexplicable is Guy's vulnerability to Bruno's entreaties to fulfill his part of the exchange by murdering Bruno's father. What might explain this is a profound feeling of guilt on Guy's part, who fails to acknowledge early on that the expression of a desire - that Miriam disappear - can lead to the fulfillment of that desire. What emerges in the novel is a damning portrait of the American capacity for self-invention or, in other words, a social identity which is constructed anew, like the house Guy builds for his new life, out of virgin materials without memory. A telling moment in the narrative occurs when Guy is in Mexico with his new girlfriend, Anne, who comes from the upper-class Guy aspires to join, and he talks of his old attachment to his wife Miriam. Guy tells Anne:

She's the type who goes to the bad movies, acts in them, reads the love-story magazines, lives in a bungalow, and whips her husband into earning more money this year so they can buy on the installment plan next year, breaks up her neighbor's marriage- (p.47)

Anne tells Guy to stop his childish outburst and then he says what perhaps Anne fears to know. He says "the fact that I once loved her...loved all of it makes me ill." (p.47) What he loved, obviously, is the middle-class striving which defined his past and not just the high-school sweetheart who has betrayed him with her infidelity. Since meeting Anne, however, Guy has learned to leave all that behind for the pleasures of a more gracious existence of which Anne and her family approve. But sometimes Guy finds it difficult to sever all that ties him to his upbringing and the resulting tension between memory and the desire to wholly blot out the past drives the action in the novel and perhaps even explains Guy's automatic, zombie-like fulfillment of Bruno's plan for his father's murder.

A certain sentimentality for an ideal family life complicates both Guy Haines' and Tom Ripley's attempts to be reborn without baggage of any kind. Guy is welcomed by his fiancée Anne Faulkner's parents as a kind of wunderkind whose talents need nurturing in the proper social environment. With them, he is at once in training to be one of them and at the same time a wholly redeemed part of their world, one who was lost and now has been found by the sharp-sighted Anne. Tom, too, feels redeemed by the Greenleafs who treat him as a son, who provide him with the

kind of guidance and support his own dead parents could not have. Tom's disappointment in Dickie, who he has idealized before seeing him in Italy, is acute and this too explains why Tom finds it so expedient to murder Dickie. By stealing his identity, essentially replacing him, Tom has become the son he would always have liked to be, surrounded by the objects a devoted family provides for a child. His emotion upon receiving from the Greenleafs a bon voyage basket in his cabin as he departs on his mission to persuade the wayward Dickie to come home is one of the most authentic expressions of feeling in the novel and also the one which elicits our sympathy. Highsmith writes:

Tom had never received a bon voyage basket. To him, they had always been something you saw in florist's windows for fantastic prices and laughed at. Now he found himself with tears in his eyes, and he put his face down in his hands suddenly and began to sob. (p.188)

But, of course, this emotion which comes with a sense of loyalty has the potential to stand in the way of the clean break necessary for the crafting of a new identity.

The way Highsmith's characters avoid this roadblock is to project their emotional attachment on to objects rather than people. So for Guy, true freedom from his tawdry middle-class past comes in the form of a house he will

build for himself and Anne, a gleaming white house he wishes to name "The Crystal." And for Tom, freedom is the ability to collect all sorts of wonderfully well-made objects - furniture, clothes, jewelry, art and especially houses. In his study of Highsmith, the critic Russell Harrison puts it best; he writes that Tom "has an aesthetics, rather than an ethics." (p.27) In Highsmith's fiction, the moral dilemmas are resolved aesthetically if not ethically and this has a certain appeal for the reader who is complicit in the social-climbing fantasy world in which Guy Haines and Tom Ripley are bright stars.

The most powerful and indeed frightening aspect of Highsmith's writing, that which makes it truly worthy of the hard-boiled moniker, is in the way she elicits total identification with her depraved characters from the reader. That she does this without ever using first-person narration speaks volumes about her skill and also the possibilities of the kind of straight, third-person prose she used to such advantage. Who would not recognize himself, for example, in the following welling-up of despair in Tom Ripley when he realizes his essential aloneness as a human being, especially in the way Highsmith says:

You were supposed to see the soul through the eyes, to see love through the eyes, the one place you could look at another human being and see what really went on inside, and in Dickie's eyes Tom saw nothing more now than he would have seen if he had looked at the hard, bloodless surface of a mirror. (p.235)

Tom extrapolates from this a basic truth about human relationships which hits him hard:

It was as if Dickie had been suddenly snatched away from him. They were not friends. They didn't know each other. It struck Tom like a horrible truth, true for all time, true for the people he had known in the past and for those he would know in the future: each had stood and would stand before him, and he would know time and time again that he would never know them, and the worst was that there would always be the illusion, for a time, that he did know them, and that they were completely in harmony and alike. (p.235)

Our vulnerability to the illusion is what Highsmith points to here and in her other stories as the capacity we all carry to objectify others, to perhaps kill for expedience and not just for passion. We are cornered by Highsmith's writing, forced into a position from which we can judge an activity as immoral at the same time that we indulge in an

aesthetic judgment which brings us perilously close to feeling if not committing the evil we are supposed to deplore.

A similar move was achieved by Dorothy B. Hughes who also capitalized on the reader's capacity for identifying with a certain hard-boiled feeling, if not exactly an attitude. An atmosphere of generalized mistrust pervades her crime fiction which makes all judgment suspect. Her writing is unique for the way she managed to disperse the attitudes we associate with both the white knight and the itinerant *picaro* into a kind of fog which makes it hard to distinguish between the real and the imagined, the sincere and the disingenuous.

Her 1947 novel In a Lonely Place, about a serial killer in Los Angeles, literally had people moving through fogs in the city which made them unable to determine if they were being followed. Paranoia is as likely an explanation for Hughes' characters as is a real threat. Dix Steele's friends divide their time between being afraid and trying to figure out if their suspicions about him are correct. Conquering fear is just as important, they discover, as seeking the truth and the investigation of their suspicions of someone who is "supposed" to be a writer may be a nod towards the role fear played in intimidating writers in

Hollywood who could be blacklisted if their sympathies were discovered. It could also be interpreted as a more generalized fear which many writers of the 1940's tried to evoke, more or less successfully.

The special kind of fear Hughes communicated was one that made familiar places strange and menacing, and familiar people suddenly suspicious. In one of her novels set in New York City, The Fallen Sparrow, a young man returns to his own home, an apartment on Park Avenue, to find his parents away and unfamiliar servants working and living there. Since they do not recognize him, he has to announce his identity to them and in that movement reveals his deep-seated anxieties about not truly belonging to the social world in which he lives. It is his stepfather, Geoffrey Wilhite, who has ushered Kit and his mother into the exclusive circles in which they now legitimately move and Kit acts as if complete strangers can decipher his parvenu status from the look on his face, or from the way he walks into a room. When he enters his own home, for example, he "showed the girl he was no salesman by walking into the living-room without her suggestion." (p.13) All throughout the novel, Kit, who has just barely survived being tortured in a Spanish prison, is unusually aware of the people around him. It turns out to be a good thing as

the plot winds on with Nazis posing as refugees and his own life in danger. And the servants? They, too, are not the real servants but replacements set up by the Nazis to fool him while the real employees are away.

Hughes' fiction is full of improbable plots involving international conspiracy and intrigue. Yet the nimbleness with which she advanced the idea that names and identities were even in the best of cases provisional was convincing. It functions at once as a critique of social class separation and at the same time as a reminder of how very easy it is to produce a "type." Hughes herself carefully avoided the usual types recognizable in crime fiction, such as detectives and small-time crooks. Instead, she had people playing those roles despite themselves, forced by circumstance or desire into responsibilities or liabilities which hardly suited them. Kit McKittrick, for one, is made fun of in The Fallen Sparrow for wanting to know more about the suspicious death of his best friend Louis Lepetino, who was supposed to have fallen to his death from a hotel window. A policeman in New York who knew Kit's late father, a well-known detective, lets him have it in no uncertain terms. He tells Kit:

Arizona lets you rich kids play cowboy as long as you pay for it but I'll be damned if New York is going to

start letting you play detective even if your name is McKittrick. Run along now. Forget it. You'll have more fun at the Stork than here. (p.12)

Kit's triumph in the novel is his insistence on playing detective despite the inappropriateness of the role. The police are ineffective in their rigidity and it is Kit, with his class-conscious fluidity, who saves the day and brings the hard light of truth into the shadowy world into which all New York is thrust in the novel.

There is a moral in Hughes' portrayals of exceedingly class-conscious protagonists who at first regret the awkwardness of their sensitivities and insecurities but in the end are grateful for the insight it affords them and all those who are saved by it. She suggests that the powerlessness felt by those whose hold on identity is tenuous and provisional can be profitably reinterpreted as an advantage in a world in which nothing is as it appears. Although Hughes did not develop a knight character like her contemporaries Hammett and Chandler, she had an approach to character which most closely matched Chandler's philosophy of "progenitor" figures who may, when it is time to act, step into the heroic and even chivalric roles demanded of them. Her particular emphasis on the potential of alienated, upper-class characters, mostly New Yorkers, such

as Griselda Satterlee in The So Blue Marble and Kit McKittrick in The Fallen Sparrow, is unusual in hard-boiled fiction. Their identities, cobbled together from various relationships, seem like props yet at the same time they are props which work very well in the course of the challenging adventures they face in the novels. Griselda Satterlee takes full advantage of the privileges involved in being both a member of New York society and at the same time part of the more raucous Hollywood scene. Kit McKittrick, troubled as he is about the impression that he has forgotten the working class roots of his parents, trading them rather blithely for the glittering world of his stepfather on Park Avenue, moves seamlessly between the two worlds when the people he loves are in trouble. The tragic and suspicious death of his best friend from downtown reminds him that while he cannot "go home again," he can still walk its streets and talk its talk without surrendering his present to his past. All of Hughes' novels, in one way or another, turn on such existential questions of reconciling memory with the sometimes blinding light of day.

The stakes of this reconciliation, however, are different and, perhaps, more precious for Hughes' criminal characters. In Ride the Pink Horse, a character known only

as "Sailor" suffers from the same awkward self-consciousness which plagues Hughes upper-class characters, yet he has fled his squalid childhood in the slums of Chicago with the help of gangsters, not the true leisure classes. He still feels inferior, as if his background were legible through his expensive clothes like a stubborn growth of beard. Upon arriving in a small New Mexico town on the eve of Carnival or "Fiesta," Sailor is furious that he cannot find an available hotel room. He feels personally rejected as he wanders the town in the following scene, thinking about entering the lobby of a good hotel:

He didn't turn in at the arch. He started to but there were two babes coming down the walk, two babes that had just been washed and ironed in white linen. They didn't have anything more on their minds than lying around getting that golden glow on their skin. He didn't want to pass them; he didn't want to watch them look down their noses at this bum. He walked on, passing the garden wall, a high wall to keep out the muck but let them hear the gashing laughter, the tinkling ice of the elect behind the wall. (p.7)

Sailor, a lapsed Catholic, associates the upper classes with a sanctity he covets but does not feel comfortable approaching himself. Throughout the novel, he tries to get

clean, literally, but his efforts do not pay off and he ends up accepting, despite his revulsion, the hospitality of a Mexican-American carousel operator who offers to share his bed with the stranded traveler. Through his relations with the man he insists on calling "Pancho," Sailor learns some humility and also begins to reflect upon what it was in his background that made him so vulnerable to making bad choices in life. But, more than anything, Sailor is desperately afraid of a kind of nonchalance concerning labels and identities among the people "Pancho" knows, mostly native people, whose sense of the unity between the past and the present fills Sailor with nothing less than horror. He equates "the Indians" with a museum head he saw as a child at the Art Institute and like a stone sculpture he encounters in the local plaza. He thinks:

Maybe it was the way to do things, not to worry about the now, to wait for time to take care of things. What if the measure of time was one thousand, two thousand years? In time everything was all right. If you were an Indian.

Maybe that was the terror the stone Indian generated. In time, you were nothing. Therefore, you were nothing.

(p.55-56)

Sailor feels himself slipping away in several moments of such awareness in the novel. His paranoid reaction to what he perceives as the conflation of past and present is the key to his own moral crisis which is predicated on a choice he made not to fight "on the side of the angels" but to instead take the easier route of working for the criminal syndicate in Chicago.

At the end of Ride the Pink Horse, Sailor has shown himself to be a man capable of good deeds, a man who appreciates innocence, and, most importantly, a man searching for some form of absolution. He wants quite desperately to leave behind his uniform of picaresque, street-smart city kid who knows that what is good for the boss is what is good for him. Yet Sailor, unlike Hughes' upper class heroes and heroines, fails to make the grade. At the very last moment, when it seems Sailor is ready to take responsibility for his crimes and ally himself with "Mac," the weary Chicago detective who has always believed in Sailor's redemption, the *picaro* in him bolts for freedom. He shoots Mac, the same man who tells him "I've always wanted to help you, Sailor. I've tried. Because but for the grace of God, there go I." (p.198) After he shoots Mac, Sailor thinks "He hadn't wanted to do it. Mac was a good man. But Mac was a copper." (p.200) Like Sam Spade,

the detective, Sailor, the criminal, must fulfill his role despite his misgivings. He heads for the mountains, weeping for his loss and for his actions, and the last line of the story is "Blindly he stumbled on." (p.200) Hughes suggests here that Sailor does not enjoy the insight won by her more knightly characters in their dramatic identity struggles; rather, this picaresque figure is returned to the darkness which he embraced as a young man, despite his attempts to flee the inevitable weakness of his own moral character.

Does it have to be that way? That is the question taken up a bit later on by the writer David Goodis. It is a dark and gloomy vision of surrender. But Sailor is represented as having made a choice. Even more than Hughes, Goodis excelled at representing what Geoffrey O'Brien, in the introduction to his reprinted novels, beautifully terms an "air of ineluctable doom." (Dark Passage, p.vii).

Ineluctable is the right word to describe how Goodis' characters experience their worlds. Their sense of fatalism, of being caught up in the works of a machine they do not understand and certainly do not control, is so extreme that they develop a distorted view of their ability to take responsibility for any of their choices in life. The wisdom of that analysis is always in question in

Goodis' novels, even as the characters lose patience and submit to the absurdity they sense around them.

In all of Goodis' novels, there is a man who stumbles back and forth between a virgin and a whore. In the end, the whore always wins out, despite the man's aspirations to break free of her influence and to take up with the virgin instead, who represents all that he may become if only given the chance. The virgin is represented as an ideal partner, which Goodis often interpreted as a woman who cooks for her man. The whore would never think to be so kind, yet she is incredibly attractive to Goodis' men with her power and frank sexuality. These representations should never be mistaken for actual attempts to portray women. They are much better understood as features of the sometimes hero, sometimes anti-hero's psychological landscape. The men whose sad tales unfold in Goodis' narratives are never truly in dialogue with anyone. Their despair comes from within even as it seems to arrive unbidden, cloaked in mystery and inspiring an abject fear. In Of Tender Sin, for example, a man's guilt and confusion about a boyhood transgression shows up suddenly one night in his comfortable suburban house like a specter outside his bedroom door. Goodis describes it as wholly unreal:

The unknown party outside the bedroom door was inviting him to come on out and say hello, then come along down an unlit road, a very long road. Where there was nothing on either side, there was nothing at all, just the road going down and down. (p.12)

What seems to be the ghostly arrival of the grim reaper is soon revealed to be none other than a repressed memory.

Many of Goodis' characters are indeed in flight from memory and its harsh certainties. They resist the advances of the inevitable traces of their pasts as long as they can, so as not to deal with the moral consequences of their actions.

Some of Goodis' characters are not, however, criminal characters who are trying to cover up evil deeds. Yet, they seem guilty as they adopt alternative identities and careers in their somewhat successful attempts to divorce themselves from their pasts. It is significant, too, that the identities these men adopt are always debased and inferior versions of what they did in their previous years, their pre-guilty years. Two who fall into this category are James Cassidy, an airline pilot turned bus driver in Cassidy's Girl and Edward Webster Lynn, a concert pianist turned piano man in a cheap bar, in Down There.² Some would

² Also known as Shoot the Piano Player, after the success of the Truffaut film based on it.

include David Goodis himself in this category, a serious novelist who left the hurly burly and glamour of the big city behind to move back in with his parents and turn into a reliable producer of paperback originals. Perhaps Goodis is explaining his own survival as a writer when he tells us about James Cassidy's work as a bus driver in the following passage:

Aside from the pay, it was emotionally important for Cassidy to do this type of work. Keeping his eyes on the road and his mind on the wheel was a protective fence holding him back from internal as well as external catastrophe. (p.3)

Not one of these fallen characters, living in much reduced circumstances, seems to care for money or recognition, both important things before. Yet they all work, day in and day out, with a kind of robotic fidelity which is oddly lacking in ambition.

To go along with their new, less impressive occupations the men also assume alteregos which place them into a lower social class than the one to which they had belonged before they changed. The men are, for a time anyway, successful at passing in a different milieu. It is a particularly American theme, one which is central to hard-boiled literature with its emphasis on portraying people on the

margins of society. Once James Cassidy is outed as a high-class refugee in the working class world, one of his friends explains why no one suspected before that he had a college education. He says:

He's been through a certain process. It's something on the order of oxidation. When the bright polish comes off and for a while there's only the dull surface and then slowly it arrives, the rust. It's a special kind of rust. It gets under the surface and goes way down deep.

(p.125)

This explanation echoes Philip Marlowe's famous contention that he has become "part of the nastiness." But in Goodis' novels, the sordidness is not always associated with criminality. Rather, it can be as straightforward as persistent alcoholism or being addicted to the company of people who reinforce the worst aspects of one's spirit. Goodis makes it very clear that the denigrated living circumstances of his downtrodden talents are not unique; anyone could find himself there given the right turn of events.

One thing which Goodis' makes clear is that, regardless of who is to blame for the circumstances of one's life, the individual pays for the damages with his/her identity. Life, with all of its inherent treachery, is represented as

an endless assault on identity. In his first successful crime novel, Dark Passage, Goodis has Vincent Parry undergo plastic surgery in order to shield his identity as a man who has broken out of prison to find out who really killed his wife. Parry is serving a life sentence at San Quentin for her murder. The fact that he is innocent does not help. As Goodis writes in the opening words of the novel:

It was a tough break. Parry was innocent. On top of that he was a decent sort of guy who never bothered people and wanted to lead a quiet life. But there was too much on the other side and on his side of it there was practically nothing. (p.1)

So Parry, who is innocent, must still sacrifice the most concrete aspect of his identity, his face, in the pursuit of justice. His only crime in the novel is being that "decent sort of guy" who is too trusting of the people in his life. In the end, he eludes capture but lives in the shadow of a persistent and insidious paranoia about everyone he meets. If there is a moral to this story, then it points specifically to the dangers of a lack of awareness of the true nature of people around us. Like the knightly detective heroes, Goodis' middle-class strivers stumble when they believe too much in the rewards which come to those who toe the line, who serve the right

masters. Parry, for example, was a clerk in a brokerage house. He admired the rich investors whom he saw from time to time, although he was too shy to speak with them. Yet he idealized them and hoped to become like them through honest hard work and thrift. The demise of Parry's innocence is a large part of the story. And, as in all of Goodis' fiction, it is only when the characters accept their complicity in the self-servingness they deplore that they begin to have some control over their own destinies.

Goodis himself learned after Dark Passage to be more aware of what was to be gained by "slumming" or "passing" as a paperback writer. In his early days, he wrote under a variety of pseudonyms for economic reasons. But later he made poetry from the gesture, casting his characters as sympathetic *pícaros*, tricksters without malice. Goodis' characters remind us to always be skeptical of representation. This growing awareness in the novels does more than insulate the characters from disappointment. By deliberately acting within what we might call the "pattern language" of commodified genre fiction, Goodis' characters break out of the rutted tracks of the romance in which they are supposed to be living. Yet, at the same time, they resist the inevitable march forward of the picaresque narrative destiny by subverting the geography in which they

operate as subjects of the modern metropolis. In a way, they all win by taking hold of figuration with all of its inherent dangers and dark alleys. They are all like Vincent Parry who goes to the bus station in San Francisco and when asked where he wants to go answers truthfully that he would like to go to Patavilca, Peru. When queried again, he replaces Patavilca with Maricopa, Arizona, the place of his birth. Vincent has a ticket for Maricopa in his pocket, but what no one knows is that he is really on his way to Patavilca, one way or another. (p.241) Although the facts of his birth bear down upon the dream of freedom symbolized by Patavilca in the story, Parry will emerge from his "dark passage" and prevail in his bid to reconcile the two forces in his life.

Parry contemplates life in Patavilca the same way that Marlowe in Chandler's stories regards the tableau in stained glass at the Sternwood mansion in The Big Sleep. Marlowe tells us that:

...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. (p.4)

Marlowe returns to this tableau at the end of the novel and notes the lack of progress the knight seems to be making.

(p.209) Chandler does not want us to forget here that the image of the knight frozen in his role is a literary ideal, a feature of romance which itself looks backwards towards the familiar symmetries of legend rather than outwards towards the griminess of the present world. It may, however, seek to address that world with its own oblique gestures. The reconciliation of these impulses is the story of hard-boiled crime fiction in America. Certainly the conflict has a social context, and certainly the attitudes of its players can be evaluated in that light. But, as Chandler and Goodis and all the others remind us, we are confronting a crisis which demands an explicitly literary solution.

The words of another who chose to write romance when he might have written a straight novel instead are relevant here. In the introduction to The House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne defines romance thus:

...the attempt to connect a by-gone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us. It is a Legend, prolonging itself, from an epoch now gray in the distance, down into our own broad daylight, and bringing along with it some of its legendary mist, which the Reader, according to his pleasure, may either disregard, or allow it to float almost imperceptibly about the characters and events, for the sake of a picturesque effect. ("Introduction," p.2)

A cursory and superficial reading of hard-boiled crime fiction finds only that "picturesque effect" and does not allow the reader to fully realize the implications of this clear invocation of romance in the pursuit of a crime fiction which will more adequately address twentieth-century moral crises. The truth is that like Cervantes and his odd couple, hard-boiled crime fiction necessarily takes up romance as a subject and not just as referent. The heroes and villains alike struggle to distinguish themselves in a landscape so bleak and overdetermined by forces beyond their control that they both have trouble remembering that they have free will. How their consciousness of this is returned to them and how they deal then with the consequences of their discoveries are the two forces which drive the plot. It is, indeed, a far cry from

the classic detective story whose intention is always expressed as a desire to uncover that which wishes to remain hidden. In hard-boiled crime fiction, it is rather the hubris of the quest coupled with the dazzling brilliance and cruel honesty of "our own broad daylight," unobscured by that "legendary mist," which seeks to advance the frontier of our knowledge, and simultaneously delivers an awareness of our deepest sins.

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