

Tough Guys In a New World: The times of *The Maltese Falcon*

Chapter six of Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture by John G. Cawelti, entitled “The Hard-Boiled Detective Story,” explores the key elements and aspects of the classic detective novel. The city becomes one of the most important aspects of the genre. The city is a deceptive façade, the outer layer displaying a center of commerce, industry and science. It is a place of mystery, writes Cawelti, but at its interior lays a world of exploitation and criminality. Furthermore, the modern city represents a place for adventure. (141) Using the city as backdrop to the story is just part of the formula in writing a hard-boiled detective story. More important than the city itself are the story’s characters who, because of their city lives, behave in a certain manner.

The classic hard-boiled detective story must include four main characters types: a victim, a criminal, a detective and minor characters who cannot solve the problem. These minor characters are often the police. The victim is often a sympathetic character. The criminal is frequently a central character in the story, many times as major a character as the detective himself. The criminal hides behind many clues, is often close to the detective or in many cases romantically involved with a central character. The criminal is part of larger group, dealing in the criminal underground. The detective of the story is a tough guy, a complex personality who mixes honor and cynicism, brutality and sentimentalism, failure and success. (149) The hard-boiled detective has learned that criminality can be anywhere – to him society is corrupted and anyone can be a suspect.

The hard-boiled detective’s attitude of toughness and cynicism is often a façade, much like that of the city in which he works. He is likely to have deep moral roots and in most cases resorts to the values of an earlier time, a chivalric code of honor that guides his actions. The detective undertakes every case as a mission, a “crusade to root out and destroy the evils that have corrupted the urban world.” (151) The hard-boiled detective is a man of virtue in an immoral and corrupt world. (153) The detective’s values obligate him to take over and do the job of protecting society because of the failure and corruption of those in power. In the classical story, the police represent the limitations and inadequacies of a system likely to be corrupt. Above all, the detective is a man of honor, his actions are dictated by his moral integrity. He is different from the rest of the population in that he will not jeopardize his honor for fame or fortune. But he is rewarded for his services by winning the population’s admiration and often capturing the heart of the story’s damsel. He is always rewarded well for his services. Ultimately, the hard-boiled detective story is always a story of success.

Sexuality in the hard-boiled novel is a double edge sword, an object of pleasure and betrayal. The women in the novel are one more obstacle, temptation or threat, that the detective must overcome. The seductive and dangerous woman represents the new threats the city poses. The new woman of the roaring twenties is no longer the chaste Victorian lady of elegance, she has shifted from victim to villain. In that aspect, women, along with the rich, have become the objects of hostility in the new society.

In chapter seven “Hammett, Chandler and Spillane,” Cawelti, compares the literary style of the three most prominent hard-boiled writers of the time. Dashiell Hammett’s responsible more than any other person for creating the image of the hard-boiled detective. His success lies in his ability to embody a powerful vision of modern life. Hammett’s stories provide a window into the corruption, violence, and greed of the time. His stories go well beyond those of lesser quality by expressing a philosophical view of the world, an illusion of time passed, and a fear of times to come.

“Hammett and the Hard-Boiled Sentimental,” chapter two of Leonard Cassuto’s Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories, explores the changes taking place in American society during the 1920s as reflected in the era’s hard-boiled detective stories. Cassuto notes that The Maltese Falcon – though published before the stock market crash – anticipates the socioeconomic crisis that would ensue as the Great Depression swept across America. According to Cassuto, Hammett uses the novel’s characters to call attention to the changes and tensions taking place in society. The characters’ lack of sentiment or strong family ties suggest a loss of morality and a breakdown of family relations within society at large. Socioeconomic changes brought on by the incorporation of America have also led to an obsession with pursuing individual self-interest. As a result, the trust among individuals – particularly among families – has declined. Trust exists only in the pursuit of self-interest, as exemplified by Samuel Spade.

The conclusion of World War I, Cassuto maintains, redefined the idea of trust in the public sphere. (51) Americans, began to trust large corporations with their investments, creating a family of financial interest outside of the home. Hammett viewed this new family of interest as one void of sympathy and preoccupied with the pursuit of the dollar. (52) He expresses this view in the character of Samuel Spade, who lacks any close connections and is willing to betray for the sake of self-interest. The movement of society from a system of visible money, to one in which the individual had to rely on stock certificates and checks to carry value led many Americans who were not ready for this type of economic change to distrust the new system. Similarly, Samuel Spade refuses to speculate – unlike the rest of the novel’s characters – and, accordingly, was able to survive the debacle of the falcon. According to Cassuto, this was Hammett’s way of warning people of the possible collapse of this new speculative economy. Only those who don’t risk or speculate too much would survive when the inevitable crisis came. (60) “Dashiell Hammett,” he suggests, “represented this loss of trust, years before it was gone” (63)