Adventure, Mystery, and Romance

Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture

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For Betty, Donald, and Florence Cawelti

Who cannot be held responsible for my taste in literature, but who have had a great deal to do with everything else

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Any successful formula is likely to inspire individual work on many levels of quality. This is certainly true of the hard-boiled detective story. Two of its major creators, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, hold a high place on most lists of the finest writers of mystery fiction. Some critics consider them important literary figures worthy of being ranked with contemporaries like John O'Hara and John Steinbeck. Even in dismissing the whole of classical detective fiction as beneath serious attention, Edmund Wilson exempted Raymond Chandler from his anathemas. On the other hand, the most popular writer of hard-boiled stories, Mickey Spillane, is a favorite literary villain, everybody's supreme embodiment of the tasteless, vulgar, obsessive, sadistic, and unredeemable drags of popular formula literature. The purpose of this chapter is to examine some of the central differences between these writers and to define more fully their individual characteristics and artistic significance.

Dashiell Hammett

In contrast to most hard-boiled detective writers who tend to employ the same detective and the same essential story over and over, Dashiell Hammett's work is extremely various. Each of his novels presents a different kind of problem and pattern of action. His first two full-length books, Red Harvest and The Dain Curse, feature an anonymous professional detective known as the Continental Op, who is also the central figure of most of Hammett's short stories. Though they share the same detective, these two novels are nonetheless very different in character. Red Harvest is westernlike in its setting and in its violent and chaotic narrative of gang warfare. The Dain Curse resembles a gothic novel with its eerie atmosphere of family curses, drugs, strange religious cults, and twisted motives. Hammett's third novel, The Maltese Falcon, develops a new detective, Sam Spade, who bears some resemblance to the Continental Op but is younger, wittier, and more of a ladies' man than his predecessor. His story too is different, shaped like a classical detective story complete with complex mystery and hidden treasure. The Glass Key goes beyond the detective story altogether to become a study in political power and corruption. Finally, in The Thin Man, Hammett invents still another detective, the private investigator Nick Charles, newly married to an heiress and transformed into a socialite and successful businessman but still capable of a good bit of detection between parties. Despite this manifold inventiveness, a distinctive Hammett quality pervades all his works. Most critics have summarized this characteristic as the importation into the detective story of a new "realism." Raymond Chandler, for example, argued that

Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not with handwrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes.¹

That there was a new quality in Hammett's detective stories is certainly the case. Hammett, more than any other person, invented the hard-boiled detective. It is true that there were action-filled, tough-guy detective stories before Hammett came on the scene; in fact, the origins of the formula are lost in the obscurity of early twentieth-century western and action-detective pulps. Several hard-boiled writers emerged more or less simultaneously with Hammett in the pages of Black Mask Magazine during the twenties, but Hammett was the most important. It was he who latched the new story into shape, gave it much of its distinctive style and atmosphere, developed its urban setting, invented many of its most effective plot patterns, and, above all, articulated the hard-boiled hero, creating that special mixture of toughness and sentimentality, of cynical understatement and eloquence that would remain the stamp of the hard-boiled detective, even in his cruder avatars.

The claim that Hammett's contribution to the detective story was primarily a new kind of truth or accuracy about people who commit murders and the individuals who find them out is dubious on two counts. First, Hammett's stories are not that much more realistic than many classical detective stories and, second, Hammett's power as a writer does not lie in his greater fidelity to the realistic details of crime and punishment but in his capacity to embody a powerful vision of life in the hard-boiled detective formula.

Actually, Chandler's insistence that Hammett is primarily a "realist in murder" must be seen in its context as a defense of the hard-boiled story against the classical genre of complex puzzles and clues. The main ground of Chandler's defense is that the classical story lost contact with reality in its development of intriguing and mystifying puzzles solved by a gentlemanly amateur detective whom, as Chandler puts it, "the English police seem to endure . . . with their customary stoicism; but I shudder to think of what the boys down at the Homicide Bureau in my city would do to him."² But is it really the case that a Hammett novel like The Maltese Falcon, which revolves around a mysterious age-old treasure, eccentric villains, and complex webs of

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in intrigue, is more "realistic" than the detective novels of Dorothy Sayers with their ordinary settings, their relatively plausible motivations, and their rich texture of manners and local color? Such an assertion surely exemplifies that American literary tendency to identify the "real" with the violent, the sordid, and the brutal aspects of life. As Lionel Trilling points out in his analysis of this tendency in Theodore Dreiser and Vernon Parrington, such an identification can be just as arbitrary and limited a view of "reality" as the more philosophical or genteel perspectives it set out to attack.3 If one approaches the Hammett canon without accepting the premise that toughness and violence are supremely real, the fantastic nature of most of his stories becomes clear. The Continental Op creates and controls a revolution in a mysterious Balkan country in a story tougher in style but no more plausible in incident than the popular Graustarkian romances of the early twentieth century. A criminal genius named Pappadopoulous (but clearly a Hammett version of Doyle's Professor Moriarty) brings an army of gangsters to San Francisco, pulls off a bank robbery that involves a pitched battle with the entire city police force, and then succeeds in killing off the great majority of his henchmen before he is finally brought to bay by the Op. The Op becomes involved in the tangled affairs of the Leggett family, which are so bizarre that they even involve a family curse. In one of the climactic moments of this story the Op confronts a hardened prophet who is about to sacrifice the heroine on the altar of his temple, a setting as gothic as anything out of The Mysteries of Udolpho. To say that such characters, actions, and settings are more realistic than the advertising agencies, country villages, or university quadrangles of Dorothy Sayers cannot withstand serious scrutiny.

Far from being a straightforward realist who rescued the detective story from sterile littérature and gave it back to the actual world, Hammett was an extremely literary writer. His work shows both an awareness of earlier literary models and a continual interest in such literary effects as irony and paradox. One of his earliest published works, "Memoirs of a Private Detective," though based on Hammett's own experiences as a Pinkerton operative, implies a perspective shaped as much by the elegant, fin-de-siècle cynicism of writers like Ambrose Bierce as by the direct perception of life. Though Hammett probably had more practical experiences as a detective than any other writer of mystery novels, his presentation of his own career takes the form of brief, delicately turned paradoxes that have a flavor something between The Devil's Dictionary and an O. Henry story.

Wishing to get some information from members of the W.C.T.U. in an Oregon city, I introduced myself as the secretary of the Butte City Purity League. One of them read me a long discourse on the erotic effects of cigarettes upon young girls. Subsequent experiments proved this trip worthless.4

As he developed as a writer, Hammett lost some of the aroma of the décadence, not so much because his attention focused more directly on life, but because his literary models changed. Hammett's early stories grew directly out of the pulp tradition and many of them, like Red Harvest, resemble westerns as much as they do detective stories. Even at this time Hammett occasionally experimented with the transformation of other traditional literary types into his own hard-boiled mode. This became a standard practice in his later novels. Thus, The Dain Curse makes use of a wide variety of gothic traditions—the family curse, the mysterious temple with its secret passages and ghosts, religious manias, the tragedy on the beetle cliffs—while The Maltese Falcon reflects the great tradition of stories of hidden treasure like "The Gold-Bug" and Treasure Island with Cairo and Gutman playing the role of Long John Silver. The Thin Man embodies a more contemporaneous literary tradition, the novel of high society and urban sophistication. The quality of its dialogue, setting, and general tone of breezy hauteur suggests that it was at least partly modeled on the novels and stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In part Hammett may have felt that his employment of the hard-boiled detective in stories that owed so much to established literary traditions added respectability and dignity to the saga of the tough-guy hero in such a way as to make his adventures more acceptable to a cultivated, middle-class reading public. It would not be the first time that a pulp writer had tried to add tone to his creations by wrapping them in a literary toga. Hammett's contemporary Max Brand (Frederick Faust) even went so far as to construct an entire western called Hired Guns using the plot and characters of the Iliad in cowboy costumes (a ten-year range war between two families that started in an argument over a young lady named Ellen). But this is only part of the story. Hammett's use of these traditional literary materials is more often ironic than straightforward, satirical rather than serious. Hammett continually builds up conventional literary moods and then punctures them with the flat, rasping cynicism of the private eye who has seen it all before and knows it is phony. In the famous climax of The Maltese Falcon, Sam Spade unmasks Brigid O'Shaughnessy as the killer, accusing her of having used him to save her neck. Brigid, however, still hopes to capitalize on the romance that has grown up between the two:

"Yes, but,—oh, sweetheart!—it wasn't only that. I would have come back to you sooner or later. From the first instant I saw you I knew—Spade said tenderly: "You angel! Well, if you get a good break you'll be out of San Quentin in twenty years and you can come back to me then." She took her cheek away from his, drawing her head far back to stare up without comprehension at him. He was pale. He said tenderly: "I hope to God they don't hang you, precious, by that sweet neck." He slid his hands up to caress her throat.5

Sam's flat refusal—"I won't play the sap for you"—shatters the world of romantic illusion that Brigid has woven about the attraction between herself and Sam and dissipates the haze of dashing adventure with which she has
cloaked the sordid reality of her pursuit of the falcon. This sort of ironic contrast between romantic fantasies and real violence and ugliness permeates *The Maltese Falcon* as it does much of Hammett’s work. We see it in the way Cairo and Gutman’s exotic elegance has an underside of petty and sordid ruthlessness, or in the way Spade refuses to accept any of the noble motives that various characters seek to ascribe to him; for example, though Sam insists on tracking down the killer of his partner, Miles Archer, he makes it clear that he does so not out of affection or loyalty, but as a matter of good business: “When one of your organization gets killed it’s bad business to let the killer get away with it. It’s bad all around—bad for that one organization, bad for every detective everywhere.” Perhaps, most powerfully of all, Hammett’s perspicuously flat, hard-edged, and laconic vernacular style with its denial of the lyrical effects cultivated by vernacular stylists like Hemingway or, in a different way, by Hammett’s fellow hard-boiled writer Raymond Chandler, runs against the breathless excitement of his stories. Even the most fantastic episodes retain the solid, cold, slightly tired tone in which Hammett’s detectives narrate their adventures. Everything is calmly weighed and measured:

It was a diamond all right, shining in the grass half a dozen feet from the blue brick walk. It was small, not more than a quarter of a carat in weight, and unmounted. I put it in my pocket and began searching the lawn as closely as I could without going at it on all fours.⁶

He came in, looking and acting as if I were St. Peter letting him into Heaven. I closed the door and led him through the lobby, down the main corridor. So far as we could see we had the joint to ourselves. And then we didn’t. Gabrielle Leggett came around a corner just ahead of us. She was barefooted. Her only clothing was a yellow silk nightgown that was splashed with dark stains. In both hands, held out in front of her as she walked, she carried a large dagger, almost a sword. It was red and wet. Her hands and bare arms were red and wet. There was a dab of blood on one of her cheeks. Her eyes were clear, bright, and calm. Her small forehead was smooth, her mouth and chin firmly set. She walked up to me, her untroubled gaze holding my probably troubled one, and said evenly, just as if she had expected to find me there, had come there to find me: “Take it. It is evidence. I killed him.”

I said: “Huh?”

The stylistic combination that these passages exemplify—utterly fantastic incidents described in nearly emotionless, lucidly descriptive vernacular prose—has a surrealistic flavor, like those paintings by Dali where flaming giraffes and melting watches are rendered with the most carefully drawn “realistic” detail. This interweaving of flat realism and wild fantasy seems to grow out of Hammett’s basic sense of life: the vision of an irrational cosmos, in which all the rules, all the seeming solidity of matter, routine, and custom can be overturned in a moment, pervades his work from beginning to end. Even the early “Memoirs of a Private Detective” continually reflects this utterly paradoxical sense of the world:

Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane

A man whom I was shadowing went out into the country for a walk one Sunday afternoon and lost his bearing completely. I had to direct him back to the city.

I was once falsely accused of perjury and had to perjure myself to escape arrest.

I knew a detective who once attempted to disguise himself thoroughly. The first policeman he met took him into custody.

I knew a man who once stole a Ferris-wheel.⁷

By the time he wrote *The Maltese Falcon* several years later, Hammett’s whimsical, fin-de-siècle cynicism had developed into a starker vision of cosmic treachery. Early in *The Maltese Falcon* Sam Spade tells Brigid O’Shaughnessy the story of Flitcraft, a successful businessman in Tacoma who had suddenly disappeared, leaving behind his wife and children. When Sam finally met Flitcraft five years later in Spokane, he was again a successful businessman, had remarried, and settled down to a life identical in all respects to that he had left. Flitcraft gladly explains to Sam the reason for his strange behavior.

One day, walking down the street, he had been nearly killed by a falling beam. This made him realize that life was not fundamentally neat and orderly, but that men “lived only while blind chance spared them.” He felt a need to adjust to this new vision of life and so he went away. But in moving to Seattle, Flitcraft had gradually drifted into the same life pattern he had known before. Sam is obviously fascinated by this story. He tells Brigid that Flitcraft wasn’t sorry for what he had done. It seemed reasonable enough to him. I don’t think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that’s the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more beams fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.”⁸

In the context of the novel, the Flitcraft story is a kind of warning to Brigid that Sam has adjusted himself to a world that is likely to betray him at any time. As it turns out, Sam needs all his cynical equanimity, for Brigid conceals a devastating treachery behind a facade of beauty and romance. In the end it is only Sam’s total disillusionment that saves him from destruction.

Yet the moral of both stories—that of Flitcraft and of Sam Spade—is more than a little ambiguous. It is true that Flitcraft and Spade manage to survive the falling beam, but for what? Flitcraft goes back to the same respectable middle-class life that he had so suddenly awakened from; Spade returns to his shabby office, having sent the woman he loves off to prison. The price of survival would seem to be a terrible emptiness, a restriction of human possibilities, a cynical rejection of deeper emotion and commitment. Though some critics have suggested that the Flitcraft story is an existentialist parable, it implies something more ambiguous to me. The existentialist believes that recognizing the irrationality and absurdity of the universe can be the prelude
to a new spiritual depth. Through such a realization man can pass beyond despair to a freely chosen moral responsibility that gives meaning to an otherwise ridiculous and empty existence. The Flitcraft parable seems to come out at the other end. Only a rejection of all emotional and moral ties can help man survive in a treacherous world.

Instead, the job is the source of value and meaning for Hammett's hard-boiled hero. When the beautiful Russian Princess Zhukovski offers him money and her body not to turn her in, the Continental Op replies:

"We'll disregard whatever honesty I happen to have, sense of loyalty to employers, and so on. You might doubt them, so we'll throw them out. Now I'm a detective because I happen to like the work. It pays me a fair salary, but I could find other jobs that would pay more.... Now I pass up about twenty-five or thirty thousand of honest gain because I like being a detective, like the work. And liking work makes you want to do it as well as you can. Otherwise there'd be no sense to it. That's the fix I am in. I don't know anything else, don't enjoy anything else, don't want to know or enjoy anything else. You can't weigh that against any sum of money. Money is good stuff. I haven't anything against it. But in the past eighteen years I've been getting my fun out of chasing crooks and tackling puzzles, my satisfaction out of catching crooks and solving riddles. It's the only kind of sport I know anything about, and I can't imagine a pleasant future than twenty-some years more of it. I'm not going to blow that up."

Sam Spade exposes Brigid, the woman he thinks he loves, as a murderess because "when one of your organization gets killed it's bad business to let the killer get away with it.... It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him." The Hammett hero has little of the quixotic knight-errantry or complex inner reluctance of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. He is capable of helping young ladies in trouble or of suppressing evidence so that relatively innocent persons will not be hurt, but his major dedication is to being a good detective and not letting either romantic illusions or the irrational forces of chance catch him off guard. As one of the girls he helps tells him, he is "a monster. A nice one, an especially nice one to have around when you're in trouble, but a monster just the same, without any human foolishness like love in him."

Hammett's first full-length novel, *Red Harvest*, presents the confrontation of the Hammett hero with a world of crazy, irrational violence that nearly catches him up in an orgy of destruction. Only his common sense, his brutal cynicism and disillusion, and his technical skills as a manhunter save him from the torrent of chaos unleashed in the town of Personville by his own investigations. *Red Harvest* is a prime example of that rhythm of exposure and temptation that was designated in the preceding chapter as one of the major characteristics of the hard-boiled formula. The Op is called to Personville—known as Poisonville to many—by a newspaper editor, Donald Willson. Before the Op can even see his client, Willson is murdered. The Op soon discovers that Willson had sent for a detective in connection with a newspaper crusade he planned to launch against the rampant corruption in Personville. At the center of this corruption lies Willson's own father, the violent old mining baron Elihu Willson. The older Willson had run the town of Personville like a little kingdom of his own until challenged by the IWW. To break the power of organized labor, Willson had brought in criminal-dominated gangs of strike-breakers. But, as a former labor leader tells the Op,

old Elihu didn't know his Italian history. He won the strike, but he lost his hold on the city and the state. To beat the miners he had to let his hired thugs run wild. When the fight was over he couldn't get rid of them. He had given his city to them and he wasn't strong enough to take it away from them."

Finding his city dominated by such disreputable characters as "Whisper" Thaler, Pete the Finn, and Lew Yard, old Willson gives his idealistic son the *Morning Herald* in the belief that a newspaper crusade against crime will help him to regain his old power. Willson's gangster allies, suspecting his intentions, have apparently murdered his son to stop the crusade. Old Elihu doesn't show much interest in the connection between his son's murder and Personville's rampant corruption until, the next evening, a gangster named Yakima Shorty breaks into his home. At this point, Willson decides that his former gangster allies are determined to kill him as well. He commissions the Op to clean up Personville.

The Op proceeds to apply the principle of divide and conquer. With information provided by a woman named Dinah Brand who has been the mistress of several of the men involved in Personville's gangs, the Op splits the various forces and brings them to a state of open war against each other. Explaining his technique to Dinah, the Op reveals the kind of stoical self-reliance that marks the Hammett hero:

"The closest I've got to an idea is to dig up any and all the dirty work I can that might implicate the others, and run it out. Maybe I'll advertise—*Crime Wanted—Male or Female*. If they're as crooked as I think they are I shouldn't have a lot of trouble finding a job or two that I can hang on them."

"So that's the way you scientific detectives work. My God! for a fat, middle-aged, hard-boiled, pig-headed guy, you've got the vaguest way of doing things I ever heard of."

"Plans are all right sometimes," I said. "And sometimes just stirring things up is all right—if you're tough enough to survive, and keep your eyes open so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top."

The Op's stirring-up technique works beautifully at first. As he hears shooting break out all over the city, the Op purrs with satisfaction:

Off to the north some guns popped.
A group of three men passed me, shifty-eyed, walking pigeon-toed.
A little farther along, another man moved all the way over to the curb to give me plenty of room to pass. I didn’t know him and didn’t suppose he knew me.

A lone shot sounded not far away.

As I reached the hotel, a battered black touring car went down the street, hitting fifty at least, crammed to the curtains with men.

I grinned after it. Poisonville was beginning to boil out under the lid, and I felt so much like a native that even the memory of my very un-nice part in the boiling didn’t keep me from getting twelve solid end-to-end hours of sleep.13

If this represented the Op’s final attitude toward the Personville situation, only Hammett’s style would differentiate his hero from a bloodthirsty manhunter like Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer. But legitimating brutal aggression in the name of justice is not exactly Hammett’s intention. Instead, as the violence in Personville mounts, driven on by his own machinations, the Op himself begins to lose his grip, caught up in the bloodlust.

“This damned burg’s getting me. If I don’t get away soon I’ll be going blood-simlar like the natives. There’s been what? A dozen and a half murders since I’ve been here. . . . I’ve arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I’ve ever got the fever . . . Play with murder enough and it gets you one of two ways. It makes you sick, or you get to like it.”14

Additional ironies compound the ambivalence of the Op’s position. It turns out that the killing of Donald Willson, which initiated the slaughter, was committed by a bank clerk, jealous of Willson’s attentions to Dinah Brand. Thus it had nothing to do with underworld intrigue. When Elihu Willson realizes this, he attempts to call off the case. Moreover, the gangsters soon discover that internecine warfare can only lead to ruin. All parties concerned would like to bury the hatchet. The Op arranges a “peace conference” at old Willson’s house where he plays so effectively on the fears and jealousies of the assembled gangsters that a new orgy of violence breaks out almost before the meeting is over. Unlike most of the hard-boiled writers, Hammett does not ignore or evade the vicious implications of his hero’s actions. The Op senses that he, too, is becoming a murderer. Speaking to Dinah Brand, who has become his ally, the Op bitterly explains the significance of what he did at the “peace conference.”

“I could have gone to [Elihu Willson] this afternoon and showed him that I had them ruined. He’d have listened to reason. He’d have come over to my side, have given me the support I needed to swing the play legally. I could have done that. But it’s easier to have them killed off, easier and surer, and, now that I’m feeling this way, more satisfying. I don’t know how I’m to come out with the agency. The Old Man will boil me in oil if he ever finds out what I’ve been doing. It’s this damned town. Poisonville is right. It’s poisoned me.”

Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane

“Look. I sat at Willson’s table tonight and played him like you’d play trout, and got just as much fun out of it. I looked at Noonan and knew he hadn’t a chance in a thousand of living another day because of what I had done to him, and I laughed, and felt warm and happy inside. That’s not me. I’ve got hard skin all over what’s left of my soul, and after twenty years of messing around with crime I can look at any sort of a murder without seeing anything in it but my bread and butter, the day’s work. But this getting a rear out of planning deaths is not natural to me. It’s what this place has done to me.”15

The Op’s personal immersion in violence reaches its climax in a drunken party with Dinah Brand. Trying to escape the emotional tension between his hatred of Personville and his doubts about the bloodlust into which his personal crusade to clean up the city has fallen, the Op gets drunker and drunker. Finally, he asks Dinah for a drink of laudanum and falls into a nightmarish semiconsciousness in which he dreams that he is hunting through a strange city for a man he hates. When he finds the man, he is on the roof of a tall building. The ending of the dream symbolizes the Op’s own destruction in the violence he has sought.

His shoulder slid out of my fingers. My hand knocked his sombrero off, and closed on his head. It was a smooth hard round head no larger than a large egg. My fingers went all the way around it. Squeezing his head in one hand, I tried to bring the knife out of my pocket with the other—and realized that I had gone off the edge of the roof with him. We dropped giddily down toward the millions of upturned faces in the plaza, miles down.16

When the Op awakes in the morning, he finds that he is holding an ice pick in his right hand and that the pick’s “six-inch needle-sharp blade” is thrust into Dinah Brand’s breast. But, instead of being devastated by the realization that he has killed a woman for whom he had begun to feel a real comradeship and affection, the Op becomes once again the detached and cynical professional with a job to do.

I knelt beside the dead girl and used my handkerchief to wipe the ice pick handle clean of any prints my fingers had left on it. I did the same to glasses, bottles, doors, light buttons, and the pieces of furniture I touched or was likely to have touched.

Then I washed my hands, examined my cloth for blood, made sure I was leaving none of my property behind, and went to the front door. I opened it, wiped the inner knob, closed it behind me, wiped the outer knob, and went away.17

At this point in the story, Hammett shifts the narrative focus from the Op as hunter to the Op as hunted. Instead of manipulator of forces and puppet-master of violence, the Op himself becomes a wanted man as the town explodes into a final chaos of violence. Such a shift is necessary to
resolve the moral ambiguities of the Op’s role without directly confronting
the meaning of violence in such a way as to take *Red Harvest* out of the moral
fantasy of heroic adventure and make it a mimetic action. To remain within
the limitations of the hard-boiled formula, Hammett must somehow pull his
hero out of the moral dilemma created by his immersion in violence, thus
freeing him from the devastating awareness of personal guilt. He does this by
a device that has been well prepared for in the course of the novel and, as we
saw in a previous chapter, became one of the foundations of the hard-boiled
detective formula: the violence and corruption are finally attributed to
the city itself, to Poisonville. Through this means, the Op is exonerated, his
causal role in the many murders being legitimized as an act of purification.
Finally, the Op tracks down the one surviving gang leader, now mortally
wounded. This gangster makes a dying confession to the murder of Dinah
Brand. With the elimination of the underworld elite and a final clean-up by
the National Guard, the Op is able to leave the devastated city. “Personville,
under martial law, was developing into a sweet-smelling and thornless bed of
roses.”\(^{16}\)

Though he finally brings about the exoneration of his hero and the
legitimation of his role as agent of destruction and purifying violence,
Hammett ironically undercut this resolution in several ways. All the murder
and destruction accomplish very little. As the Op himself realizes, the
eventual result of his terrible crusade to purify Poisonville is that the city will
be handed back to Elihu Willson, “all nice and clean and ready to go to the
dogs again.” Purification through violence only prepares the way for another
“red harvest.” Moreover, as the orgy of murder reaches its climax, even the
Op loses control over the process and the National Guard has to be called in
to stand watch over the shambles of a city. This final scene brings to mind
the conclusion of Akira Kurosawa’s movie “Yojimbo,” a Japanese analogue
of *Red Harvest*. In the film’s last scene, the samurai hero stands among
the smoking ruins and scattered bodies of the town he has cleaned up. Turning
to the old man who had originally begged him to break the power of the town’s
rival gangs, he says with bitter irony, “Well, old man. You’ll have lots of
peace and quiet now.” Though the Op does finally discover that Dinah Brand
was murdered by the gangster Reno Starkey, his essential guilt can hardly be
escaped. Not only did his determination to purify Poisonville by setting the
rival gangs against each other establish the motive for Dinah’s murder, his
own actions directly caused the killing. As Starkey tells the Op, he had come
to Dinah’s house the night of the murder in order to trap “Whisper” Thaler,
but was suspicious that the trap might be for himself:

“I’m leery that I’ve walked into something, knowing her. I think I’ll take
hold of her and slap the truth out of her. I try it, and she grabs the pick and
screams. When she squawks, I heard man’s feet hitting the floor. The trap’s
sprung, I think…. I don’t mean to be the only one that’s hurt. I twist the
pick out of her hand and stick it in her. You gallop out, coked to the edges,
charging at the whole world with both eyes shut. She tumbles into you.
You go down, roll around till your hand hits the butt of the pick. Holding
on to that, you go to sleep, peaceful as she is.”\(^{19}\)

Though he may not literally have struck the blow, the Op’s hand held the
weapon. Like Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, the conclusion of the Op’s
case requires the destruction of a woman who has offered him a wider range
of emotion and fulfillment than the bleak and rigid rituals of the job. And the
final irony is that there is not much sense of heroic completion to the Op’s
crusade. The final curtain of *Red Harvest* comes down to the tune of the Op’s
boss roasting him for his illegal tactics in Personville: “I might just as well
have saved the labor and sweat I had put into trying to make my reports
harmless. They didn’t fool the Old Man. He gave me merry hell.”\(^{20}\)

In Hammett’s hands what later became the hard-boiled story was a bitter
and ironic parable of universal corruption and irrational violence. *Red
Harvest* might be interpreted as a political parable—Personville being a
symbol of the exploitative capitalist society that has reached the point
where its internal contradictions keep it in a state of perpetual corruption and
chaos. Such a reading might fit the details of the novel and our knowledge of
Hammett’s personal ideological commitments, but it seems basically irrele-
vant to *Red Harvest*. Instead, the book suggests that underneath his
radicalism Hammett was a bleak and stoical pessimist with no more real faith
in a revolutionary utopia to come than in existing societies. Though *Red
Harvest* distantly resembles other “proletarian” novels in which the clash of
capital and labor in a gang-ridden company town leads to violence, there is
no surge of optimistic hope for the future at the end. Proletarian novels
usually ended with the conversion of the protagonist to a vision of the
proletariat on the march, but *Red Harvest* leaves us with a bitter, fat, aging,
and tired detective who has survived the holocaust only because he is harder
and tougher and doesn’t ask much out of life. The enemy that Hammett’s
bitter fictions found beneath the decadent facade of twentieth-century
capitalist society was the universe itself. More than any other hard-boiled
writer, Hammett’s work reflects the vision of a godless naturalistic cosmos
ruled by chance, violence, and death that dominates such major twentieth-
century writers as Conrad, Crane, and Hemingway. Though his work is
shaped by the formulaic imperatives of mystery, suspense, and the victorious
protagonist, Hammett’s stories have a philosophical power and seriousness
beyond most other writers of hard-boiled detective stories. Like the greater
works of Conrad, Crane, and Hemingway, his stories are essentially about
the discovery that the comforting pieties of the past—belief in a benevolent
universe, in progress, in romantic love—are illusions and that man is alone in
a meaningless universe.
Raymond Chandler

Hammett's style is lean, cool, and objective. Its impact derives not from figurative and emotional language but from the collision between flat, emotionally empty, but extremely lucid prose and the striking events and characters it describes. The following is perhaps the most emotionally intense and grotesque scene in *The Dain Curse*, but, with the exception of a few rather austere adjectives, the language is almost purely descriptive with little metaphorical embellishment and almost nothing to indicate the reactions and feelings of the narrator. The scene is powerful enough, but it gains its power through the direct presentation of colors, light, action, and situation:

The altar was glaring white, crystal, and silver in an immense beam of blue-white light that slanted down from an edge of the roof. At one end of the altar Gabrielle crouched, her face turned up into the beam of light. Her face was ghastly white and expressionless in the harsh light. Aaronia Haldorn lay on the altar step where Riese had lain. There was a dark bruise on her forehead. Her hands and feet were tied with broad white bands of cloth, her arms tied to her body. Most of her clothes had been torn off. Joseph, white-robed, stood in front of the altar, and of his wife. He stood with both arms held high and widespread, his back and neck bent so that his bearded face was lifted to the sky. In his right hand he held an ordinary horn-handled knife with a long curled blade.\(^{21}\)

Compare this with the following passage from Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, describing Philip Marlowe's climactic encounter with the psychopathic killer Carmen Sternwood:

The gun pointed at my chest. Her hand seemed to be quite steady. The hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated, become animal, and not a nice animal.

I laughed at her. I started to walk towards her. I saw her small finger tighten on the trigger and grow white at the tip. I was about six feet away when she started to shoot. The sound of the gun made a sharp slap, without body, a brittle crack in the sunlight. I didn't see any smoke. I stopped again and grinned at her.

She fired twice more, very quickly. I don't think any of the shots would have missed. There were five in the little gun. She had fired four. I rushed her.

I didn't want the last one in my face so I swerved to one side. She gave it to me quite carefully not worried at all. I think I felt the hot breath of the powder blast a little.

I straightened up. "My, but you're cute," I said.

Her hand holding the empty gun began to shake violently. The gun fell out of it. Her mouth began to shake. Her whole face went to pieces. Then her head screwed up toward her left ear and froth showed on her lips. Her breath made a whining sound. She swayed.\(^{22}\)

In both these scenes the detective-hero confronts a mad killer. Both exemplify the taut vernacular cultivated by hard-boiled writers with its short, staccato sentences, rhythmic repetitions, and rapid pace. Chandler's language has a figurative and emotionally charged quality that is quite absent from the Hammett passage despite the grotesque intensity of the scene itself. Chandler's style is elaborately metaphorical. The killer's face has a "scraped bone look," the gun makes a "sharp slap" and a "brittle crack in the sunlight." The killer is seen as undergoing a striking series of metamorphoses, from a woman, into a snake ("the hissing sound"), into an animal, and then finally into some totally distorted figure like a cubist painting ("Her whole face went to pieces. Then her head screwed up toward her left ear"). The language intensifies our impression of the strange and incomprehensible involvement of the narrator in the scene; he is being shot at, but he laughs and grins and then finally calls his assailant cute. In comparison, Hammett's description of his detective's physical involvement in the scene that immediately follows the static tableau quoted above seems lucid and objective:

I was fighting. When the knife, shining over our heads, started down, I went in under it, bending my right forearm against his knife-arm, driving the dagger in my left hand at his throat. I drove the heavy blade into his throat, in till the hilt's cross stopped it. Then I was through.\(^{23}\)

When Chandler's Marlowe fights, the scene is described with the same subjectivity that characterizes his confrontation with Carmen Sternwood:

The door jumped open. I was flat against the wall on the opening side. He had the sap out this time, a nice little tool about five inches long, covered with woven brown leather. His eyes popped at the stripped bed and then began to swing around.

I giggled and socked him. I laid the coil spring on the side of his head and he stumbled forward. I followed him down to his knees. I hit him twice more. He made a moaning sound. I took the sap out of his limp hand. He whined.

I used my knee on his face. It hurt my knee. He didn't tell me whether it hurt his face. While he was still groaning I knocked him cold with the sap.\(^{24}\)

Like his style, the world of Chandler's books has little of the lucid impenetrable objectivity of Hammett's vision. Instead, it is permeated with the bitter, lonely, neurotic, but humorous imagination of Philip Marlowe. Marlowe's characteristic stylistic device is the slangy, hyperbolic simile:

Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, he looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food.\(^{25}\)

She approached me with enough sex appeal to stampede a business men's lunch.\(^{26}\)

The subject was as easy to spot as a kangaroo in a dinner jacket.\(^{27}\)

His smile was as faint as a fat lady at a fireman's ball.\(^{28}\)

The eighty-five cent dinner tasted like a discarded mail bag and was served to me by a waiter who looked as if he would slug me for a quarter, cut my
of the twentieth-century antihero. Thus Marlowe became a reluctant and ambiguous knight engaged in an obscure quest for a grail whose value he could never completely articulate. As Richard Schickel puts it, Marlowe is a “moral man, who refuses to play the game of life in a conventionally immoral or amoral way,” and he consequently is doomed to an isolation and loneliness that he hides behind a protective set of tough-guy manerisms.” Chandler himself summed up Marlowe’s character in a letter to a friend:

I think he will always have a fairly shabby office, a lonely house, a number of affairs but no permanent connection. I think he will always be awakened at some inconvenient hour by some inconvenient person to do some inconvenient job. It seems to be that that is his destiny—possibly not the best destiny in the world, but it belongs to him. No one will ever make him rich, because he is destined to be poor. But somehow, I think he would not have it otherwise.... I see him always in a lonely street, in lonely rooms, puzzled, but never quite defeated.22

In one of Chandler’s best books, Farewell, My Lovely, the pattern of the hard-boiled formula becomes the complicated and enigmatic story of Marlowe’s quest for justice. As in most of the novels where he appears, Marlowe becomes involved in one line of investigation that seems to lead to a dead end. He then takes up another problem that at first appears to have no connection with the original situation. When the story reaches its climax, however, the solution is seen to lie in the intersection of the two lines of investigation. In part, this plot structure is a technique of obfuscation aimed at keeping the reader from solving the mystery. As Chandler once explained:

It often seems to this particular writer that the only reasonably honest and effective method of fooling the reader that remains is to make the reader exercise his mind about the wrong problem, to make him, as it were, solve a mystery (since he is almost sure to solve something) which will land him in a bypath because it is only tangential to the central problem.33

But the device is also appropriate to Marlowe’s character in that it sets the detective on a quest that becomes increasingly ambiguous and exasperating, forcing him to seek not only for the factual solution to the various mysteries he confronts, but for a moral stance toward the events in which he has become enmeshed. Farewell, My Lovely begins with Marlowe’s random involvement in the affairs of one Moose Malloy, a former bank robber who has just been released from eight years in prison. In fact, Marlowe is literally plucked off the street by Malloy, a man of gigantic stature and strength.

He lifted me up two more steps. I wrenched myself loose and tried for a little elbow room. I wasn’t wearing a gun. Looking for Dimitrios Aleidis hadn’t seemed to require it. I doubted if it would do me any good. The big man would probably take it away from me and eat it.24

Malloy, in a perfectly friendly though somewhat bewildered way, wants Marlowe to accompany him to a nearby bar where his girl friend, Little
Velma, had formerly worked. When they arrive at the bar, Moose and Marlowe discover that it has become a black establishment and that nobody there has ever heard of Little Velma. Moose gets into a fight with the bar’s owner and kills him. Moose then disappears. After reporting to the police, Marlowe makes a desultory attempt to track him further. When Marlowe talks to an old woman, Mrs. Florian, who had known Moose and Velma in earlier days, she tells him that Velma is dead. He gives up the chase.

At this point Marlowe becomes involved in what seems to be a completely new line of action. A certain Lindsay Marriott tells Marlowe a complicated and dubious story about having to pay ransom for a fabulous jade necklace and hires the detective to act as his bodyguard during the payoff. When they drive to the deserted road supposedly designated by the jewel thieves, Marlowe is knocked out and Marriott is murdered. Marlowe is left with a bitter sense of having failed in his job. He investigates further and discovers that the jade necklace belongs to the wealthy Mrs. Lewin Lockridge Grayle. Marlowe calls on Mrs. Grayle, who tells him another story about her jade necklace and then makes a date to meet him at a night club. In the meantime, examining some marijuana cigarettes found on Marriott’s body, Marlowe finds a card with the name ‘Jules Amthor, Psychic Consultant’ printed on it. Amthor turns out to be a Hollywood spiritualist with an establishment similar to that of the Haldorn’s in Hammett’s The Dain Curse. When he approaches Amthor, however, Marlowe comes out second. He is beaten up by Amthor and a huge Hollywood Indian named Second Planting, and then turned over to two crooked policemen from neighboring Bay City. The two policemen deposit Marlowe in a clandestine hospital where the corrupt Dr. Sonderberg injects him with drugs. Waking from his drug-induced stupor, Marlowe escapes from Sonderberg’s “hospital.” In the process he discovers that Moose Malloy has been hiding out there. When he tells his story to the police, Marlowe is warned to stay off the case and to let the police handle the rest of the investigation. By this time it is fairly obscure just who and what are being investigated.

The next phase of the action begins when Marlowe and the police discover that Mrs. Florian, with whom Marlowe had talked earlier, has been violently murdered, apparently by Moose Malloy. Marlowe returns to Bay City and discovers that Moose Malloy is probably hiding out on a gambling ship anchored off shore. With the assistance of an honest former policeman he meets on the waterfront, Marlowe manages to board the gambling ship secretly and to persuade its owner, the racketeer Laird Brunette, to deliver a message to Moose. By this time, the reader, like Marlowe, has probably realized that the wealthy and beautiful Mrs. Grayle is actually Moose’s former sweetheart who has married an elderly millionaire during Moose’s long stretch in prison. The climax of the novel is a confrontation between Moose and Mrs. Grayle-Velma in Marlowe’s apartment. The culmination of this meeting is worth quoting as an example of the taut, emotionally charged, but understated narrative that is one of Chandler’s most effective stylistic qualities:

He didn’t look at me at all. He looked at Mrs. Lewin Lockridge Grayle. He leaned forward and his mouth smiled at her and he spoke to her softly. “I thought I knew the voice,” he said. “I listened to that voice for eight years—all I could remember of it. I kind of liked your hair red, though. Hiya, babe. Long time no see.”

She turned the gun.

“Get away from me, you son of a bitch,” she said.

He stopped dead and dropped the gun to his side. He was still a couple of feet from her. His breath labored.

“I never thought,” he said quietly. “It just came to me out of the blue. You turned me in to the cops. You, Little Velma.”

I threw a pillow, but it was too slow. She shot him five times in the stomach. The bullets made no more sound than fingers going into a glove.33

Velma escapes, and Moose dies. This is the end of Marlowe’s direct involvement with the case. We are told, however, that, three months later, in Baltimore, a detective recognizes Velma singing in a night club. When he corners her, Velma shoots the detective and then herself.

Needless to say, it is not clarity of plot or the suspenseful intensity of a straightforward line of action that accounts for the particular power of Farewell, My Lovely. Chandler’s plot is both fantastically intricate and lacking in suspense, at least as far as the mystery itself is concerned, for it requires little penetration to see that the key to the mystery lies in the identity of Mrs. Grayle. The central problem of Farewell, My Lovely is not who did the murders but why Philip Marlowe goes to so much trouble and runs so many risks to arrange the final confrontation between Moose Malloy and his Little Velma. The whodunit answer to this question is that after the death of Mrs. Florian only Moose can identify the wealthy Mrs. Grayle as Little Velma and thereby implicate her in the murder of Lindsay Marriott. But this motive seems disproportionate to the trouble and risk Marlowe takes to bring Moose and Velma together. His actions clearly imply that Marlowe has come to feel that Moose and Velma have earned the right to confront each other without interference. When Moose lets Velma shoot him down, Marlowe recognizes that Moose has made his choice, and sympathizes with him. Later, the doctor tells him that Moose has a chance to survive the shooting, and Marlowe’s laconic judgment is, “He wouldn’t want it.”

Though Moose Malloy is a brutal killer, he is a man of epic proportions whose motives derive from the simple code he lives by and from his love for Velma. He is an Ajax anachronistically thrust into the antimacho twentieth-century city, a gargantuan Romeo whose innocent passion is betrayed and who is eventually murdered in cold blood by his Juliet. Yet there is a kind of grandeur about him and his situation that, for Marlowe, places him beyond
the sterility and corruption of the city and earns him the right to confront his Velma. Because the big sap loved her — and still does. That’s what makes it funny, tragic-funny," Marlowe comments toward the end of the story as he struggles to articulate his reaction to the final confrontation. Even when Moose kills, he does so in the innocence of his epic strength, reminding one of the feeble-minded Lennie in John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men.

“You killed a woman,” I said. “Jessie Florian. That was a mistake.” He thought. Then he nodded. “I’d drop that one,” he said quietly.

“But that queered it,” I said. “I’m not afraid of you. You’re no killer. You didn’t mean to kill her. The other one — over on Central — you could have squeezed out of. But not out of beating a woman’s head on a bedpost until her brains were on her face.”

“You take some awful chances, brother,” he said softly.

“The way I’ve been handled,” I said, “I don’t know the difference any more. You didn’t mean to kill her — did you?”

His eyes were restless. His head was cocked in a listening attitude.

“It’s about time you learned your own strength,” I said.

“It’s too late,” he said.24

Both Marlowe as reluctant knight and Moose Malloy as epic bandit live by codes of behavior that contrast with the sordid routines of the city. Consequently there is a mutual attraction from the moment that Marlowe sees Moose dressed like a parody of a romantic dandy in the middle of tawdry Central Avenue “looking up at the dusty windows with a sort of ecstatic fixity of expression.” Moose, as Marlowe initially observes,

was worth looking at. He wore a shaggy borsalino hat, a rough gray sports coat with white golf balls on it for buttons, a brown shirt, a yellow tie, pleated gray flannel slacks and alligator shoes with white explosions on the toes. From his outer breast pocket cascaded a show handkerchief of the same brilliant yellow as his tie. There were a couple of colored feathers tucked into the band of his hat, but he didn’t really need them. Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, he looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food.25

Once Marlowe realizes that this epic figure is engaged in an enterprise at once so innocent and absurd as seeking to find the woman he loves right where he had left her eight years ago, he becomes increasingly sympathetic to the ferocious bandit. Even though he knows Moose is a killer, he comes to feel that Moose’s quest is somehow authentic:

“It didn’t matter to him that she hadn’t written to him in six years or ever gone to see him while he was in jail. It didn’t matter to him that she had turned him in for a reward. He just bought some fine clothes and started to look for her the first thing when he got out. So she pumped five bullets into him, by way of saying hello. He had killed two people himself, but he was in love with her. What a world.”26

Moose’s romantic illusions partly resemble those of Fitzgerald’s Gatsby.

Like Gatsby, Moose cherishes the memory of an earlier love and he dreams of turning the clock back to the time of this romance. When he discovers that this is impossible, he dies instead of living on in a world of shattered illusions. Needless to say, Fitzgerald’s characters are more humanly plausible and their actions more moving and tragic than in Chandler’s story. For example, the relationship between Daisy and Gatsby is deeply and richly treated by Fitzgerald in all of its phases, while the Moose-Velma relationship remains largely on the level of simple illusion and betrayal. Similarly when Nick Carraway, who plays the role of “detective” in The Great Gatsby, gradually comes to understand Gatsby’s motives and significance, it is a deeply shattering and maturing experience for him. Marlowe, on the other hand, is not fundamentally changed by his encounter with Moose and Velma. On the contrary, he plays the role of swashbuckling deus ex machina and final judge who shapes life in the image of his own sense of rightness rather than coming to a new recognition of the dilemmas of human life.

Though the limitations of the formula and of his own sense of life prevent Chandler from creating a work as rich as The Great Gatsby, he does give his characters moral implications beyond their role in the pattern of mystery, investigation, and exposure. Moose and Velma are both in quest of an elusive grail that continually eludes them. Velma (Mrs. Grayle) is the object of Moose’s quest. She herself has tried to escape from the sordid reality of her origin into a life of wealth and freedom. But both these quests become destructive and corrupt. Because she will not come to terms with her past, Velma becomes a murderer. In his obsessive insistence on finding Velma, Moose not only becomes a murderer himself, but frightens Velma into murdering Lindsay Marriott. Thus the quests of Moose and Velma become sources of a kind of moral infection that spreads through the social order and involves the crooked policeman, phony spiritualists, and racketeers who try to stop Marlowe from completing his investigation. There is also a cultural allegory in Chandler’s treatment of these two characters. Moose and Velma embody the dreams of youthful romance and success, which Chandler, like many writers of his period, saw as characteristic American illusions.

Marlowe is no victim of such illusions. He is armed against them by the bitter cynicism and world-weariness that are revealed in his recurrent sense of disgust and revulsion at his involvement with this corrupt society:

A lovely old woman. I liked being with her. I liked getting her drunk for my own sordid purposes. I was a swell guy. I enjoyed being me. You find almost anything under your hand in my business, but I was beginning to be a little sick at my stomach.29

Yet Marlowe, too, seeks a grail, a moral justice transcending the tawdry and corrupt routines of society’s legality. Thus an extremely important theme in Farewell, My Lovely is Marlowe’s running conflict with the police, a conflict through which Chandler dramatizes the limitations of social institutions and justifies Marlowe’s determination to allow Moose and Velma to confront
their own destinies rather than turning them over to the police. In Farewell, My Lovely the police range in character from the decent but tired Nulty and the honest but too cynical Randall of the Los Angeles police to the totally corrupt officers of “Bay City.” But whether honest or corrupt, the police, in Marlowe’s view, are too insensitive or too limited by the necessities of politics to deal justly with a situation like that of Moose and Little Velma. Their handling of Velma is a case in point. So long as she remains the wealthy Mrs. Lewin Lockridge Grayle, the police will do everything they can to keep her from being approached or questioned by characters like Philip Marlowe. With the connivance of the police of “Bay City,” Marlowe is assaulted, drugged, and imprisoned in a phony medical establishment to keep him from making further inquiries into the relationship between Mrs. Grayle and Lindsay Marriott. Once Mrs. Grayle is exposed as Velma Valento, however, she becomes simply a quarry, an object to be hunted down and made the center of a public circus. To Marlowe there is something deeply immoral about this total absorption of the individual into the public role. And it is Velma’s ultimate refusal to play the degrading role that society’s justice would force upon her, even though this role might save her life, that finally determines Marlowe’s own judgment:

“I’m not saying she was a saint or even a halfway nice girl. Not ever. She wouldn’t kill herself until she was cornered. But what she did and the way she did it, kept her from coming back here for trial. Think that over. And who would that trial hurt most? Who would be least able to bear it? And win, lose or draw, who would pay the biggest price for the show? An old man who had loved not wisely, but too well.”

It should be noted that Marlowe’s lapse into Shakespearean grandiloquence is immediately covered up with the private eye’s patented overcoat of protective cynicism. When police lieutenant Randall rejects this analysis as sentimentality, Marlowe replies: “Sure. It sounded like that when I said it. Probably all a mistake anyway. So long.” But Marlowe’s final comment is an eloquently ambiguous statement: “It was a cool day and very clear. You could see a long way—but not as far as Velma had gone.”

Thus, Farewell, My Lovely uses the hard-boiled detective formula to treat such contemporary moral and cultural themes as romantic illusion, destructive innocence, and the conflict between individual moral feeling and the collective routines of society. Because they embody serious themes in a quasi-allegorical fashion Chandler’s characters gain richness and depth even though they remain rather artificial and melodramatic creations. One might find it a little difficult to believe in a chess-playing, Shakespeare-quoting, supremely chivalrous tough guy like Marlowe were it not that the moral dilemmas posed by the characters he encounters have a degree of serious significance and human complexity missing from most of the hard-boiled detective writers.

Mickey Spillane

By most traditional literary or artistic standards, the works of Mickey Spillane are simply atrocious. His characters and situations not only strain credibility to its limits, they frequently turn the stomach as well. Spillane’s narrative technique is so “hard-hitting,” as the reviewers say, that it has the expressiveness of a blackjack. His style and dialogue are awkward, stilted, and wooden. His idea of a theme consists of a primitive right-wing diatribe against some of the central principles of American democracy and English law. Yet, despite all these disadvantages (or perhaps they are advantages), Spillane’s books have sold over forty million copies. Among the thirty top best-sellers from 1895 to 1965, seven were by Spillane. Only such superlative books as Dr. Spock’s Peyton Place, Gone with the Wind, and The Carpetbaggers have exceeded the sales of I, the Jury and The Big Kill. Such superb hard-boiled stories as Chandler’s Farewell, My Lovely and Hammett’s The Maltese Falcon have sold just over a million copies, while Spillane’s books average four to five million.

Spillane’s immense popularity is often attributed to the unregenerate depravity and stupidity of the mass reading public. Since his closest sales competitors are hard-boiled writers like Brett Halliday and Richard Prather, prolific hacks who more or less imitate the Spillane recipe without adding much in the way of literary interest, one can easily envision mindless millions of cretins slobbering idiotically as Mike Hammer pistolwhips another naked female. But such visions are too vague and moronic to be of much help in understanding the Spillane phenomenon. The mass audience and its motives are too complex for such simplistic generalizations to do anything but relieve the feelings of those who are distressed that such questionable works of literature should attract so wide a public.

Spillane’s first and best-selling novel, I, the Jury, shares with Chandler’s Farewell, My Lovely the basic characteristics of the hard-boiled formula. Both novels take the form of a personal narrative by a tough private investigator. This hero pursues an investigation that leads him ever deeper into the perversion and evil endemic to the urban setting in which he operates. In the process both Chandler’s Philip Marlowe and Spillane’s Mike Hammer become involved in an ambiguous relationship with the police, a relationship that reveals the limitations of the legal process in achieving “true” justice. Through this portrayal of the inefficiency and helplessness of the established authorities, the hero’s own personal sense of justice and his aggressive acting out of his judgment are made emotionally necessary and morally righteous. Finally, both heroes discover that the criminal they seek is a beautiful but vicious woman who has sexually tempted them earlier in the book.

The difference between the two writers is nonetheless substantial. Chandler fleshes out this fable with fairly complex characters and a richly symbolic
action, whereas Spillane operates by leaving the basic formulaic framework as simple and uncomplicated as possible. Instead of adding human complexity to the skeleton, he heightens the pattern of the formula through violence, quasi-pornography, and other devices of emotional intensification. Both the style and the larger structure of his novels manifest this kind of heightening. For example, in both *I, the Jury* and *Farewell, My Lovely* women attempt to seduce the detective-hero. In Chandler's novel, however, the seduction is described in a relatively detached and ironic fashion that emphasizes its sordidness, artificiality, and pathos, especially when, in the middle of the action, the temptress's elderly husband wanders pathetically into the scene:

She fell softly across my lap and I bent down over her face and began to browse on it. She worked her eyelashes and made butterfly kisses on my cheeks. When I got to her mouth it was half open and burning and her tongue was a darting snake between her teeth.

The door opened and Mr. Grayle stepped quietly into the room. I was holding her and didn't have a chance to let go. I lifted my face and looked at him. I felt cold as Finnegan's feet, the day they buried him.

The blonde in my arms didn't move, didn't even close her lips. She had a half-dreamy, half-sarcastic expression on her face.

Mr. Grayle cleared his throat slightly and said: "I beg your pardon, I'm sure," and went quietly out of the room. There was an infinite sadness in his eyes. 42

When Spillane does a seduction scene, not a hint of irony or pathos enters in, except unintentionally. In its place there is a voyeuristic fascination with the woman's movements and a fantasy of male dominance as the woman extends her sexual invitation. Clearly Spillane's model here as elsewhere in his descriptions of sexual relations is not the actual encounter of men and women but the conventionalized sexual ritual of the striptease:

Mary drew her legs up under her on the divan and turned on her side to face me. During the process the negligee fell open, but she took her time to draw it shut. Deliberately, she let my eyes feast on her lovely bosom. I could see of her stomach was smooth parallel rows of light muscles, almost like a man's. I licked my lips. . . .

Her eyes were blazing into mine. They were violet eyes, a wild blazing violet. Her mouth looked soft and wet, and provocative. She was making no attempt to keep the negligee on. One shoulder had slipped down and her brown skin formed an interesting contrast with the pink. I wondered how she got her tan. There were no strap marks anywhere. She uncrossed her legs deliberately and squirmed like an overgrown cat, letting the light play with the ripply muscles in her naked thighs. 45

In comparison with the Chandler scene where sexuality is open, brutal and a direct expression of character (the woman callous but driven, the detective reluctant and ironic), in Spillane, as in pornography, it is largely divorced from character. This abstract sexuality uses repetition and a drawing out of the action to produce a heightened feeling in the reader. Interestingly enough, there is almost no description of the sexual act itself in Spillane. Indeed, in the passage cited above, Mike Hammer refuses the lady's overtures at the last minute and departs in righteous chastity. As in the case of the striptease, the preliminaries are more important than the goal. After the repetitive, teasing buildup of bumps and grinds, the actual moment of nakedness is an anticlimax. So Spillane has his females endlessly ripple their muscles while letting their dresses hang open provocatively. One might almost say that his novels are structured as elaborate stripteases in which Mike is increasingly tempted by a series of sexy damsels; in the end, the tease almost reaches the point of passionate sexuality, but the final teaser always turns out to be the murderess and consequently must be destroyed. In one of the central emotional rhythms in Spillane's work, sexual provocation leads to fulfillment in violence.

Violence as orgasm is a main theme of Spillane's novels. Despite the prevalence of violence in the novels of Hammett and Chandler, one must look fairly hard to find instances where the detective-hero himself either hits or shoots another character. When they do, the incident is usually treated with a neutral terseness or with the ironic detachment that marks the hero's character. I have already commented on the increasing disgust and fear that mark the Continental Op's involvement with the mounting violence of Hammett's *Red Harvest*. Only once does the Op actually shoot somebody in that novel, and there the description is cold and emotionless with no sense of fulfillment in violence:

Across the street, burly Nick had stepped out of a doorway to pump slugs at us with both hands.

I steadied my gun-arm on the floor. Nick's body showed over the front sight. I squeezed the gun. Nick stopped shooting. He crossed his guns on his chest and went down in a pile on the sidewalk. 46

Nor does the Op enjoy banging people around in the manner of Spillane's Mike Hammer. The one time he actually knocks another character down, it is presented as a decent and humane act: "I poked him to give him back some of his self-respect. You know, treated him as I would a man instead of a down-and-outer who could be slapped around by girls." 47 Like Hammett's detective-hero, Chandler's Marlowe is rarely the source of violence, though on these occasions Chandler does stylistically heighten the description of violence to a greater degree than Hammett. Marlowe's ironic reluctance is still a part of the scene:

He whirled at me. Perhaps it would have been nice to allow him another shot or two, just like a gentleman of the old school. But his gun was still up and I couldn't wait any longer. Not long enough to be a gentleman of the old school. I shot him four times, the Colt straining against my ribs. The
gun jumped out of his hand as if it had been kicked. He reached both his hands for his stomach. I could hear them smack hard against his body. He fell like that, straight forward, holding himself together with his broad hands. He fell face down in the wet gravel. And after that there wasn't a sound from him.  

In Spillane's novels, however, Mike Hammer is the main source of violence. His chief investigative technique consists of beating up the suspects to force confessions, and this violence is described with a detail and intensity that leaves no doubt of the great emotional catharsis it brings to the hero:

The goddamn bastards played right into my hands. They thought they had me nice and cold and just as they were set to carve me into a raw mess of skin, I dragged out the .45 and let them look down the hole so they could see where sudden death came from.

It was the only kind of talk they knew. The little guy stared too long. He should have been watching my face. I snapped the side of the rod across his jaw and laid the flesh open to the bone. He dropped the sap and staggered into the big boy with a scream starting to come up out of his throat only to get it cut off in the middle as I pounded his teeth back into his mouth with the end of the barrel. . . . The punk was vomiting on the floor, trying to claw his way under the sink. For laughs I gave him a taste of his own sap on the back of his hand and felt the bones go into splinters. He wasn't going to be using any tools for a long time.

Spillane makes the relationship between sexual teasing and violent catharsis a part of the basic texture of his stories. In his hands, the hard-boiled structural formula of increasing involvement in a web of corruption becomes an alternating pattern of sexual provocation and orgies of shooting or beating that seem to function psychologically as a partial release of the emotional tension built up by the unconsummated sexual teasing. This structural pattern reaches its climax in the nightmarish final scenes of Spillane's novels. Spillane has a remarkable ability to imagine and visualize scenes in which the disturbing emotions aroused by the mounting tensions of sexual teasing and orgiastic violence reach culmination. The key to these scenes is a legitimated sadism that differentiates Spillane from most of the other hard-boiled writers. Three examples will indicate the way in which Spillane creates the climactic sadism of his stories. In One Lonely Night, Mike Hammer's chaste secretary-sweetheart Velda has been captured by Communist spies. When Mike breaks in on their secret hideout he finds that Velda has been strung up naked and is being whipped. Although Mike then shoots the Commie rats, it seems clear that one reason for his passionate destruction of her torturers is his own ambiguous delight in the flagellating of Velda.

Then there was only beauty to the nakedness of her body. A beauty of the flesh that was more than the sensuous curve of her hips, more than the sharp curve of breast drawn high under the weight of her body, more than those long full legs, more than the ebony of her hair. There was the beauty of the flesh that was the beauty of the soul and the guy in the pork-pie hat grimaced with hate and raised the rope to smash it down while the rest slobbered with the lust and pleasure of this example of what was yet to come, even drooled with the passion that was death made slow in the fulfillment of the philosophy that lived under a red flag.

It is worth noting that Spillane frequently expresses such political or social attitudes in connection with the emotions aroused by his porno-violence. In a number of his novels “patriotic” hostility toward “communism” and foreigners serves as part of the justification for Mike's participation in the culminating orgy of sadism and destruction.

Another example of Spillane's way of bringing his two major themes of sexual provocation and violence together is the conclusion of The Big Kill. Marsha Lee, the beautiful actress who has been tempting Mike throughout the novel—“the soft pink tones of her body softened the metallic glitter of the nylon gown that outlined her in bronze, flowing smoothly up the roundness of her thighs”—turns out to be a vicious blackmailer who is responsible for the killing of a man whose little boy Mike has been protecting. When Mike confronts Marsha, she manages to get the drop on him, but just as she is about to shoot, the little boy, who happens to be in the room, starts to play with Mike's forgotten gun. Providentially, the gun goes off and the bullet flies across the room “with a horrible vengeance that ripped all the evil from her face, turning it into a ghastly wet red mask that was really no face at all.” Here, as in One Lonely Night, the sadism is slightly disguised by attributing it to someone other than the hero, but in I, the Jury, the climactic scene of sadistic masculine response to sexual provocation is brutally overt. Mike confronts the beautiful blonde he has discovered to be the murdering head of a dope ring. In response to Mike's accusations, the lady slowly and provocatively strips until she stands naked and inviting before him. Then Mike shoots her. The final dialogue between the lovers is devastatingly revealing of Mike's bitter hostility toward women.

When I heard her fall I turned around. Her eyes had pain in them now, the pain preceding death. Pain and unbelief. “How c-could you?” she gasped. I only had a moment before talking to a corpse, but I got it in. “It was easy,” I said.

Since they are built up out of this texture of sexual provocation and masculine violence climaxd by the infliction of pain and death on the sexual object, Spillane's books are an extreme embodiment of the fear, hostility, and ambiguity toward society and particularly toward women that are built into the hard-boiled detective formula. Where writers like Hammett and Chandler qualify the endemic aggression and sadism of this formula with a considerable degree of irony and complexity, Spillane's skill as a popular writer lies
precisely in his ability to suppress characters and turns of plot that might confuse or enrich the essential emotional pattern, and in his capacity to invent incidents like the ritual striptease killing of *I, the Jury* that embody the central emotional themes of the hard-boiled formula with primitive and vivid directness. Even the detective-hero has highly simplified motives in the Spillane story. Instead of Marlowe’s complex reluctance, or the Continental Op’s stoic professionalism, Mike Hammer usually becomes involved in a case through a simple desire for revenge. In *I, the Jury* the novel begins with the murder of Mike’s best friend, and the rest of Mike’s actions are explicitly motivated by a desire to avenge this death. In *The Big Kill* Mike witnesses the murder of a father of a young child. He becomes temporarily the child’s protector and swears to avenge the father. The action of *One Lonely Night* centers on the capture of Mike’s secretary Velda by Communist agents. The story derives from Mike’s violent desire to rescue Velda and/or destroy her tormentors. Once established, Mike’s single dominant motive does not change in the course of the story, in contrast to Marlowe’s constantly shifting attitudes and redefinitions of his mission.

One might well inquire why, if this is the central purpose of his version of the hard-boiled formula, Spillane’s readers do not simply prefer straight sadistic pornography. Erwin Panofsky greatly assists us in dealing with this problem, when, in an essay on “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” he sums up the central characteristics of the “folk art mentality” as they become embodied in the early movies:

They gratified—often simultaneously—first, a primitive sense of justice and decorum when virtue and industry were rewarded while vice and laziness were punished; second, plain sentimentality when “the thin trickle of a fictive love interest” took its course “through somewhat serpentine channels,” or when Father, dear Father returned from the saloon to find his child dying of diphtheria; third, a primordial instinct for bloodshed and cruelty when Andreas Hoffer faced the firing squad, or when (in a film of 1893–94) the head of Mary Queen of Scots actually came off; fourth, a taste for mild pornography; and finally that crude sense of humor, graphically described as “slapstick,” which feeds upon the sadistic and the pornographic instinct, either singly or in combination.52

The one improvement we might suggest for this fine enumeration of the characteristics of folk art is a greater emphasis on the relationship between the elements. For it is not simply the presence of sadism or pornography but their careful and inextricable relationship with sentiment and a “primitive sense of justice,” that is important. Thus, Mike Hammer’s orgiastic sadism is acceptable and cathartic for a mass audience because it is initiated by sentimental feelings, such as Mike’s deep sorrow for a murdered friend and justified by the unpunished evil that his investigations uncover. Weighed against the individual and social evils he confronts, Mike’s brutality is made to seem a necessary and even indispensable course of action. In an urban

world dominated by gangsters, Communist agents, and socialite dope pushers, the only person who can bring the elites of evil to their reckoning is Spillane’s lone wolf of destruction. Spillane’s social paranoia with its hysterical fears of urban sophistication, foreigners, and minority groups therefore serves an important function in justifying his hero’s brutality. Similarly, Spillane’s sentimentality and didacticism are given greater intensity through their eventualization in violence.

This combination of sentimentality, pornography, and violence, linked by a delight in the extralegal punishment of successful evildoers and by a profound, ambiguous fear of the temptations and wickedness of the city have long been a staple of folklore, as Panofsky points out. In addition, this particular combination has been endemic to the popular literature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century England and America ranging in time (and quality) from Dickens and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *Peyton Place*. If we look, however, for a nineteenth-century analogue to this combination of elements, simplified and heightened in the fashion of Mickey Spillane, we find it in the immensely popular but now forgotten didactic temperance novels written by such authors as T. S. Arthur, whose *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* had the same kind of a skeletal form as Spillane’s novels. Moreover, there is enough similarity of theme and attitude between these two literary types to make the comparison curious but revealing. In the temperance novel, the hero, like Spillane’s detective, encounters the disturbing temptations of the sophisticated city: the corruptions of wealth, the destructive habits of tobacco and alcohol (and the dangerous seductiveness of the Scarlet Woman). Spillane, writing for a society that has accepted smoking and drinking as part of its way of life, transmutes the animus against liquor into a fear of drugs. The Scarlet Woman is a central figure in his stories. In addition, temperance novels are full of tearful children who beg their wavering daddies to set aside the fatal glass of beer and come home. Similarly, Spillane frequently arouses his reader’s feelings for the plight of the innocent child by having his detective-hero protect children threatened by the surrounding corruption. The temperance novel even tends to manifest the same pattern of social hostility as Spillane: the corrupters represent sophisticated wealth on one side and non-white or non-Protestant groups on the other. For the nineteenth-century didactic novelists, popery plays the role assumed by communism in Spillane: a foreign conspiracy associated with threats to the sexual purity and moral asceticism of the American way of life. Finally, the temperance novels characteristically end with a terrible providential vengeance against the corrupters, just as Spillane’s novels end with the violent death of the Scarlet Woman. While Spillane does not suggest that his Mike Hammer is an agent of divine providence, he does frequently imply that Mike is driven by forces larger than himself, that his brutality comes from a sacred frenzy against the rampant evils at large in the world. For example, at one point Mike thinks that he might give up his crusade against evil:
I ought to get out of it. I ought to take Velda and my office and start up in real estate in some small community where murder and guns and dames didn’t happen. Maybe I would, at that. It was wonderful to be able to think straight again. No more crazy mad hatred that tied my insides into knots. No more hunting the scum that stood behind a trigger and shot at the world.14

But this is only a passing moment. In the next few pages Mike is at it again, compulsively driven by his instinct for primitive justice to wipe out more rotten gangsters and foreigners.

This comparison with the temperance novel suggests that beyond his capacity to simplify and emotionally heighten the basic formula of the hard-boiled detective story, Spillane also brings to this formula something of the fervor and passion of the popular evangelical religious tradition that has long been a dominant element in the culture of lower-middle- and lower-class America. It is certainly no accident that this tradition also exemplifies many of Spillane’s primary social hostilities: rural suspicion of urban sophistication; nativist hatred of racial and ethnic minorities; the ambiguous hostility toward women of those anxious about their status and concerned about the erosion of masculine dominance. But, above all, it is the similar intensity of passion, growing out of a bitter, overpowering hatred of the world as a sinful and corrupt place that unites Spillane with the popular evangelical tradition. Spillane’s own temporary involvement in the passionate millenialism of the Jehovah’s Witnesses suggests the extent to which his own view of the world is similar to that of the evangelical tradition.

Thus, Mickey Spillane’s version of the hard-boiled detective formula has a special quality that comes from two main sources: first, there is Spillane’s ability to construct a narrative that embodies in heightened form the pure skeleton of the formula; Spillane has a visceral feel for the essential pattern of action and theme that underlies the hard-boiled story and is able to express this pattern with great simplicity and force in highly colored episodes and images. Second, Spillane has always instinctively recognized the connection between his narratives and the popular evangelical tradition and has been able to tap the great passion that many Americans have invested in that tradition by embodying its central themes of hostility toward the sinful city with its corrupt men of wealth, its degenerate foreigners, and its Scarlet Women. Of all the hard-boiled writers, Spillane’s art is closest in its mythical simplicity to folklore and in its passionate hatred and denunciations to the popular revivalist sermon. It is to its combination of these qualities and not simply to its preoccupation with sex and violence that the work of Mickey Spillane owes its immense popularity. It is tempting to suggest that the strained and hysterical violence of so much of his work reflects the fact that he is a prophet of the past, that his vision of the brutal redeemer Mike Hammer is the agonized but final outcry of the evangelical subculture of rural America about to be swallowed up in the pluralistic, cosmopolitan world of the cities. The cool, bureaucratic style of Mike Hammer’s successors, the James Bonds and the Matt Helms, is certainly far removed from the passionate crusades of Spillane’s bitter and violent hero.