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## From Falling Beams to Fallen Souls : The Ethical Development of the Hard-Boiled Detective Novel

Kevin Chaffee

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## Abstract

### FROM FALLING BEAMS TO FALLEN SOULS: THE ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE HARD-BOILED DETECTIVE NOVEL

by

Kevin Chaffee

The hard-boiled detective story ushered in a revolution in the mystery story. The older "formal" mystery story saw society as a benevolent, ordering force which the detective restored by catching the murderer, while the hard-boiled mystery portrayed society as corrupt, wild and flawed, and presented an implicit criticism of it. The three best writers of the hard-boiled school, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald, show an ethical progression, a turning outward, from the personal, inwardly focused ethics of Hammett's characters to the outwardly turned moral understanding of Macdonald's hero.

Dashiell Hammett writes of an ironic, tough world that the detective accepts because he cannot change it. Hammett's detectives have a strong private code which forms a bulwark against the chaos of society. The detective cannot depend on anything outside himself, so these personal ethics help the detective survive, but he remains isolated and apart from

society.

Raymond Chandler's detective turns the focus of his ethics slightly outward. His code is personal, but he believes in ideals outside himself and works towards them. He has honor and truly wants to help those in need, and his code embodies the world as he thinks it should be. He cannot accept the corruption of the world, remaining isolated because of his personal stand against it.

Ross Macdonald's detective has partaken of the world, and has been tainted but not corrupted. Instead he has a greater understanding of people's failures. He also has a personal code, but his emphasis is on helping others understand themselves and their actions. Thus Macdonald focuses the ethical spotlight outside of his detective, on the forces in life that make people go bad.

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE HARD-BOILED DETECTIVE NOVEL

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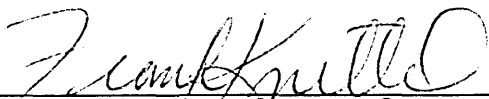
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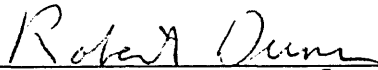
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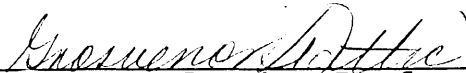
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## Introduction

The term "detective story" conjures up many images from the popular subconscious, everything from Sherlock Holmes in his deerstalker cap, haunting the foggy streets of Victorian London, to a host of private eyes smoking in dingy offices and looking suspiciously like Humphrey Bogart. Indeed, at one time or another, everything from the apochryphal Daniel and the Dragon to James Bond have been included under the heading "detective story." Mysteries are a popular art form, though the best of them sneak in the back door of Literature, and the variations are probably as numerous as the faceless and everchanging public who buys them. Obviously, in order to study the detective novel, some distinctions are necessary, otherwise the whole undertaking dead-ends in a tangle of ambiguous terms and vague classifications.

A little history helps clear the air of confusion. The detective story as it appears today can be traced to Edgar Allan Poe, and his detective, C. Auguste Dupin, in such stories as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter." Arthur Conan Doyle expanded this start with perhaps the most famous and enduring detective of all times, Sherlock Holmes. From there the lineage progresses down to such moderns as Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie and their American counterpart Ellery Queen. This family tree has many branches: such sub-genres as the spy novel, the police procedural, the novel of suspense, and the hard-boiled mystery all sometimes fall under

the heading "detective story." The hard-boiled mystery, an American form of the detective story, branched off from the old-style detective stories in the 1920's. These stories differed from the classical detective story in several important ways.

The classical mystery story takes a form familiar to most everyone, probably the form that jumps to mind when someone says "detective story." These stories often take place at a country manor or an expensive town house, and frequently those involved drip wealth. A murder occurs, the victim often a rich eccentric, or a wealthy crank, or an unfaithful husband, the flirtatious wife, or any number of other usually corrupt but sometimes innocent incarnations. The usual host of suspects appears: the jealous spouse, the greedy sibling, numerous feuding and covetous relatives, the beautiful young gold-digger, the quietly suspicious gardener. The case baffles the police (unless, of course, the detective hero is a policeman himself, whereupon the case merely baffles other policemen) and they call for help. The amateur detective, who for some reason always seems to be vacationing nearby, or a friend of the family or something, comes to the aid of the police, and by a process of logic, careful questioning, and wide knowledge, pieces together the puzzle and solves the case. The suspects gather in the drawing room, the detective explains his ingenious reasoning, the guilty party makes an unsuccessful escape attempt, and everyone is astonished (the reader



included, presumably).

The best of these works transcend the cliches of the form and remain entertaining, clever, puzzling stories, often written with good feel for character and human insight. They probably suffer, however, from the indelible image that innumerable low budget movies of the 1930's and 40's have burned into the popular mind (a problem that the hard-boiled mystery shares).

At any rate, these stories have an essentially conservative thrust. A murder, once committed, disrupts society, and the function of the detective is to bring the murderer to justice, thus restoring peace and trust to society. Such novels see society as a benevolent institution, something worth saving, and murder is merely an aberration from the norm. Such stories are in the comic mode and reactionary, for they end with the reaffirmation and regeneration of society, the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

But the hard-boiled novel differs significantly. In 1920, H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan began publishing a pulp magazine called Black Mask. (Such magazines were called pulps because of the paper they used, not because of what they printed.) Black Mask published tough, fast-paced stories, noted for their sparse, economical prose. Black Mask and its competitors initiated a revolution in the classical form of the detective story, a revolution singularly American in nature. They created the Private Eye, a character which endures

even today in various television incarnations.

Rich amateurs with esoteric knowledge of poisons and other methods of murder no longer peopled this detective world. In the hard-boiled story, paid detectives, often former policemen, lived and worked in a world that was violent and dark and criminal. They dealt not with the highly intellectual master criminal who seemed to kill simply to give the detective a puzzle to wrap his massive intellect around, but with people who killed out of anger, fear, or greed. As novelist Raymond Chandler put it, they "took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley."<sup>2</sup>

Thus began a revolution in philosophy and intent. Society no longer functioned as the benevolent and ordering status quo, but as a corrupt and morally ambiguous environment from which the detective was lucky to escape with life and integrity intact, a locale that W.H. Auden called the "Great Wrong Place."<sup>3</sup> Chandler, in his famous essay, "The Simple Art of Murder," describes the world that these novels explore:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his

pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing. . . .<sup>4</sup>

This attempt to capture a morally confusing, dark and often violent world was an attempt to bring the detective story back to reality. These writers tried to write about a world they saw around them, and crime formed part of that world. The picture of this environment in their books had to be accurate, and the criminals and victims and detectives all had to act like real, living people.

In portraying this society as they saw it, the writers of these works give society a mirror of itself. Critic Julian Symons notes that these stories reflect "the increasing violence of American society and the misery of the depression years."<sup>5</sup> This group of authors, then, criticizes society by presenting its darker side, and in the morals of their detectives they present a moral reflection of the society that engendered them. The fact that these are popular works, and widely read, only means that the codes and behaviors developed in them must have appealed to a portion of society, at least. How else would the private eye have become such an enduring archetypal figure in American popular culture? And the detective usually appears upholding right, not corruption.

The detective engages in a search for truth--not necessarily a philosophical truth, but at least a circumstantial one. Ralph Harper has pointed out that one of writer Dashiell Hammett's contributions to the thriller is the recognition that at the core of evil is deception, or lies.<sup>6</sup> This vision remains constant throughout Hammett, as well as the other writers of this school. The detective usually encounters a situation where everyone lies to him, for one reason or another, as critic Steven Marcus states.<sup>7</sup> The detective must recreate what actually happened by exposing lies and liars, and what truth exists in a situation the detective must create himself. He actively engages in this process of construction and enlightenment.

Of course, such incomplete and contingent knowledge puts the detective in a tough spot, and as Harper notes, the detective is a man acting in a crisis.<sup>8</sup> Circumstances force him to take action in an immoral world, and the detective who moves in the seam between good and evil must have some inner moral strength, or he can be no better than the people he chases. At times he is not.

An examination of this morally complex world requires a look at the works of three authors of the Black Mask "school": Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald. These three, besides being the best and most enduring writers of this group, form a continuum which shows the development of a moral and ethical consciousness in the hard boiled detective

novel, a turning outward from the strictly personal codes of Hammett's detectives to the sophisticated moral understanding of Macdonald's hero. The issues change as the detective novel develops, from survival in Hammett to honor and morality in Chandler, culminating in Macdonald's search for human understanding.

But first some background. While a fair amount of critical work has been done on the mystery story, the majority of it covers the classical mystery story, and only within the last decade or so has the hard-boiled mystery begun receiving critical attention. Howard Haycraft published two landmark books on the mystery story, The Art of the Mystery Story, a grab bag collection of history, stories and criticism, and Murder for Pleasure, a general history of mystery writing. A.E. Murch's The Development of the Detective Novel covers much of the same ground as the latter Haycraft work, and concentrates mostly on the classical mystery. Francis M. Nevins edited The Mystery Writer's Art, a collection of essays dealing with all kinds of mysteries. Most of the useful essays dealing with the hard-boiled story in Nevin's collection are reprinted from David Madden's collection, Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties, which examines the "tough" attitude in everything from Hemingway to James M. Cain. Robin Winks has edited Detective Fiction, a good overview of the detective story, with several useful essays. William Ruehlmann's Saint with a Gun deals mostly, but not exclusively, with the hard-boiled

detective, and frequently misses the point of the works discussed, seeing the detective as an unlawful vigilante and avenging angel.

As far as works dealing with Hammett, Chandler, and Macdonald, three unpublished dissertations deserve mention. Etta Abrahams' "Visions and Values in the Action Detective Novel" discusses Chandler and Ross Macdonald, but leaves out Hammett and includes John D. MacDonald. Robert Parker's "The Violent Hero, Wilderness Heritage, and Urban Reality" studies the detectives of Hammett, Chandler, and Macdonald as descendants of Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, only the unspoiled wilderness of Cooper has become an urban nightmare. Allen Crider's useful "The Private Eye Hero" discusses the development of the detective as hero, and his function in the work of all three authors.

Book-length studies of each author have been published separately. Peter Wolfe's Beams Falling: The Art of Dashiell Hammett and William Marling's Dashiell Hammett are both good general studies of Hammett's writing. George Thompson's dissertation "The Problem of Moral Vision in Dashiell Hammett's Detective Novels" contains a solid critical look at the ethics of Hammett's protagonists. William Nolan's Dashiell Hammett: A Casebook blends some criticism with a strong dose of biography. Similarly, Philip Durham's Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go mixes criticism and biography together for Chandler. Jerry Speir has written two useful studies, enti-

tled Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald.

But the best place to find out about these authors is from their own works. They speak for themselves quite ably, and often with more subtlety than might be expected.

## Dashiell Hammett

Dashiell Hammett, the first of the three authors chronologically, wrote in the 1920's and 1930's. He had worked at various jobs before he started writing, tasks as widely disparate as stevedore and advertising manager. He served in the army in World War I, where he contracted the tuberculosis that plagued him for years afterward. He worked as a detective for the famous Pinkerton Agency until his tuberculosis forced him to quit, and from this background he drew many of the ideas and characters for his stories.<sup>9</sup>

Critic Howard Haycraft calls Hammett's novels "penetrating if often shocking novels of manners," which presents no surprise, for Hammett wrote about a world he knew firsthand.<sup>10</sup> His hard, ironic characters and the unsettling violence that surrounds them vividly portray a current in the stream of American attitudes in the twenties and thirties, and his characters, Philip Durham observes, spoke for those who had "lost faith in the values of society--during war, gangsterism, and depression."<sup>11</sup>

Hammett's characters move in a shadowy world of deceit and treachery, where the lie and the double-cross are common currency, and what truth exists reveals itself in the careless phrase, the unguarded gesture, or in the bark of a gun and swish of a blackjack through the air. Concepts of good and evil become mixed, confused, and often meaningless in practical action. To live and survive in such a world creates a



cynical, skeptical attitude towards society and its manifestations, and a profoundly necessary self-reliance.

This vision of the world colors the detective's choices and actions, and an understanding of the detective's ethics, both professional and personal, necessitates an understanding of the detective's world and his view of that world.

Hammett's first literary creation, the Continental Op (short for operative of the the Continental Detective Agency) possesses a hard-headed, no nonsense view of his world. In the short story "The Golden Horseshoe" the Op, sitting in the Golden Horseshoe cafe, spies a sign hanging on the wall: "ONLY GENUINE PRE-WAR AMERICAN AND BRITISH WHISKEYS SERVED HERE." The Op reacts typically for him: "I was trying to count how many lies could be found in those nine words, and had reached four, with promise of more. . . ."12

The Op instinctively subjects everything he sees and hears to a careful scrutiny, and with good reason. He needs such skepticism in situations like that in Red Harvest, where one character taunts him with her dissembling, defying him to "try and figure out which part of what I told you is the truth."<sup>13</sup> Other Hammett characters evince the same skepticism. Sam Spade of The Maltese Falcon finds himself surrounded by liars telling him a different wild tale at every turn. Spade's lawyer accurately notes, "You don't cash many checks for strangers, do you, Sammy?"<sup>14</sup> Ned Beaumont of The Glass Key, although not a professional detective like other Hammett

protagonists, fills the same role technically. And he, too, bumps into a wall of lies whichever way he turns. Even his best friend, Paul Madvig, lies to him about committing the murder at the heart of the novel.

Along with a general skepticism about people and what people say, Hammett's characters suspect the integrity of the institutions of society, and in fact, society itself. As Marcus notes, most of Hammett's books were written during the Prohibition era, when "every time an American took a drink he was helping to undermine the law, and American society had covertly committed itself to what was in practice collaborative illegality."<sup>15</sup> The Harding administration and the Teapot Dome scandals lay in the not-too-distant past, and mobsters ran roughshod over large cities. Corruption, while perhaps not universal, appeared at all levels, from the cop standing on the street corner to the cabinet of the President of the United States.

Not all of Hammett's writing deals overtly with the ills of society, but those ills often lurk in the background, forming a part of the moral backdrop against which the story plays. For example, in The Dain Curse, a book not dealing with institutional evils, the Op sideswipes the courts and more: "Who said anybody believed it? . . . I'm just telling you what we'll go into court with. . . . You know there's not necessarily any connection between what's true and what you go into court with--or into the newspapers."<sup>16</sup> Religion appears

fraudulent in Hammett as well. The Cult of the Holy Grail in The Dain Curse and the Cult of Hador in "The Scorched Face" both turn out to be fronts for drugs and blackmail.

Some of Hammett's novels deal with corruption directly. In Red Harvest, the Op descends into the inferno of Personville (pronounced Poisonville by the natives), a mining town overrun by thugs and lawlessness. The Op finds Personville "an ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been all dirtied up by mining" (p. 4). Besides the disquieting aesthetics of the town, the nature of the law here quickly becomes apparent to the conscientious Op:

The first policeman I saw needed a shave. The second had a couple of buttons off his shabby uniform. The third stood in the center of the city's main intersection . . . directing traffic, with a cigar in one corner of his mount. After that I stopped checking them up. (p. 4)

The Op goes to work for Old Elihu Willsson, who owns most of the city and "a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature" (p. 9). Willsson used to run the town, but lost control to hired thugs he rushed in to break a mine strike. He broke the strike, bloodily, but the thugs took over the town.

The Glass Key describes a similar sort of world, more subtle and not as openly wild, but every bit as crooked. Ned Beaumont works for his friend Paul Madvig, who runs a gambling house and most of the local city, including the newspapers, fixing trials and alibis for his friends as a matter of course. As the novel opens, Madvig has decided to back the aristocratic Senator Henry in the upcoming election, knowing that the Senator can't win without his help and can't lose with it. As part of the unwritten pact with the Senator, Madvig thinks he will marry the Senator's daughter, Janet. Beaumont, as discerning and skeptical as any Hammett hero, knows otherwise, and admonishes Madvig: ". . . I'm warning you to sew your shirt on when you go to see them, because to them you're a lower form of animal life and none of the rules apply."<sup>17</sup> Thus Hammett symbolizes the moral atmosphere of The Glass Key, the marriage of politics and crime, with the hypocritical Senator dangling his daughter as a prize for the help of a crime boss he considers his absolute inferior.

Contact with this world certainly influences the behavior of Hammett's detectives, but fails as an explanation of motive. To understand that, one must dig deeper into the psyches of the Hammett protagonists, to the personal vision, the philosophy of existence which helps them explain their lives.

Apart from his professional ethics, to be discussed in a later section, the Op speaks little about his personal philosophy. The Op comes closest to expressing a personal

view of the world in his fatalism. As critic Allen Crider points out, the Op knows he could die at any time, that the world is unpredictable and chancey.<sup>18</sup> In Red Harvest, when a gambler tells the Op about winning big one day and being broke the next, the Op replies that "that was the kind of world we lived in" (p. 88). In the story "Dead Yellow Women," the Op echoes this fatalism:

I hadn't the least idea where I might be. But that didn't disturb me so much. If I was going to be cut down, a knowledge of my geographical position wouldn't make it any more pleasant. If I was going to come out all right, one place was still as good as another.<sup>19</sup>

Sam Spade of The Maltese Falcon, possesses a much more complex world view, an important one for the study of Hammett, as it is "central to the world view of all Hammett's characters."<sup>20</sup> In a curious scene in the middle of the book, Spade tells a story to Brigid O'Shaughnessy, his client and love interest, while they wait to meet with others searching for the statuette of the falcon. Spade had once been hired to find a man named Flitcraft, who had been living in Seattle. Flitcraft had a wife and children, a good real estate business, and was to all appearances successful, but one day he disappeared "like a fist when you open your hand" (p. 64). Spade found him settled in Spokane under the name Pierce, with a new wife and family and a successful automobile business,

living a life much like his old one.

Flitcraft tried to explain to Spade the reasons for his leaving: while Flitcraft had been on his way to work one day, a beam falling from eight or ten stories up on a building under construction had barely missed him, slamming into the sidewalk beside him. This narrow escape shocked Flitcraft, who "felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works" (p. 66). Flitcraft wanted his life in step with his surroundings and had thought it so; the life he led "was a clean orderly sane responsible affair" (p. 66). The falling beam, however, showed him that his life differed from the reality of existence:

He knew then that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them. It was not, primarily, the injustice of it that disturbed him: he accepted that after the first shock. What disturbed him was the discovery that in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, and not into step, with life. . . . Life could be ended for him at random by a falling beam: he would change his life at random by simply going away. (p. 66)

Spade shares Flitcraft's vision of the world, but he lives in a different world than Flitcraft. In Spade's world, as critic Robert Edenbaum notes, the beams are always falling.<sup>21</sup> Spade lives in an unpredictable and unstable world, and as

the Flitcraft story illustrates, Spade knows of the basic unpredictability and random impermanence of the universe, which prepares him for survival in the world of the bald-faced lie and the gunshot in the back.

But to leave the story simply as a vision of meaningless uncertainty misses some of the subtlety of Hammett's writing. Flitcraft perceives the world wrongly, because he bases his life on erroneous assumptions about the world.<sup>22</sup> The falling beam shatters those assumptions, along with the stability of Flitcraft's world. And yet, when no more beams fall, Flitcraft's random behavior seems out of step with the world, so he returns to his old life. In both instances, Flitcraft's actions are based on his perceptions of the external world, and his mistaken reliance on those perceptions to judge his life. He exhibits what critic William Marling calls the "adaptive response." Even with the random events that occur in the world, man acts in a patterned way, and such events serve to illuminate the pattern, by chasing away the protective covering humans employ.<sup>23</sup>

Spade, who lives in a world where the beams always fall, cannot afford the luxury of Flitcraft's mistaken assumptions about existence. Flitcraft experiences only for an instant what Spade lives with continually. Spade's survival depends, as Thompson points out, on knowing "that the external world lacks certainty, and therefore one must not count on the stability of anything outside of one's self."<sup>24</sup> Spade provides

the order and meaning in his world; it comes from within, not from the outside. Spade exhibits a self-reliance of the highest order, and all moral codes and ethics for Spade are extremely personal, developing from this existential vision.

Ned Beaumont, the protagonist of The Glass Key, inhabits a similar world. As Crider notes, Beaumont is a gambler by profession, and this defines his identity.<sup>25</sup> This symbolizes Beaumont's world well, one where risk may or may not bring gain, and often brings pain. At one point, Beaumont says, "I don't believe in anything, but I'm too much of a gambler not to be affected by a lot of things" (p. 169). This bitter statement cannot be taken fully at face value, for it comes when Beaumont feels betrayed by his best friend.<sup>26</sup> And he does believe in certain things: trust and loyalty between friends and enduring whatever life brings. But these few items add up to little; waves of skepticism and disbelief still wash around Beaumont's feet.

In keeping with The Glass Key's images of risk and chance, Hammett articulates further the moral vision of the novel. Janet Henry, the senator's daughter whom Paul Madvig hopes to marry, tells Ned Beaumont of a strange dream she had. Janet and Ned, cold, tired and hungry, come upon a house in the woods, locked up tight. While trying to get in to reach the food they see inside, they find a glass key, but when they open the door, hundreds of snakes on the floor slither towards them. At first Janet lies about the ending of the



dream, telling Ned that they locked the snakes back in, but later she tells him the real ending: the key, being glass, shattered when they opened the door, so they could not lock the snakes in, and they "came out all over us and I [Janet] woke up screaming" (pp. 169-70, 202).

While this dream deals mainly with personal relationships, it also illuminates the general philosophical atmosphere of much of Hammett's writing, and the attitudes that many of his characters share. Crider interprets this dream as a key to the whole novel: "When one reaches out for whatever he wants most, he should be prepared to face ugly consequences. One's life can be shattered like the glass key; once the door is open, and the ugly secret disclosed, there is no going back. The door cannot be locked again."<sup>27</sup> This bleak interpretation suggests that one taking risks generally ends up losing, and indeed Beaumont loses much throughout the novel, from the money he has lost at the beginning to the friendship he loses at the end. Beaumont realizes that only by taking chances can one gain something worthwhile, yet this sort of gamble brings many dangers and little chance of success.

How do these moral visions, then, affect Hammett's characters? Basically in two main ways: in their professional ethics and in their personal relationships. While the effect varies from book to book, and from character to character, certain general patterns hold true for most of Hammett, developing in complexity from the earlier novels to the later ones.

The Op, Hammett's earliest detective, lives for his work, and in fact, lives through his work. His personal life never appears in his stories, except for passing references to past jobs. For the Op, therefore, professional ethics become supremely important, as they represent the rules by which he guides his life, and his gravest crises appear when these rules come under attack.

Of course, any ethics in the Op's world must be personal (as the outside world cannot be trusted), and his professional code derives not from an exterior system of morality, but from inside himself, centering on the job of the detective. The Op stands as a complete professional, loyal to his work and wanting to do it well. Critic Robert Parker calls this an areligious extension of the protestant work ethic, but it means even more in the Op's world.<sup>28</sup> Being as good a detective as possible orders his life and provides an existential barrier against the chaos of the universe. The Op illustrates this in a story titled "The Gutting of Couffignal," when offered a bribe to let the guilty party go:

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 pay more. . . . I like being a detective, like the work. And liking the work makes you want to do it as well as you can. Other-

wise there'd be no sense to it. That's the fix I'm 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.<sup>29</sup>

The Op fends off evil and corruption to accomplish his job, often turning down money, as just mentioned, or the temptation of sex, as also happens in "The Gutting of Couffignal" or "The Girl with the Silver Eyes." He refuses to do that sleaziest of detective jobs, divorce work. Much of the moral ambiguity in Hammett's work stems from the fact that the detective resists certain actions not from a sense of inherent wrongness, but out of a sense that these actions are unprofessional.<sup>30</sup> Professional ethics come before societal ethics, and conniving or appearing to connive with crooks stands as acceptable practice if it helps bring the villains to justice, thus completing the Op's task.

For the Op, his client and his job come first. While he sometimes seems to be playing the avenging angel or merciful protector, his actions often either protect his livelihood or his client. For example, in "The Scorched Face" he protects his client's daughter after she murders her blackmailer, partly out of sympathy, but also, he says, because "I was her father's hired man just now. I saw her side of the affair."<sup>31</sup> In "\$106,000 Blood Money," a Continental detective goes crooked and is killed in the course of the action. The Op could have prevented his death, but does nothing, and later makes it

appear that the agent died in the line of duty, to protect the Continental Detective Agency from any scandal. The Op safeguards his job, telling his boss, the "Old Man," that events "just happened that way," but that he "played the cards so that we would get the benefit of the breaks."<sup>32</sup>

But the severest test of the Op's professional ethics comes in Hammett's first novel, Red Harvest, published in 1929. In it the Op sets out to clean up the crooked mine town Personville, overrun by the thugs Elihu Willsson brought in to break up a mine strike. Willsson's son, Donald, crusading against corruption as the editor of the newspaper, is murdered after hiring the Op. Elihu Willsson then hires the Op to investigate his son's murder. The Op starts cleaning up the criminal elements of the town, which explodes in violence.

The Op's motivation emerges as the central ethical problem in the novel, notes Thompson.<sup>33</sup> William Ruehlmann, in his usual shrill way, writes that the Op "abandons his professionalism in taking on the role of avenging angel."<sup>34</sup> When the Op's investigation threatens Elihu Willsson, who wishes to carry it no further, the Op refuses. He would be justified in going back to San Francisco, having solved the murder and received payment for it, but he stays, partly out of commitment to completing the task of cleaning up the town, and partly, as Parker notes, to test his value system against "the forces of evil."

But another motive muddies this apparently clear action.

At one point the Op says, "I don't like the way Poisonville has treated me. I've got my chance now, and I'm going to even up. . . . Poisonville is ripe for the harvest. It's a job I like and I'm going to do it" (p. 63). After the violence starts, the Op remarks that he might have been able to clean things up legally, but having the thugs kill each other off is "easier and surer, and now that I'm feeling this way, more satisfying" (p. 145). This emotional involvement, so unusual for the Op, dilutes his normal legal-professional ethics. The Op recognizes this confusion of principle, noting ruefully that "anybody who brings ethics to Poisonville is going to get them all rusty" (p. 109).

As he gets more involved in the violence of Personville, the Op becomes more and more uneasy about his part in it. The chaos draws him in until he begins to resemble the people he is trying to stop. He realizes the effect all the killing has on him:

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. (p. 145)

The Op begins to fear that he is "going blood-simple like the natives", although the fact that he fears this probably means

that he is not.<sup>36</sup> Even so, the Op has wandered into the wilderness and does not know if he can find his way out.

These fears surface again in a dream the Op has while drunk on doped gin, trying to escape the reality of Personville. In the dream, he chases a man he hates to the top of a tall building. The man jumps just as the Op catches him, and in trying to kill him, the Op goes off the building also and falls with him. This dream deals explicitly with revenge, says Thompson.<sup>37</sup> In attempting to kill this man, the Op kills himself, in the same way that the Op fears that the part he has played in Personville will damage him irreparably.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that when the Op awakens from his drugged sleep beside the dead body of Dinah Brand, he cannot be sure he did not kill her. One of his fellow detectives believes the Op did commit the murder and no longer trusts the Op. It eventually turns out to be a frame-up, but the Op questions his own moral fiber for a while.

Throughout Red Harvest, then, the Op faces the problem of moral and ethical action in an immoral and lawless world, a struggle in which the Op loses much. Critic Peter Wolfe notes that the Op, in order to accomplish his mission in Personville, "has had to sacrifice both his professional and personal standards."<sup>39</sup> But these standards define the Op's life, and to abandon them he must also abandon his conception of himself. Ironically, what usually orders his life (doing

a job well) disorders it, because of the methods he uses to accomplish the task. While the Op triumphs over the thugs in Personville, the victory remains empty because of the price it exacts.

Sam Spade, of The Maltese Falcon, expands the character of the Op into more human form. Money and sex never tempt the Op, but they do tempt Spade, putting his values to a severe test. Like the Op, Spade's ethics are personal, centering around his job, but also reflecting, as the Flitcraft story shows, an intense instinct for survival and a strong sense of reality.

Echoing the Op, Spade bends the law if it will help him accomplish his ends. Spade connives with the villains in the story, pretending to be as unscrupulous and greedy as they are, but his pretensions have reasons. He protects Brigid O'Shaughnessy and Joel Cairo from the police, but does so because he wishes to pump them for answers. Having them arrested before he knows the details of the case would not solve the mystery and would therefore not suit his purpose.

Likewise, near the end of the book, Spade appears to conspire with Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid, setting up a "fall guy" to take the blame for the murders. Again, Spade stalls while he searches for answers, as Thompson points out.<sup>40</sup> He fills in the background details of the case in this scene, so that he can turn the whole bunch over to the police with explanations that make sense. Spade practices moral pragmatism,

but acts much of the time, as he tells Brigid: "Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be. That kind of reputation might be good business--bringing in the high priced jobs and making it easier to deal with the enemy" (p. 227). In the end, Spade sticks with his vision of existence, and with his ethics based on that vision.

Spade explains this to Brigid near the end of the novel, when he turns her in to the police for murder, even though he has fallen in love with her. Most of the reasons he gives are personal, but some reflect professional ethics. "When a man's partner is killed;" Spade says, "he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought about him" (p. 226). This resembles the Op's loyalty to his agency, and illustrates Spade's view of professional obligations. Being a detective brings certain duties also: "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" (p. 226). The third reason recalls the Op's devotion to doing his job well: ". . . I'm a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go. It can be done, all right, and sometimes it is done, but it's not the natural thing" (p. 226).

Ned Beaumont of The Glass Key, while not a professional detective, nevertheless lives by a code, one that expands on



certain strands in Hammett's previous work. Beaumont, being a gambler by profession, finds his code in how he accepts luck, capitalizing on the good and enduring the bad. He explains to his friend, Paul Madvig, why he must chase down a bookie who welshed on a bet Beaumont won:

What good am I if my luck's gone? Then I' cop, or think I do, and I'm all right again. . . . The money's important enough, but it's not the real thing. It's what losing and losing and losing does to me. . . . And then, when I think I've worn out the jinx, this guy takes a Mickey Finn on me. I can't stand for it. If I stand for it I'm licked, my nerve's gone. (p. 23)

Beaumont has to chase down his winnings to retain his self-respect, in the same way that Spade and the Op find self-respect in doing their jobs well.

But as the quote illustrates, being a gambler also entails a certain amount of losing as a part of the nature of things. Beaumont understands this bleak prospect: "I can stand anything I've got to stand," he tells Paul Madvig (p. 5). And Beaumont must stand a lot in the novel--beatings, lies and the loss of his closest friend. Critic William Nolan neatly connects these two strands in summarizing Beaumont's code: "You don't let life step on you if you can help it; if you can't (bad luck) then you learn to take it."<sup>41</sup> Beaumont's code forces him to take action, then requires that he suffer

the consequences of acting. Such a code is the logical extension of the codes of the Op and Sam Spade.

Though professional ethics form a major portion of the code of Hammett's protagonists, they are not the only moral concern of these detectives. Personal relationships play an increasing role in Hammett's ethical world, a role influenced by the moral vision Hammett articulates.

The Op, Hammett's first character, possesses no personal life, or at least gives no inkling of one. Indeed, his personal life never appears--he lives only in his work, in the thrill of shadowing a dark figure down an unlit back street, in the challenge of watching the glint in a man's eyes and deciding if he lies or tells the truth. The Op can be cold and unfeeling, even brutal, if the job requires it, yet he can also be warm and caring, if it helps. At one end of the spectrum, the Op resembles the "Old Man," the head of the San Francisco branch of his agency, empty of "everything but brains" and "a soft-spoken, gently smiling shell of politeness that was the same whether things went good or bad." The detectives admire his cold-bloodedness, calling him "Pontius Pilate," because "he smiled politely when he sent us out to be crucified on suicidal jobs."<sup>42</sup> Ruehlmann sees the Op evolving into the character of the old man, becoming more and more unfeeling, and this assertion might hold if one ignored The Dain Curse.

In that novel the Op goes beyond what is strictly necessary

to help Gabrielle Leggett kick her drug habit. While this partly helps tie up the case, the Op's concern for her also seems genuine.<sup>43</sup> The Op lets Gabrielle think he is in love with her, for as Thompson notes, this gives her confidence in herself and solves the problem efficiently, even though the Op has no romanticism in him.<sup>44</sup> Gabrielle sees through him later, calling him a "monster": ". . . 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. . . ." (p. 204). While because of Hammett's objective method of narration the Op's real feelings never surface, it seems doubtful that the Op would fall in love; even so, he has gone out of his way to help Gabrielle.

The Op has no close friends, at least none that appear in his adventures. He has many acquaintances from his years of work: policemen, other detectives, former criminals, and various others, but he remains essentially a loner. This frees him to conduct his business as he chooses, but exacts an emotional toll: isolation. The inescapable result of the Op's conquering the temptations that confront him turns out to be loneliness.

The character of Sam Spade in The Maltese Falcon enlarges upon the character of the Op, making him more human, and thus more vulnerable. Personal relationships play a pivotal role in this novel, explaining Spade's motivations and sacrifices in some key scenes.

Spade has an affair going with Iva Archer, his partner's wife, as the novel opens. As so often with Spade, moral issues become important only when they conflict with his basic personal principles, which have to do with survival. So when Miles Archer is murdered, Spade hunts down the killer out of a sense of professional duty and a respect for business relationships, even though he despised Miles. As for Iva, Spade drops her as soon as Brigid O'Shaughnessy appears on the scene, yet treats Iva kindly, if somewhat reluctant to see her, after Miles' death.<sup>45</sup> But again, this relationship threatens none of the principles necessary for Spade's survival.

Spade also treats Rhea Gutman with compassion when he finds her drugged in her father's apartment. He helps her walk off the drug and calls a doctor. Although Spade pumps her for information while helping her, thus enabling him to do his job better, he does show real concern for her.

But Spade's relationship with Brigid O'Shaughnessy most threatens his survival. Spade and Brigid fit each other well, as Wolfe notes: "Both of them enjoy communicating through nuance; both like to skirt the fringes of the law; above all, each touches a central nerve in the other."<sup>46</sup> Spade wants to help her, though he suspects her all along of Miles Archer's murder, but she never gives him the trust he needs. Over and over Spade gives her a chance to level with him, but she never comes clean--she always tells another lie, another story that eventually falls apart under Spade's careful scrutiny. Brigid

explains herself to Spade in one easily missed sentence:

"I am a liar, . . . I have always been a liar" (p. 92).

Marling calls this line Brigid's "analogue to the Flitcraft parable."<sup>47</sup> Unlike Brigid, who fails to understand the Flitcraft story, Spade takes notice of Brigid's declaration, and even while in love with her, suspects everything she tells him, and with good reason.

Yet given all of this, Spade falls hard for Brigid, putting him squarely in the crossfire between emotion and reason, between his code and his feelings. Spade faces a danger more perilous than any previous Hammett detective, and finds the cost of survival greater also. At the end of the novel, when Spade enumerates his reasons for turning Brigid over to the cops, only the first three are professional. The last four are personal, a matter of survival.

Spade points out that he could not help Brigid without being "dragged to the gallows with the others" (p. 226). The next reason he gives echoes a concern he has voiced throughout the book: "I've no reason in God's world to think I can trust you" and "you'd have something on me you could use whenever you happened to want to" (p. 226). Spade cannot afford to surrender such power and give his independence to another. The next reason follows directly from the one just mentioned: Spade has something on Brigid, and what is to stop her from shooting him to regain her independence? And lastly, Spade dislikes the idea that maybe "you played me for a sucker" (p. 226).

In the end, Spade boils down all his reasons to one: "I won't play the sap for you" (p. 228). The fact that they might love each other, as Spade notes, won't balance the scales, for Brigid has counted on that love to save her when the time comes for punishment. To abandon his code and self-worth to save Brigid, whose stock-in-trade is betrayal, costs too much, and Spade cannot do it. His instinct for survival remains too strong.

But that does not make the choice easy. Hammett's description of Spade's appearance in that last scene with Brigid dramatizes the struggle going on inside Spade. His face is "yellow-white and damp with sweat," his eyes blood-shot and his smile "a frightful grimace" (pp. 223, 225). He speaks hoarsely and keeps clearing his throat. "I'll have some rotten nights," he says, but he will survive (p. 227). Thompson points out that Spade's code results in "inescapable loneliness."<sup>48</sup>

For Ned Beaumont of The Glass Key, personal relationships form a bulwark against the chaos of the outside world, but only under certain conditions. Beaumont needs trust and loyalty for a relationship to continue, and in the dark world of this novel, those two commodities are rare indeed. In a sequence early in the novel, Ned Beaumont tells Opal Madvig, Paul's daughter, "You oughtn't to lie to me" (p. 25). Later she asks him "Aren't we friends?" and Beaumont replies, "Sure, . . . but it's hard to remember when we're lying to

each other" (p. 26). As Thompson correctly sees, these lines explain Beaumont's relationships and motivation: "His point is that friendship and lies cannot coexist, that trust is a necessary ingredient of human relationships."<sup>49</sup> Thus when Paul Madvig lies to Ned about committing the murder, their friendship collapses under the weight of those lies. Beaumont will stand savage beatings for his friend Paul, and never doubts his innocence, but he cannot abide Paul lying to him. Beaumont solves the murder and clears Paul, but their friendship ends, damaged irreparably by a lack of trust, and sacrificed by Paul for the protection of his political racehorse, Senator Henry.<sup>50</sup>

Janet Henry's relationship with Ned Beaumont remains more ambiguous, because of Hammett's refusal to abandon his objective narration and show how Ned feels about her. Their mutual attraction simmers along through most of the novel, but Ned distrusts her, because her father is using her as bait to get Paul Madvig's political support and she plays along with him, though she despises Madvig. This trickery in a personal relationship sets Beaumont against her, he tells her: "The part of you that's tricked Paul and is trying to trick him is my enemy" (p. 146). Janet and Ned become friends and partners only when they make a pact to find the truth about the murder, no matter whom it indicts. They can work together with this bond of honesty and trust.

Their relationship never rests on a very secure footing.

Ned recounts a dream of his, where he caught a big fish, and Janet grabbed it and threw it back in the water before he could do anything, certainly not a promising image. Janet's dream of the house and the snakes, mentioned earlier, also suggests, in Parker's words, that "the attempt to unlock the barriers which prevent fulfillment is to release vipers."<sup>51</sup>

Janet first lies about the ending of her dream, making it happy, but later tells Beaumont the real ending, where the snakes crawl all over them. The fact that she could tell him the truth is a good sign. Ned seems at best ambivalent about Janet going away with him at the end of the novel:

"Do you really want to go or are you just being hysterical?" he [Ned] asked. . . . Before she could speak he said: 'It doesn't make any difference. I'll take you if you want to go'" (p. 201).

At the end of The Glass Key, then, Ned Beaumont has only his tenuous relationship with Janet Henry to replace his broken friendship with Paul Madvig. Lies and deceit shatter friendships just as surely as the glass key shattered in Janet's dream, and Ned has lost much by the end of the novel.

In Hammett's hard and ironic world, the cost of friendship comes high, so high that most of his characters refuse to pay it. The Op lives with his code, by himself, shutting out the world; Spade finds love with Brigid, but rejects it to save himself; Ned Beaumont loses the one strong friendship that exists in The Glass Key.



Hammett's characters exhibit an active hard-nosed self-reliance, as there exists nothing else on which to rely. Living up to one's personal code makes the world endurable for these characters, allowing them to survive in a corrupt world. As Crider states, "Hammett's characters seem to find relief by living solely for and within themselves. . . ." <sup>52</sup> Existence in this world requires mental and emotional toughness, shrewdness, and quick reflexes, to avoid the falling beams. One cannot hope to win, but merely to break even, to survive. Beneath the hard bright sheen of Hammett's world lies loneliness and isolation.

## Raymond' Chandler

Raymond Chandler turned to writing rather late in life, at the age of forty-five in 1933. He had been born in America but had been educated in England, where he worked for a while in the British Admiralty and served in the army in World War I. He came to California and entered the business world, eventually working his way up to high positions in several oil companies. The depression severed his relationship with these companies and he began to write professionally.

While Hammett's detectives sleuth mostly in tough fog-shrouded San Francisco, Chandler's detective, Philip Marlowe, moves through a sun-baked world of fading art deco elegance in Los Angeles. Chandler, although he admired Hammett's writing and learned much from it, thought he saw a flaw: ". . . it had no overtones, left no echo, evoked no image beyond a distant hill."<sup>53a</sup> Chandler tried to correct this in his writing, and to a large extent he did, with vivid characters and remarkable description. His sharply focused portrait of Los Angeles in the 1940's captures the feel of that time and place perhaps better than any other writer, and has become part of the popular recollection of that period.

Chandler inherits the moral world of Hammett and much of his vision, but shapes it to fit his own perspective. He focuses on the corruption of the outside world and the contrast between that world and the private ethics of his detective, but feels sad that those ethics are not more widespread.

In doing so, he turns the moral perspective slightly outward, and although his detective is as isolated as Hammett's by his ethics, at least he believes that ethics can exist in the outside world, and do not necessarily have to be merely private matters.

The world Chandler writes of has changed some since the days of Hammett. The curious moral anomaly of bootlegger and speakeasy have disappeared with the repeal of prohibition. Gangsters still abound, but they have thrown away the tommy guns and gangland massacres and gone legit, building mansions and driving fancy cars, passing themselves off as respectable citizens. They own the elegant gambling clubs and watering spots, along with a few policemen and a politician or two, and although they willingly resort to blackmail or murder, they try to do it out of the public eye, if possible. In Hammett's day, they would have stared the cops down over the barrel of an automatic or a satchel full of twenties, all in broad daylight.

But now the gangsters have layered sophistication over their greed, good manners over the toughness. In The Big Sleep, Marlowe meets up with Eddie Mars, who runs the local gambling house, with sidelines of blackmail and murder, among others. Mars looks harmless, even genteel: "He was a gray man, all gray, except for his polished black shoes and two scarlet diamonds in his gray satin tie that looked like the diamonds on roulette layouts. His shirt was gray and his

double-breasted suit of soft, beautifully cut flannel."<sup>53b</sup> Marlowe thinks that Mars doesn't look so much like a tough guy as he does a "well-weathered horseman" (p. 63). But when pressed, Mars reveals himself: "The veneer had flaked off him, leaving a well-dressed hard boy with a Luger" (p. 65).

Mars has a convenient "arrangement" with the Los Olindas police about his gambling club, and his nice manners don't hide the fact that he uses his own wife as a pawn in a blackmail scheme, and his hired help, Canino, kills in cold blood on orders from Eddie Mars. Marlowe meets Mars' wife at the end of the novel, and she tries to defend her husband's actions, but Marlowe sees clearly what Mars is:

Once outside the law, you're all the way outside. You think he's just a gambler. I think he's a pornographer, a blackmailer, a hot car broker, a killer by remote control, and a suborner of crooked cops. He's whatever looks good to him, whatever has the cabbage pinned to it. Don't try to sell me on any high-souled racketeers. They don't come in that pattern. (p. 181)

In Farewell, My Lovely, Marlowe runs across Laird Brunette, a gambler who owns two gambling ships out in the harbor, outside legal limits. Brunette does as he pleases, and having put up thirty grand to help elect the current mayor of Bay City, he has no problems with the local police.

Brunette dresses like old money and lives just as

elegantly, treating Bay City as his private fief when it suits him. Red Norgaard, an honest cop bounced off the Bay City police force, explains to Marlowe about crooks like Brunette: ". . . he's not a tough guy. These racketeers are a new type . . . . And as for the top men, like Brunette--they didn't get there by murdering people. They got there by guts and brains. . . . But above all, they're business men. What they do is for money."<sup>54</sup>

Although many are genteel, tough hoods abound also in Chandler's world. In The Long Goodbye, Marlowe's path crosses that of Mendy Menendez, a local hood who pays off the vice squad, then beats one of them up when the cop gets out of line. Menendez, however, finds himself doublecrossed by Randy Starr, a Las Vegas gambler, racketeer, and businessman who also happens to be police commissioner.

While the crooks masquerade as the idle rich, the rich seem little better than crooks. The wealthy General Sternwood, who hires Marlowe at the beginning of The Big Sleep, describes his two daughters for Marlowe: "Vivian is spoiled, exacting, smart and quite ruthless. Carmen is a child who likes to pull wings off flies. Neither of them has any more moral sense than a cat. Neither have I. No Sternwood ever had" (p. 10). When Carmen turns out to be a psychopath and Vivian an ally of Eddie Mars, no wonder Marlowe says, "To hell with the rich. They made me sick" (p. 59).

In Farewell, My Lovely, the Mrs. Helen Grayle who hires

Marlowe turns out to be Velma Valento, a former lounge singer who betrayed her boyfriend for a reward and murders to cover her trail. She cheats regularly on her present husband with many different men, all with his knowledge.

Both Sylvia Lennox and Eileen Wade of The Long Goodbye resemble Helen Grayle and the Sternwood daughters: rich, wild women, self-absorbed and selfish. Sylvia Lennox flaunts her infidelity to her husband; Eileen Wade loves a man out of her past and commits murder. Mrs. Elizabeth Bright Murdock of The High Window has "pewter colored hair set in a ruthless permanent, a hard beak and large moist eyes with the sympathetic expression of wet stones."<sup>55</sup> She manipulates those around her ruthlessly, including her son. She badgers her secretary, Merle Davis, into believing that she killed Mrs. Murdock's first husband, when the real murderer was none other than Mrs. Murdock herself.

Wealth and money, in Chandler's world, hold the power to corrupt, and the desire for wealth corrupts just as surely. The desire for a quick buck turns Orrin Quest of The Little Sister into a murderer who blackmails his older sister, and the younger sister, Orfamay Quest, comes west to Hollywood to get a cut of the take. "There ain't no clean way to make a hundred million bucks," a character says in The Long Goodbye, and Chandler echoes this refrain often.<sup>56</sup> Those who make big money are tainted by it, and the taint carries on to the second generation, the idle bored rich children who have a

a lot of time and money and no morals.

The police also inhabit this world, and Chandler spends much more time discussing the police than Hammett does. Chandler understands many of the problems the police face, seeing that in the dark underside of society the police can be corrupted as well, from being the guardians of law and order into part of the disorder of the world. One policeman states the problem quite succinctly in The Lady in the Lake: "Police business," he tells Marlowe, "is a hell of a problem. It's a good deal like politics. It asks for the highest type of men, and there's nothing in it to attract the highest type of men. So we have to work with what we get. . . ."57

While both good and bad cops inhabit Chandler's Los Angeles, the spoiled ones, sometimes crooked, often just brutal, seem more numerous. Sometimes the system forces police to knuckle under. Galbraith, a halfway crooked cop with an uneasy conscience, explains about coping with corrupt Bay City in Farewell, My Lovely:

A guy can't stay honest if he wants to. . . . That's what's the matter with this country. He gets chiseled out of his pants if he does. You gotta play the game dirty or you don't eat. A lot of bastards think all we need is ninety thousand FBI men in clean collars and brief cases. Nuts. The percentage would get them just the way it does the rest of us. . . . I think we gotta

make this little world all over again. Now take Moral Rearmament. There you've got something. M.R.A. There you've got something, baby. (p. 196)

Chandler musters compassion for the plight of the police force, for those who have been worn down by years of "turning over dirty underwear and sniffing rotten teeth."<sup>58</sup> Police lieutenant Christy French complains that "we're coppers and everybody hates our guts."<sup>59</sup> Something snaps in many of them after working under those conditions for years.

Some get tough and brutal, like Blane of Farewell, My Lovely, who gets "sap-hungry" and has "just got to crack a head" (p. 194). Most of Chandler's cops act tough, to intimidate Marlowe and others into confessing or giving up information, but with some the act becomes a way of life, no longer an act but a violent reality. Captain Gregorius of The Long Goodbye exemplifies this trait, being "the kind that solves crimes with the bright light, the soft sap, the kick to the kidneys, the knee to the groin, the fist to the solar plexus, and the night stick to the base of the spine" (p. 34). Brutality becomes an end in itself.

Some go on the take, or work off hours as protection for various rackets, such as the Bay City police who provide security for Jules Amthor, "psychic consultant," in Farewell, My Lovely. Bay City provides examples of the worst kind of corruption, where honest cops like Cliff Riordan and Red



Norgaard have to leave the force to stay honest. The police chief in Bay City is John Wax, a fat, expensively dressed bureaucrat who tries to throw Marlowe out of his office until he discovers Marlowe has a rich client. Then he becomes all smiles and smarmy helpfulness. One Bay City cop insinuates that Laird Brunette, the gambler, owns Wax as well as the rest of the city. Bay City cops try to frame Marlowe for drunk driving when he asks too many questions in The Lady in the Lake, a a police lieutenant in The Little Sister suggests that finding fall guys to quiet public outcry is common practice in Bay City.<sup>60</sup>

Some cops get tired and cease to care about anything anymore. Lieutenant Nulty, of Farewell, My Lovely complains when assigned to investigate the murder of a black man: "Shines. Another shine killing. That's what I rate after eighteen years in this man's police department. No pix, no space, not even four lines in the want-ad section" (p. 12). Nulty tries to get Marlowe to do his work for him, content to sit around in the "same attitude of sour patience" and do nothing about the case (p. 29).

But policemen go bad for other reasons, also. Al Degarmo of The Lady in the Lake goes crooked because he falls in love with an amoral woman who commits murder. He never gets over his failed marriage with her, and tries to cover up her wrongs, even though it weighs heavily on his conscience and in the end, drives him to kill her.

Good cops exist too in the world Chandler describes. They are tough men with a hard shell, a prerequisite of police work, but they use their toughness to solve crimes. They talk mean and they threaten, but stay mostly within the law, and they exhibit a tenacious dedication which Marlowe recognizes and respects. In every Chandler novel, there appears at least one solid, honest policeman, working toward the same end as Marlowe, although through different channels. For instance, Marlowe calls Lieutenant Randall of the Los Angeles police "slim, smart and deadly" and admires Randall's intelligence and integrity.<sup>61</sup> Lieutenant Breeze of The High Window and Bernie Ohls of The Big Sleep and The Long Goodbye are other examples of this type. These cops do not always like Marlowe, and they resent the way he sometimes holds back information to protect his clients, but grudging respect often shines through their hard-boiled patter.

The medical profession has its share of crookedness and corruption also in Chandler's novels. Doctors, like the police and politicians, can go wrong if they get too greedy and do not have much of a conscience. While they belong to a normally respected profession, these doctors have fallen a long way from the light. Marlowe meets Dr. Sonderborg, who peddles dope to addicts in the guise of a clinic, and hides out criminals on the run from the law as part of his operation. Dr. Almore in The Lady in the Lake gives morphine injections to those who need them, and the more he gives, the more they

need. Dr. Lagardie of The Little Sister has mob connections and hides out a blackmailer. Marlowe suspects that at one time he also ran an illegal abortion clinic.

Marlowe understands this world gone wrong, and thinks he knows why. In The Long Goodbye, he presents his analysis:

We don't have mobs and crime syndicates and goon squads because we have crooked politicians and their stooges in City Hall and legislatures. Crime isn't a disease, it's a symptom. . . . We're a big tough rich wild people and crime is the price we pay for it, and organized crime is the price we pay for organization. We'll have it with us for a long time. Organized crime is just the dirty side of the sharp dollar. (pp. 289-90)

Yet Marlowe remains uncorrupted by this world where so many fail, and retains his honor in a windstorm of amoral activity. An examination of Marlowe's character illuminates how this is possible. Crider observes a vital difference between the nature of Hammett's detectives and Philip Marlowe; Hammett's characters find shelter from the chaos of the world by "living solely for and within themselves," but Marlowe genuinely attempts to aid people, not because it is his job, but "because he believes that such abstract concepts as truth and justice do exist."<sup>62</sup> Marlowe illustrates this in a passing comment in The Big Sleep, his first adventure. On entering the Sternwood home, he sees a stained glass panel

of a lady tied to a tree and a knight trying to rescue her. The detective's reaction is pure Marlowe: "I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying" (p. 1). A scene in Farewell, My Lovely gives another illustration of Marlowe's character. He finds a bug in the homicide bureau, eighteen floors above the street. After watching it a while, he picks the bug up and takes it with him when he leaves, releasing it in a flower bed outside. Marlowe tells the amazed police that the bug is his good luck charm, but it means more than that, Crider notes. The bug "represents the people (and the kind of people) whom the police cannot or will not help, the people about whom only Marlowe seems to care."<sup>63</sup> Marlowe carries this knightly behavior through his adventures, searching for the embodiment of such concepts in rich neighborhoods and back alleys, but seldom finds them. Still the search continues.

Chandler laid out the basics for the character of his detective in a well-known passage from the essay, "The Simple Art of Murder":

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by

instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.<sup>64</sup>

Marlowe lives in the lonely world of the empty office and the solitary apartment, isolated from the world by his code. But he possesses intelligence and sensitivity, along with compassion, and he hides them behind the ironic veil of the tough wisecrack and the hard-boiled simile. He retains these characteristics in the rough world he inhabits, and the contrast between his toughness and sensitivity make him a fascinating character.

Professional ethics perform a different function for Marlowe than they did for Hammett's detectives. Sam Spade and the Op recognize the corruptness of the world, but mostly accept it as fact and try to work around it. For them, the moral failings of society are personal threats, threats to their survival, fended off by a strict personal code and few emotional commitments. Marlowe, however, questions and criticizes society. He sees a foulness in the human community, a distortion of desires in the soul, as responsible for the evils he confronts over and over again. Marlowe has personal and professional ethics and lives by them, but he also sees the difference between the way the world is and the way it could be.

Chandler claimed that while Marlowe had a strong personal conscience, he had "as much social conscience as a horse."

Even so, Chandler admitted that Marlowe was an idealist, although Marlowe himself would never acknowledge it.<sup>65</sup> Critic Jerry Speir notes that Marlowe's temperament attracts him to victims, citing Merle Davis of The High Window and Terry Lennox of The Long Goodbye as examples.<sup>66</sup> Marlowe feels sorry for old General Sternwood of The Big Sleep, and can even muster sympathy for the corrupt Degarmo at the end of The Lady in the Lake.

"You can't make much money at this trade, if you're honest," Marlowe says in The Big Sleep, and the desire for money seldom spurs him on (p. 51). His motivations stem more from wanting to help people, to "reach out to others," as Crider puts it, and from a certain excitement and curiosity about his work.<sup>67</sup> Marlowe realizes that his job encompasses much unpleasantness and disappointment, but sees the other side, as well: "But there's a lot of fun too. And there's always the chance of a big case."<sup>68</sup> These two goals, helping others and finding answers, recur throughout Chandler's novels.

Marlowe explains his drive to a police friend of his: "I'm a romantic, Bernie. I hear voices crying in the night and I go see what's the matter. You don't make a dime that way."<sup>69</sup> Not surprisingly, Marlowe remains far poorer than the people he works for. He seldom makes much money at his cases, and often tries to return his fee if he feels that his work has been unsatisfactory.

In that sense he possesses some of the same traits as

Hammett's detectives. Obviously, Marlowe wants to do his job well, if for different reasons: out of a sense of honesty and responsibility rather than just self-esteem. Marlowe tells a client he does "only the fairly honest kinds" of work, and he does not do divorce work at all.<sup>70</sup> Marlowe protects his clients when at all possible from scandal or the police, refusing to tell just anyone about his cases: "If a man in my line of work is handed a job, does he go around answering questions about it to anyone who gets curious?"<sup>71</sup> Part of Marlowe's motivation here is business, for he sees it as necessary for a private detective to be able to keep a secret. "How long would they [clients] come if any bruiser with a police shield could hold me upside down and drain my guts?" he asks in The Long Goodbye (p. 44).

But as so often with Marlowe, a moral issue lies behind the business concerns. Hammett's characters would have quit after considering practical business and personal survival, but Marlowe does not. He refuses to talk to the police, for instance, because he cannot always trust them, as he tells a police lieutenant:

Until you guys own your own souls you don't own mine.  
Until you guys can be trusted every time and always, in all times and conditions, to seek the truth out and find it and let the chips fall where they may--until that time comes, I have a right to listen to my conscience, and

protect my client the best way I can. Until I'm sure you won't do him more harm than you'll do the truth good. Or until I'm hauled before someone that can make me talk.<sup>72</sup>

Marlowe often refuses bribes to cover up crimes, or to stop investigating, rejecting them outright. Even the five thousand dollar bill he receives from Terry Lennox in The Long Goodbye for helping him out strikes Marlowe as a sort of bribe, and he returns it, because he dislikes the way in which he received it.

But like Hammett's detectives, Marlowe receives offers of sexual bribery more often than money, and he turns them down as quickly as the Continental Op would. Both the Sternwood daughters throw themselves at Marlowe, at various times. "It's a question of professional pride. . ." Marlowe tells one of them as he refuses her, "I'm working for your father. He's a sick man, very frail, very helpless. He sort of trusts me not to pull any stunts."<sup>73</sup> He says pretty much the same thing to the other daughter, underlining how seriously he takes his job: "I work at it, lady. I don't play at it."<sup>74</sup> He rejects the passes of Helen Grayle of Farewell, My Lovely and Eileen Wade of The Long Goodbye for related reasons: a fear of their moral corruption and a sense of sympathy for their ineffectual husbands.

Marlowe sometimes lets events take their course, without



trying to intervene, similar to what Hammett's detectives sometimes do. Marlowe lets Leslie Murdock go, at the end of The High Window, though Murdock has admitted killing a man, albeit accidentally. Marlowe does not turn him in because he has no proof it was not accidental, and because Murdock's mother is his client and that gives her a right to Marlowe's silence, although he says if the police investigate, he will have to talk. This directly echoes Hammett, whose detectives often put the protection of their clients before the reporting of crimes.

Another instance occurs in The Little Sister, where Marlowe half suspects that Dolores Gonzales, a murderer, is going to be killed by an accomplice. He calls the police, but they arrive too late. Marlowe wonders if he should have intervened, though he's not sure even then that he knew what would happen. He pleads confusion, a lack of right choices: "There was never a point where I could do the natural obvious thing without stopping to rack my head dizzy with figuring how it would affect somebody I owed something to" (p. 415).

The Long Goodbye finds Marlowe most obviously playing judge and jury. He refrains from turning Eileen Wade in to the police right away, and that night she commits suicide. When asked why he waited, Marlowe tells the police that all they would have found is a "mixed up story" and a "few silly lies" (p. 268). Wade's suicide note leaves a full confession, however, and that clears Marlowe's friend, Terry Lennox, who

was charged with the murder. Loyalty to a man he liked and a desire for justice motivate Marlowe's actions.

Marlowe refuses to turn in a murderer in The Big Sleep also. He tells Vivian Regan to take her psychotic sister away and try to cure her mental problems. He won't go to the police if she complies. Marlowe knows that if General Sternwood finds out that his daughter committed murder, the shock will kill him. Because he feels sorry for the General, he lets the murderer go, something hard to imagine Sam Spade doing.

Philip Durham notes that Chandler, in "The Simple Art of Murder," had evinced no interest in his character's private life, saying only that Marlowe was a man of honor.<sup>75</sup> Little of Marlowe's personal life appears in the novels, outside of what happens in the course of a case. While Marlowe genuinely enjoys people, his personal relationships take a back seat to his job. Anne Riordan of Farewell, My Lovely is a smart, genuinely likable woman that Marlowe befriends in the novel. Yet he rejects her offer to stay the night with her, although he obviously likes her. Speir claims that this is because he idealizes her. So often Marlowe runs into women who try to bribe him with sex, who hide amoral behavior under beauty, that when he finds someone close to his ideal, he does not wish to take her off the pedestal.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps he finds it easier to believe the ideal exists than to risk finding it does not.

Later, in The Long Goodbye, Marlowe does not reject a similar offer from Linda Loring, a wealthy divorcee. At the end of Playback, Marlowe accepts her suggestion of marriage, even though he said at one time, "It wouldn't last six months."<sup>77</sup> Chandler realized the problems in trying to marry off his detective, saying that "a fellow of Marlowe's type shouldn't get married, because he is a lonely man, a poor man, a dangerous man, and yet a sympathetic man, and somehow none of this goes with marriage."<sup>78</sup> Perhaps Chandler was trying to break out of the conventions of the detective formula, away from the isolation of the hero.

People generally interest Marlowe (they have to or he would not be in his line of work), and he often divides them into two categories, victims and victimizers.<sup>79</sup> Victims receive immediate sympathy from Marlowe, while the victimizers receive the brunt of his scorn, stemming from his hatred of injustice and corruption.

Those he sees as victims Marlowe treats with compassion. Bill Chess, in The Lady in the Lake, unburdens himself to Marlowe, who treats his confidence with respect. Marlowe feels sorry for General Sternwood of The Big Sleep, a "broken and sick old man," and tries to spare him the knowledge that his psychopathic daughter is a murderer (p. 213).

Merle Davis of The High Window, a naive and emotionally troubled soul, has been used by Mrs. Murdock, made to think that she committed a murder. Marlowe goes out of his way to

prove to her that she did not commit any murder, rescues her from the clutches of the Murdocks and sends her back home to her parents. She speaks for all victims in Chandler's novels when she tells Marlowe, "I'm not afraid of you" (p. 175).

Victimizers fare much worse from Marlowe. He wastes little sympathy on hired guns, like Canino in The Big Sleep, or on spoiled cops like Captain Blane of Farewell, My Lovely or Captain Gregorius of The Long Goodbye. The Quests of The Little Sister, out to blackmail their own sister, Marlowe despises. The rich who use others to make their fortunes, or to protect themselves from taking the consequences of their actions, infuriate Marlowe.

Yet he can feel sympathy for those victimizers who become victims themselves. In Farewell, My Lovely, the crooked cop Galbraith reveals Marlowe how he is caught in the system and not happy about it. Marlowe sees a different side of him and treats him with some compassion. Lieutenant Degarmo of The Lady in the Lake turns corrupt because of his love for the amoral Mildred Haviland. His marriage to her changed his life, a fellow policeman tells Marlowe: "A lot of what seems bad in him [Degarmo] is the result of it" (p. 154). At the end of the novel, when Degarmo dies in a wreck, Marlowe sees, in more than the obvious sense, "something that had been a man" (p. 217). Marlowe cannot condone Degarmo's behavior, but he can understand it, and feels sorry for him.

When Mendy Menendez has a vice cop beaten up without

orders from the syndicate in The Long Goodbye, they double-cross him to teach him a lesson. Marlowe despises Menendez' tough talk and his crookedness, but feels sympathy for him when he walks in on the double-cross. Mendy is hit and doubles over, prompting a cop to call him "soft as mush." Marlowe disagrees, saying "He's not soft. . . . He's hurt. Any man can be hurt" (p. 286). Marlowe even goes to the trouble of calling the syndicate boss, a police commissioner in Las Vegas, to make sure Mendy will not be killed on the the way there.

Terry Lennox of The Long Goodbye stands out as the one male friend that Marlowe has in the novels who has no connection to his job. Marlowe later becomes involved in Lennox's case, but they meet quite accidentally, when Marlowe aids the helplessly drunk Lennox. Lennox's face has scars from a war injury, an injury that scarred his personality also. Still, Marlowe likes him, although he cannot understand why Lennox stays with a rich tramp of a wife who despises him. But when Lennox gets in trouble, Marlowe helps him (at some personal risk) and then spends much of the rest of the book trying to prove Lennox innocent, which he eventually does.

But as in so many of Marlowe's relationships, the friendship ends when Marlowe rejects it because of a difference of principles, as he explains to Lennox:

You had nice ways and nice qualities, but there was something wrong. You had standards and you lived up to

them, but they were personal. They had no relation to any kind of ethics or scruples. You were a nice guy because you had a nice nature. . . . You're a moral defeatist. (p. 310)

Marlowe cannot accept Lennox's surrender to the world, and he ends up alone once more, perhaps, as Spier concludes, an obsolete romantic hero in a fallen post-war world.<sup>80</sup>

Thus Marlowe, with his lonely stand against a corrupt and sinning world, is essentially a romantic character. Chandler himself realized that he had moved away from the hard realism of Hammett. He called Marlowe "a creature of fantasy," noting that he "is not a real person."<sup>81</sup> The hard-boiled detective story takes a new turn here, from simple survival and self respect to an awareness of principle, a knowledge of right and wrong. There may still be a man with a gun behind the next door, or a woman willing to use her body to get what she wants, but Marlowe realizes that the world does not have to be this way, and will not be, at least in the form of one honorable man. On such a romantic hope rests Marlowe's existence.

## Ross Macdonald

Ross Macdonald (the pseudonym of Kenneth Millar) was born in California, but lived in Canada for much of his early life. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Macdonald received a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Michigan in 1951, and taught high school for a while, but his real interest lay in writing. He published his first novel in 1944, and his first Lew Archer novel, The Moving Target, in 1949. Macdonald's wife, Margaret Millar, is also a successful novelist.

Just as Chandler tried to improve on Hammett's writing, Macdonald tried to improve on Chandler. Chandler's conception of the hero as "neither tarnished nor afraid" bothered Macdonald, and he claimed this was a step backwards from Sam Spade, "who was submerged and struggling in tragic life."<sup>82</sup> While Chandler placed the emphasis on scenes, and actively disliked plotting, Macdonald contended differently: "The surprise with which a detective novel concludes should set up tragic vibrations which run backward through the entire structure. Which means that the structure must be single, and intended."<sup>83</sup>

Macdonald also relaxed the conventions of the detective, finding the constraints that Marlowe operated under too rigid and stylized.<sup>84</sup> Archer becomes less and less the center of attention, as the other characters take center stage, as planned: "Certainly my narrator Archer is not the main object

of my interest, nor the character with whose fate I am most concerned. He is a deliberately narrowed version of the writing self, so narrow that when he turns sideways he almost disappears." Archer becomes not so much an active force as "a consciousness in which the meaning of other lives emerge."<sup>85</sup> Macdonald takes a major step here from The Maltese Falcon, where the fate of Sam Spade rivets the reader's attention, or from Chandler, where Marlowe's wit and restless energy stand at the focal point of the novels.

But more than the above has changed. With Archer, readers enter a different moral world, one with a sophisticated psychological view of evil and its consequences. Hammett's characters retreat from the world ethically, living in their own personal moral sphere and accepting the crudeness of the world. While Marlowe can live with himself, he has trouble accepting the outside world in its corrupt state. Marlowe lives also in his private moral world, but he wishes it were universal, and he finds it lonely. But while Marlowe tries to analyze the roots of evil in society, Archer analyzes people and their problems.<sup>86</sup> Archer thinks not in terms of society, but in terms of specific people.

In Chandler's writing, the roles of villain and victim can overlap. But in Lew Archer's moral vision, this idea expands to universality, as Archer explains:

When I went into police work in 1935, I believed that evil was a quality some people were born with, like a



harelip. . . . But evil isn't so simple. Everybody has it in him, and whether it comes out in his actions depends on a number of things. Environment, opportunity, economic pressure, a piece of bad luck, a wrong friend.<sup>87</sup>

Everyone has the capacity for sinning in Archer's world, and as Crider emphasizes, the crime in Macdonald's novels is most often committed by everyday people, pushed to the limit somehow, and not by professional criminals. Everyday life has pressures that can move people to violence.<sup>88</sup>

Archer understands the extent of evil, and the suffering it brings with it. Often everyone in a case errs, and suffers for it: "Hers was one of those stories without villains or heroes. There was no one to admire, no one to blame. Everyone had done wrong for himself and others. Everyone had failed. Everyone had suffered."<sup>89</sup> Macdonald presents the world as a moral labyrinth, with no maps available. Often his villains are motivated by good intentions that slide off a precipice into wrongdoing. Archer marvels at the "appalling ease with which the things you do in a good cause can slip over into bad." And he recognizes the differences in kinds of evil; different levels of bad situations exist, and Archer notes, "The line between them isn't straight and narrow."<sup>90</sup>

Archer possesses such understanding because he understands his own nature. Like Sam Spade, Archer moves through a corrupt world, and it taints him; like Philip Marlowe, Archer dislikes the corruption of the world, but he sees it also in

himself. Reuhlmann declares that Archer's "personal sense of guilt makes him more prone to pity than punishment." He sees the reasons for this in Archer's personal failures: his divorce, his failure to finish college, his resignation from the police.<sup>91</sup> Archer freely admits his own shortcomings, as when someone asks him if he is a "good man": "I'm not. I keep trying when I remember to, but it keeps getting tougher every year. Like trying to chin yourself with one hand. You can practice off and on all your life, and never make it."<sup>92</sup>

Later he comforts a character by exposing the universality of moral failure: "You mustn't blame your husband for everything. No doubt he did wrong. We all do."<sup>93</sup>

Macdonald's world does possess some of the same features pictured by Hammett and Chandler. The world overflows with liars, and the self-interested, and even organized crime puts in an appearance in The Galton Case, although professional criminals appear infrequently in Macdonald's novels. World War II and its destructive effect on the psyches of those involved also appears: "War was their element, and when the war was finished, they were finished."<sup>94</sup>

Strange religions also make their appearance in Macdonald's writing. The Temple in the Clouds in The Moving Target, a cover for an illegal alien smuggling operation, has familiar echoes of Hammett and Chandler. But Macdonald gives these odd religions a more serious treatment sometimes--he sees how a severe religious nature can affect one's psychological life.

The redemption and reincarnation cult mentioned in The Barbarous Coast hints at this, but Macdonald treats this theme more fully in The Far Side of the Dollar. Mike Harley's psychopathically religious father warps him so that he can never lead a normal life. The religion of the Harleys oppresses and perverts, offering very cold comfort.

The motif of mental illness also recurs in several of Macdonald's novels. Psychiatrists appear in The Galton Case and The Goodbye Look, and characters in several other books have severe emotional and mental problems. Life becomes so complicated that people cannot cope, and this often affects Macdonald's stories. In The Underground Man appears Fritz Snow, a different but related case: a man of stunted mental and emotional growth who cannot be held responsible for his actions.

In Archer's world, man's wrongdoing not only causes human catastrophes, but natural ones as well. In The Underground Man, Stanley Broadhurst's death accidentally starts a large, raging brushfire which appears throughout the book. Speir sees this as "the alienation between human and natural forces," and man's treatment of the natural world mirrors man's treatment of man.<sup>95</sup> At times Macdonald makes the analogy between nature and society more clear-cut; at one point he speaks of a generation being poisoned by "a kind of moral DDT," like the pelicans had been.<sup>96</sup>

Critic Max Byrd notes that Macdonald writes of "a world

where the rattle of money drowns out all other harmonies."<sup>97</sup> Certainly money plays a great part in Macdonald's novels, usually as a corrupting force destroying man's innocence. Money changes people's conceptions of the world and of themselves. Archer understands money's effects and its power, and that they stem from basic human flaws: "You can't blame money for what it does to people. The evil is in people, and money is the peg they hang it on. They go wild for money when they've lost their other values."<sup>98</sup>

Albert Graves of The Moving Target provides an instructive case of a man turned into a murderer by money:

There may have been a time when Graves didn't care about money. There may be places where he could have stayed that way. Santa Teresa isn't one of them. Money is the lifeblood in this town. If you don't have it, you're only half alive. It must have galled him to work for millionaires and handle their money and have nothing of his own. Suddenly he saw a chance to be a millionaire himself. He realized that he wanted money more than anything on earth. (p. 182)

And the quest for money also destroys artistic impulses and sensibilities. In The Barbarous Coast, Archer looks up an old acquaintance, a scriptwriter for a movie studio, whose conscience rests uneasily. He tells Archer of the project he is working on, a movie version of Flaubert's Salamambo: "Salamambo

is a tragedy, its theme is dissolution. So Sime Graff tells me to tack a happy ending onto it. And I write it that way." He asks himself why he continues, though he is obviously uncomfortable with what he does, and in a fit of drunken sorrow, provides his own answer: "Money" (p. 92).

In fact, Hollywood serves as a metaphor for the way in which man has lost his direction. The desire for money has hardened into a living nightmare: "Hollywood started as a meaningless dream, invented for money. But its colors ran, out through the holes in people's heads, spread across the landscape and solidified. . . . Now we were stuck with the dream without a meaning."<sup>99</sup> The rich who inhabit Hollywood are corrupt also, as Archer learns. Simon Graff, who owns a studio, will do almost anything to make more money, even front for the mob. As an anguished District Attorney tells Archer: "They've got no decency, no sense of public responsibility--these goddam lousy big Hollywood names that go to Vegas and decoy for thieves and pander for mobsters and front for murderers."<sup>100</sup>

As with Hammett and Chandler, the possession of money can and does cover a multitude of sins in Macdonald's universe. In The Drowning Pool, Archer learns of Walter Kilbourne, who made his money with black market cars during World War II, then moved to California and became legitimate: "Now he's grand old California stock, and politicians go to his parties" (p. 108). Wealth evidently prompts short memories

and few inquiries.

Money makes people insensitive to others, prompting a way of thinking that treats the employee as a piece of property and anyone with less money as distinctly second class. Archer comments on this in The Goodbye Look as a human phenomenon:

"When your income passes a certain point you lose touch. All of a sudden the other people look like geeks or gooks, expendables."<sup>101</sup> Money drives Ralph Sampson in The Moving Target and eventually kills him. He buys illegal alien strikebreakers to work for him, trying to starve out his field workers, even though their "living conditions are awful and their wages aren't decent." Ironically, Sampson started out poor himself--his father was a tenant farmer--but money changed him, and as his daughter says, he "can't seem to see that Mexican field-workers are people" (p. 83).

Archer sometimes encounters this sort of class prejudice in his work, at times feeling "vaguely declassed" by the way his employers treat him.<sup>102</sup> The Hillmans of The Far Side of the Dollar think themselves superior to others because they have more money; Ralph Hillman bluntly tells Archer that he considers himself better than Archer because he has more money. His wife Elaine exhibits a similar, but slightly different condescension toward the human race: "My late father once said that you can buy anyone, anyone at all. I proved that. . ." (p. 215).

And even the rejection of wealth brings destruction at

times. In The Galton Case, young Anthony Galton tried to leave his money behind, changing his name and moving away from home. He hated snobbishness and sympathized with the working class, an old acquaintance tells Archer:

He had a theory that the country was going through another civil war--a war between the rich people and the poor people. He thought of the poor people as white Negroes, and he wanted to do for them what John Brown did for the slaves. Lead them out of bondage--in the spiritual sense, of course. Tony didn't believe in violence.<sup>103</sup>

Ironically, as Speir points out, Anthony Galton's attempt to escape from his money leads to his death, for the man who kills him knows who he is, and wants his money. His wealth isolates him even when he abandons it.<sup>104</sup>

Two other ideas exert an important influence upon Archer's world--the disintegration of the family and the inescapable link between present and past. Many of Macdonald's novels concern themselves with missing family members, especially fathers, and with events that happened in the distant past that hold the key to present puzzles. Macdonald's plots are tightly woven, often excavating years of tangled family relations to solve the case in the present.

Archer confronts the generation gap often in his cases, sometimes because of a twisted family structure, sometimes out

of a rejection of the morals of the parents' generation. Cathy Slocum of The Drowning Pool suffers because her grandmother dominates and twists the man she thinks is her father, and when she finds out another man is really her father the shock nearly unnerves her. Nick Chalmers of The Goodbye Look is haunted by the death of his father years ago, and the realization that the man claiming to be his father has lied to him for years.

The relations between parents and children exist in a tenuous balance, easily disturbed, in Macdonald's writing. Sometimes the problem arises from a rejection of the world of the parents: "It was often the same problem--an unreality so bland and smothering that the children tore loose and impaled themselves on the spikes of any reality that offered. Or made their own unreality with drugs."<sup>105</sup> Or the problem can arise out of a combination of rejection and thwarted ambition:

People are trying so hard to live through their children. And the children keep trying so hard to live up to their parents, or live them down. Everybody's living through or for or against somebody else. It doesn't make too much sense, and it isn't working too well.<sup>106</sup>

The modern family often disintegrates under the pressures of life.

A certain isolation affects parents and children, often



the parents suffering the effects of their past actions, while the children face disillusionment and despair. And too often, the lessons of the past remain unheeded: "Generation after generation had to start the past from scratch and learn the world over again. It changed so rapidly that children couldn't learn from their parents or parents from their children." Archer calls the different generations in this condition "alien tribes, islanded in time."<sup>107</sup> In The Underground Man, he understands the generation gap; he notes the poisoning of one generation "with a kind of moral DDT that damaged the lives of the young" (p. 226). No wonder, as one father tells Archer, that such alienation exists: "They're punishing us for bringing them into the world."<sup>108</sup>

Coupled with this is the unbreakable chain of cause and effect that binds the present to the past. The solution to Archer's cases often lies in determining what happened in the past, and how it relates to the present. Secrets hide everywhere, and Archer must ferret them out to solve the case. Such a world view admits few coincidences; few appear in Macdonald's work. Rather the reader sees the essential connectedness of events. "Life hangs together in one piece. Everything is connected to everything else," Archer states in The Far Side of the Dollar (p. 171).

Inevitably, these connections surface when Archer starts investigating. In The Drowning Pool Cathy Slocum finds that the man married to her mother is not her real father; she

resulted from an affair years earlier. An attempt at blackmail because of this affair starts Archer on the case. In The Galton Case, the disappearance of Anthony Galton years ago, and the sudden reappearance of a young man claiming to be his son (and wanting his inheritance) sends Archer on an excavation of the past. In The Chill, Roy Bradshaw tells Archer, in explanation of his actions, "I've lived my entire adult life with the consequences of a neurotic involvement that I got into when I was just a boy."<sup>109</sup> The plot of The Far Side of the Dollar hinges on an affair that took place during World War II, and its reverberations in a family years later, when the son tries to establish his true parentage. The characters of The Goodbye Look are haunted by a robbery and two murders that happened over fifteen years earlier. In The Underground Man, Stanley Broadhurst's attempt to find his missing father, who vanished when Stanley was a child, leads to his own disappearance and death, by the hand of the same murderer. Truly, as Ruehlmann writes, the "sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons" as a consequence of the past.<sup>110</sup>

And yet for all the darkness in Macdonald's world, hope exists, a tenuous, fragile hope, but far stronger than any found in Hammett and Chandler. At the end of The Drowning Pool, Cathy Slocum's real father, Ralph Knudson, plans to take her away, hoping her neuroses can be cured. The novel ends with Archer and Knudson shaking hands, a sign of "the possibility

of human understanding," as Speir puts it, in the deepening darkness.<sup>111</sup> The Galton Case ends on a note of hope, with young John Galton and his girlfriend about to start a new life, once the demons of the past have been exorcised by solving the case. In The Underground Man, young Ronny Broadhurst has returned safely to his mother. Archer hopes Ronny will forget his father's death and break the circle of violence that has plagued the Broadhurst family. Susan Crandall has been saved from suicide, and the raging brushfire in the novel has been extinguished. Perhaps there is hope for the younger generation if they avoid the mistakes of their parents.

Even though Archer's moral world is more complicated than his predecessors', colored by his sophisticated understanding of human behavior, his professional ethics play less of a role than in Hammett or Chandler. Professional ethics do not organize Archer's life, as they do for Sam Spade or the Op, and Archer never becomes the honorable knight, standing above and away from the world, as Philip Marlowe does. Archer belongs to the world, tainted and fallible, as the world is, but this makes him a universal citizen, able to deal with people because he understands them and is one of them. He does, however, have a strong code of ethics and a conscience to match.

The Op and Marlowe do not do divorce work, but Archer will, and has been doing it for ten years, he says in The Drowning Pool, although several years later, in The Chill,

he claims that he usually does not do divorce work.<sup>112</sup> Whatever the case, his willingness to do this most despised of detective work hints at his difference--Archer is capable of sin, and not uncorrupted by the world.

Like the detectives of Hammett and Chandler, Archer likes his job. Curiosity and an interest in people make his life rewarding, even though he may not make much money and may be lonely. Often he remarks that a case has him hooked, as in The Drowning Pool: ". . . once I'm in a case I sort of like to stay through to the end. It's more than curiosity. . . . I owe it to her [his client] or myself to find out the reason, to see the whole thing clear" (p. 202). Archer will continue on a case without pay, partly out of duty and interest, but also because people's lives intrigue him.

Archer remarks, in answer to a question asking him why he is a detective, that "I don't do it for the money. . . . I do it because I want to."<sup>113</sup> Archer genuinely enjoys his work, like the Continental Op, although his life ranges somewhat wider than the Op's. He also enjoys the change that his job brings him: "I like to move into people's lives and then move out again. Living with one set of people in one place used to bore me."<sup>114</sup> People, however, form the bedrock foundation of his attraction to his job. In The Far Side of the Dollar, Archer notes that people are not only his business, but ". . . my passion. And my obsession, too, I guess. I've never been able to see much in the world besides the people

in it" (pp. 154-55).

Being a detective also offers Archer a freedom he did not have when he worked on the police force. The politics of police work bothered him, as he notes in The Drowning Pool that often the official version of events bore little similarity to the facts, but his reasons for leaving boiled down to ethics: "Most good policemen have a public conscience and a private conscience. I just have the private conscience; a poor thing, but my own" (p. 139). Archer can avoid the constraints on caution, curiosity, and procedure that the police labor under.

Archer's code encompasses some of the same terrain that earlier detectives explored. Archer cannot be bought or frightened by money, nor can he be bought with sex, although the offers come much less frequently than in Chandler. Archer puts his job before his personal life, and cannot be scared away from a case by threats. Like his literary predecessors, he will resort to violence if forced, but unlike the Op, he tries to avoid it, feeling very uneasy about it, even in self-defense: "Once I killed another man with my hands. I did it to save my own life, but his blood is on my hands."<sup>115</sup> In Archer's world, the avoidance of violence sets him apart from the bully and psychopath, as Archer explains in The Drowning Pool: "I wanted to hurt him, but the memory of the night was ugly in my mind. There had to be a difference between me and the opposition, or I'd have to take the mirror out of

my bathroom" (p. 113). Archer never acts out of revenge, as the Op does in Red Harvest; in fact, Archer finds himself more interested in conserving life than taking it: "The hot breath of vengeance was growing cold in nostrils as I grew older. I had more concern for a kind of economy in life that would help to preserve the things that were worth preserving." And the things worth preserving include "any man, or any woman."<sup>116</sup>

Here Macdonald extends Hammett's code of self-preservation to include the world itself, something Marlowe might sympathize with, but never say, and Spade might just shake his head at.

Archer's self-effacement puts the emphasis on others, and Archer exhibits a true concern for people--not merely curiosity, but a true interest in helping them. This completes an enlargement of the detective character that Chandler began. In The Barbarous Coast, Archer expands the boundaries of his job: "The problem was to love people, try to serve them, without wanting anything from them." Archer realizes he is "a long way from solving that one," but the attempt must be made, anyway (p. 87). Archer's sense of his own fallibility makes him go easy on others, and while he acts as a servant of justice, the role rests uneasily on him. "I have a secret passion for mercy," he explains in The Goodbye Look, "But justice is what keeps happening to people" (p. 96). Sam Spade and the Continental Op would barely recognize this detective.

Archer's methods in his work fall halfway between the

discussion of his professionalism and his personal relationships. Archer's interest is people, after all, and their relationships usually hold the key to solving the mysteries. Archer's methods often contain questions aimed at understanding relationships between people and elucidating the past. Crider notes that while both Archer and Marlowe want to help people, "Marlowe seems interested in simply helping others out of trouble, [while] Archer wants to help them attain self-knowledge." He also calls Archer a "peripatetic psychoanalyst," describing Archer's manner of detective-as-therapist.<sup>117</sup>

People talk easily to Archer, and he encourages them, often letting them ramble on, interrupting only here and there with a question to lead the way. People need to unburden themselves in Macdonald's novels, and Archer willingly listens, especially when one considers what he believes about coincidences: "[i]f you trace them back far enough, they usually have a meaning."<sup>118</sup> Archer lets people talk, sometimes even sounding like an analyst, as in The Chill: "Keep on talking loosely. You can't tell what may be important" (p. 6).

Of course, all good detectives do this to some extent or another--their task includes the study of human motivation. But no one investigates the psyche as closely as Archer does, nor do many have such overtly psychological cases. Archer shifts the emphasis slightly in his investigations: "Truth interests me, though. Not general truth if there is any, but

the truth of particular things. Who did what when why. Especially why."<sup>119</sup> Here Macdonald has passed from concentrating on who did it to why it was done, as Chandler had started to do before him.

Archer's own past colors any discussion of his personal relationships. His failed marriage and subsequent divorce darken the present like some huge and ominous shadow. He only mentions his divorce briefly and obliquely, yet each time with a sharp stab of pain. In The Underground Man, Archer mentions that his wife "walked out on me and sent me divorce papers through a lawyer" (p. 135). In The Moving Target he claims that she left him because "[s]he didn't like the company I kept" (p. 13). Speir points out that Archer's reasons for his divorce always center on his wife's dislike of his work, and with unpredictable hours and constant danger, Archer's line of work would be easy to criticize.<sup>120</sup> Archer's dedications to his job would only intensify the problem. Unlike the Op or Marlowe, he has not remained isolated from emotional entanglements in the world, and he has paid the price in suffering, but this suffering allows him an empathy and human understanding not always seen in other detectives. Yet he remains, as a character in The Underground man calls him, "a lonely man" (p. 15).

Archer's relationships with women remain shaky at best. In The Goodbye Look, he has a brief affair with Moira Smitheram, but he leaves early the next morning, suggesting, as Speir



says, "that he is unwilling to face the consequences of the morning after."<sup>121</sup> More often, Archer, like Marlowe before him, refuses the advances of women and remains celibate. Often he refuses because women are trying to use him, or buy him, both ideas outside his code, but sometimes his own hang-ups get in the way. In The Underground Man, Ellen Storm asks him, "What are you afraid of, Archer?" and his answer sheds some light on his personal life: "It was hard to say. I liked the woman. I almost trusted her. But I was working deep in her life. I didn't want to buy a piece of it or commit myself to her until I knew what the consequences would be" (p. 229). Of course, who can know what the consequences will be? Archer remains afraid of emotional commitment.

This fear exists partly because of his divorce, and partly because of the nature of his job--the instability, the irregular hours, the danger, and the isolation necessary for the objective insight Archer brings to his work. Also, Archer fears using people, as when he questions his motives in The Goodbye Look, when he wants to discuss the case with Moira Smitheram, though he realizes their growing emotional involvement with each other: "But if I started to use the woman and the occasion, I'd be using a part of myself and my life that I tried to keep unused: the part that made the difference between me and a computer, or a spy" (p. 114). The sense that people matter shows strongly through Macdonald's work.

For Archer does care about people. In The Far Side of

the Dollar Archer prevents Harold Harley from committing suicide; he does the same for Susan Crandall of The Underground Man. He acts in keeping with his wish to "preserve the things that were worth preserving."<sup>122</sup> Often Archer senses the pain that others suffer when he rakes up the past, as with the old banker, Rawlinson, in The Goodbye Look: "I felt sorry for the man. He had had everything and bit by bit lost nearly all of it" (p. 144). Occasionally Archer even stops his questioning when he notices it has become too painful, but he must solve the case and find answers, and sooner or later the questions must be asked. That they cause pain makes Archer sad and a bit guilty.

So in the end, Archer shows the taintedness, the involvement in the world, that marked Sam Spade, and occasionally the Op. Archer has sinned, failed sometimes, and sees his own imperfections, far more than do Hammett's characters, who are not given to introspection. Yet Archer also shares Marlowe's concern for truth and his interest in helping people, without sharing Marlowe's increasingly angry alienation from the world. Archer shares many of Marlowe's beliefs in justice and morality, but sees their limitations--he understands the basic fallibility of the human soul, because he himself is also fallible.

Macdonald mentions two real private detectives he knows personally, and correctly notes their resemblance to Archer in certain qualities: "their intelligent humaneness, an

interest in other people transcending their interest in themselves, and a toughness of mind which enables them to face human weaknesses, including their own, with open eyes."<sup>123</sup>

Archer can discard the outer toughness of the private detective (yet still remain tough inside) and become, more than anything, human.

## Conclusion

Ralph Harper writes that "All thrillers are basically concerned about two things: death and responsibility."<sup>124</sup> This dictum holds true in all three authors discussed here, from the hard irony of Hammett to the romantic chivalry of Chandler and the psychological tragedy of Macdonald. All three novelists picture men in a problem-ridden society forced to take moral action, and ask how man can act ethically in a corrupt world and avoid becoming part of the corruption. Such questions cannot always be answered successfully.

Hammett's characters focus inward--their ethics are strongly personal, and not universal, nor do they expect such codes to be. Their private ethics form a bulwark against the corruption of the inscrutable world, and they accept that world without question, taking its blows without complaint. Friendship and emotional commitment mean danger in this self-dependent existence, and they meet this risk with emotional retreat and an open skepticism of society, coupled with a profound sense of self-reliance. Such an existential affirmation protects them in the chancy, random world of Hammett's fiction, and they play their hands as they are dealt, skillfully, without questioning the rules.

Chandler's detective inherits this moral universe and the concepts that go with it. His detective's ethics are personal also, puritanically defended, but Chandler changes the emphasis slightly. Marlowe enjoys his cases and likes

being a detective, but while his job seems to command his whole life, it never orders his world as it does for Hammett's characters. Marlowe wants to help people, the downtrodden, the helpless, and he sympathizes with such people. He must not only live by a code, he must be honorable, a romantic knight, standing in lonely vigil against the corruption around him. Marlowe believes in things outside himself, thinks that moral concepts should be universal, and knows they are not, which saddens him. He questions the world, instead of accepting it, notes its failings, and hopes that his life of honor will somehow make a difference.

Macdonald shifts the moral emphasis outward. Lew Archer seeks to understand the world, not just criticize it or accept it. He wants to know not only who committed the murder, but why. Understanding of others and compassion for their failures marks Archer's style. He follows his own personal code, but sees his own failures; they help him to understand the weaknesses of others. Good and evil intermix in people, and moral questions become clouded, not as clear-cut as in Hammett or Chandler. Moral concepts exist outside Archer, but so do moral failures; Archer seeks understanding and a conservation of the good in people. Coincidence does not exist, actions have consequences, all is connected, and he seeks knowledge of these connections to understand human behavior. Perhaps the world can be made better with self-knowledge and mercy.

Harper mentions that writers such as these write of

"the world of moral and political anarchy, a world in which evil cannot be restrained simply by analytical exposure."<sup>125</sup> Hammett, Chandler, and Macdonald write about the new world gone bad, the spoiled American eden and the failed dream, an ambiguous place of intermixed and sometimes indistinguishable good and evil, colored in tones of gray instead of sharply contrasting blacks and whites. They write implicit critiques of the nature and fabric of American society, and the problems of dealing with such a society. The fact that they write in a stylized popular medium does not mean they have no insight into human values and behavior.

Such novels deal not only with societal concerns, however. As the hero ventures out, Harper says, he confronts dread-- he meets "shadows" and "slivers of himself." The reader does also as he moves along with the detective. This recognition of evil and violence, of the darkness underlying a part of American society, is a major contribution of this school of writing, and it brings the recognition that this dark side may exist in the reader, also. Such a recognition is, in the final analysis, a personal one, for, as Harper notes, such stories "are written for the sake of and about the interior life of man."<sup>126</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Grella, "The Formal Detective Novel," in Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robin W. Winks (Enlewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 96-99.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in The Art of the Mystery Story, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), p. 234.

<sup>3</sup> W.H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," in Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robin W. Winks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Chandler, "Simple Art," p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Symons, Mortal Consequences: A History--From the Detective Story to the Crime Story (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 136.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Harper, The World of the Thriller (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve Univ., 1969), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Marcus, Introd., The Continental Op, by Dashiell Hammett (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. xix.

<sup>8</sup> Harper, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1974), pp. 169-70.

<sup>10</sup> Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, pp. 171-72.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Durham, "The Black Mask School," in Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1968), p. 71.

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