



## The Moral Ambivalence of Phillip Marlowe and His World in *The Big Sleep*

Kalyan Chatterjee

Assistant Professor of English,  
Government General Degree College,  
Manbazar-II, Purulia, WB

Coming up in the year 1939 Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* puts the last touches on the construction of the noir-ish world of a private detective named Phillip Marlowe. His world, although geographically located at California, offers a metaphorically magnified moral scape of any city in the war struck America. It's a world that walks away intentionally from the one inhabited by the likes of Dupin, Holmes or Poirot – the world of the classical or conventional private investigators. This, on the contrary, is the new world of the hard-boiled detectives. It's a world first introduced by Dashiell Hammett through his *Black Mask*<sup>1</sup> stories of the Continental Operative, the anonymous agency-detective operating in San Francisco. This dark world of the murderers, according to Chandler, was a welcome change from the convention of the earlier detective stories. In his famous essay "The Simple Art of Murder", Chandler says in appreciation of Hammett, his worthy predecessor: "Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" (n.pag.). Hammett, according to Chandler, not only puts the murder into the darkness of an alley, he also gives it back to the people who are believable as murderers : "Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand" ("The Simple" n.pag.). These are people who "were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street" (Chandler, "The Simple" n.pag.). Marlowe's wanderings add farther details to the city-scape of this new world of crime and murder. The Hard-boiled detective's departure from other parallel genre lies chiefly in the difference of the worlds they inhabit and in case of Phillip Marlowe, especially, the departure is also marked by the unique moral lens he carries around him. This paper seeks to show the moral opacity that this lens lets him afford. Resultant to the perception that this lens yields is how Marlowe becomes a "part of the nastiness" (Speir qtd. in Fontana 180) of the setting. The moral ambiguousness of Phillip Marlowe balances the world he dwells. The ending of a Phillip Marlowe story, hence, often comes up with moral uncertainty. Where as in Hammett's Continental Op. stories not infrequently the ending declares or at least suggests punishment of the culprit, a Phillip Marlowe story often ends in moral ambivalence, where the perpetrator of crime sometimes escapes by self-destruction right under the nose of lawmen (as in *The Lady in the Lake*) or is at times ignored willfully by Marlowe (As in *The Big Sleep*).

Much has been said about this departure of the world of the hard-boiled from the world the conventional detective stories represent. The utter absence of innocence is one such point of departure for the world of the hard-boiled. Charles J. Rzepka in his essay “‘I’m in the Business Too’: Gothic Chivalry, Private Eyes, and Proxy Sex and Violence in Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*” explains it in the following way:

The world of the hard-boiled detective, unlike that of his contemporary English counterparts, leaves little room for innocence. ... In the American hard-boiled genre, however, innocence not only cannot be regained—it is never there to begin with. (699)

The indeterminacy in representing good and evil makes another fulcrum of this world: “The division between good and evil is never clear. Cops are on the take; doctors are often drug pushers; rare book dealers are smut peddlers; the beautiful, innocent-looking young client is really a ruthless killer” (Fine 200). Deception is one of the principal constituting component of the world of the hard-boiled. Here “nothing is what it appears to be” (Fine 200). This world of deception is built out of lies. These lies often go on to create facades of a glittering California present that actually covers a seedy, criminal past of its inhabitants (Fine 200). The elaborate crisscrossing versions of lies that come out of the characters of this world form a diffused narrative, utterly untrustworthy, and, most strangely, in the beginning, even the detective adds to that with his own lies, strategic though his ones are. In this, however, Chandler parallels Hammett as we are easily reminded of the intricately constructed network of lies that confronts the reader of Hammett’s *The Maltese falcon* (1930), where even Sam Spade, the hard-boiled detective of Hammett, creates and hides behind the facades of a corrupt private eye. Whereas a conventional detective will engage himself with the logic and argument in the alibi of every suspect (the so-called scientific method championed by Dupin, Holmes or Poirot), the task of the hard-boiled is far more difficult as he sieves through the deceitful accounts of the suspects, who come up with revised versions of multiple cunning narratives, begging the detective to trust. The so-called scientific method of the conventional detective is of no use here. That is why “the hard-boiled novel dramatizes the traps and false leads inherent to the so-called scientific method;...” (Garrison 106).

An atmosphere of darkness is the other constituting component of this world of Marlowe. This darkness, it goes without saying, is representative of the metaphorically represented moral and ethical bankruptcy of the contemporary America of Chandler. The metaphor is clearly hinted at in Chandler’s own words: “[t]he streets were dark with something more than night” (qtd. In Jensen 19). As counterparts to this world, its denizens depart from the inhabitants of the world of the conventional crime stories. The most crucial departure in this area comes in the form of the murderers’ often absent lack of understandable, universally acceptable motives or, at times, their unpredictable psyche, their indecisive acts of violence, their sheer impulsivity or else their complete lack of compunction. The younger daughter of the colonel for instance in *The Big Sleep* pulls the trigger for being jilted in her epileptic fits of sexual cravings. The complete lack of materiality in her motive and the overwhelming drive of impulsivity make the crimes almost impossible to be discovered by conventional detective acts. Marlowe succeeds by exposing himself—like a bait—to the raw sexuality of the lady and thereby enabling himself in making inferences from that. This is nigh impossible for a traditional act of private

investigation like the ones of Poirot or Holmes. It would be beneath honour and dignity for a conventional detective to act that way. But a hard-boiled like Marlowe has to wade through such filth. He does that with considerable self-awareness as he walks these “mean street” (Chandler).

In his “The Simple Art of Murder”, Chandler projects Phillip Marlowe as the white knight who trades through the morally macabre cityscape of California. In fact critics also have endorsed this idea of Marlowe being a white knight on occasions. For them he is “a ‘white knight’ in the unspeakably crooked underground of criminal Los Angeles” (Peters 324). For Chandler the use of the darkly realistic setting (of Los Angeles or San Francisco or some other places) in contemporary fiction is not enough. For him there should be at least a force amidst this darkness that is undaunted by the ferocity and treacherousness of that land. It should be a force that carries in it the possibility of at least a faint hope, if not redemption. In continuity to this, he envisages the knight-like heroism of Marlowe:

“...down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid”. Chandler’s emphasis on Marlowe’s heroism is quite articulated: “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 honour, 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. (Chandler, “The Simple” n.pag.)

For Chandler Marlowe’s apparent moral ambivalence is just a façade, because under the smothering presence of his corruptive milieu his code of heroism is dug deep inside his bone. Marlowe, in Chandler’s views, acts out of this mysterious code and thereby creates only a charade of immorality. Chandler says:

I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honour in one thing, he is that in all things. (“The Simple” n.pag.)

But “[h]e has a sense of character, or he would not do his job” in a world as dark as this; and, most importantly, reminding us of what Hammett’s Sam Spade does in the ending of *The Maltese Falcon*, where he returns the amount he was bribed with by the criminals to the police, Chandler says, Marlowe “will take no man's money dishonestly”. In short, “If there were enough like him”, Chandler thinks, “the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull worth living in” (“The Simple” n.pag.).

But, what Chandler ignores in his vision of Marlowe as the time-traveling white knight of a medieval romance gone awry, is his tacit agreement with moral lapses on several occasions. These are lapses that are ignored not because Marlowe is bribed or left awed by the pomp of the riches, but because in these lapses he sees his own dark reflection. The investigation in Marlowe’s journeys often ceases mid-way of the narrative, just as it happens in *The Big Sleep*, when everything is settled with the law enforcement and Marlowe is paid his remuneration by the Colonel for bringing the job assigned to him to its best possible conclusion. But Marlowe doesn’t stop on a moment like that and keeps going for the truth that tantalizes him from under its grave. In *The Big Sleep* Marlowe picks up the trail for the missing son-in-law of Colonel Sternwood, by name Rusty Regan. He was not to be paid for it, neither did anybody ask him to dig for it. But

there he goes on a personal adventure that threatens his life and leads him to cause the single act of murder that Marlowe commits in the entire oeuvre. At the end of this journey the truth implicates both the daughters of Colonel Sternwood, along with Eddie Mars and the butler of the Sternwood household, Norris by name. Two of them for being complicit in the crime, one for committing it and one for suppressing evidence. But Marlowe chooses not to report them to the law. Instead he asks the Sternwood daughters to leave the city. Even before this ending, half way through the novel, Marlowe fails to identify Owen Taylor's killer, highlighting "Marlowe's ambiguous position in a world he strives to deal with honourably but successfully—an extremely difficult balancing act" (Merrill 8). Marlowe slyly steps aside from getting farther stuck into the mystery behind Taylor's death, a menial pawn as Taylor is in the bigger scheme of things. Whether he was murdered or he committed suicide was left for conjecture. These compromises and unconventional acts of negotiation with the crime and the criminal, as William Luhr points out in his review of Athanasourelis's book on Phillip Marlowe, is something that sets Marlowe apart. His siding with the perpetrator of crime outlines "Marlowe's role not as a righteous avenger but rather as a negotiator, one who is willing to acknowledge flaws in himself and tolerate them in others" (299). For Marlowe, the murdered, Regan, is a corpse now, and it no longer matters where he lies now. Addressing the dead Marlowe speaks in his mind: "You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. ... You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell" (250). And with this he realizes his moral predicament: "Me, I was part of the nastiness now" (250). But the self-realization does not depress him as much as to paralyse him completely. On the way downtown he stops at a bar has a couple of drink, possibly to forget or get over his moral dilemma. But he realizes the futility of that: "They didn't do me any good" (251). Rather the drinks pokes his memory: "All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig" (251). The only solace he is permitted to is the departure of the figure from his territory: "...and I never saw her again" (251). The self-awareness centering his moral ambiguity and his sense of limitation as a hero of this crooked land and his determination to still push farther make Phillip Marlowe more akin to the dark knight than the white knight Chandler wants him to be. No wonder Ernest Fontana looks at *The Big Sleep* as a "subversion of romance" or even a "failed romance" (185), where the knight's only unequivocal victory is textual, the written, retrospective narrative of this subversion" (185-186).

## Notes

1. *Black Mask* was a pulp magazine that started in 1920 in America. It chiefly published detective fiction. It was initially published by H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan. The magazine became monetarily profitable and published, among others, Dashiell Hammett.

## Works Cited

- Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. Penguin, 2011.
- “The Simple Art of Murder”. *The Simple Art of Murder*. Faded Page eBook. 2014.
- Fine, David. “Nathanael West, Raymond Chandler, and the Los Angeles Novel”.  
*California History*, vol. 68, no. 4, Winter 1989/1990, pp. 196-201.
- Fontana, Ernest. “Chivalry and Modernity in Raymond Chandler’s ‘The Big Sleep’”.  
*Western American Literature*, vol. 19, no. 3, Fall 1984, pp. 179-186.
- Garrison, Kristen. “Hard-boiled rhetoric: The ‘Fearless Speech’ of Phillip Marlowe”. *South Central Review*, vol. 27, no. 1/ 2, Spring/ Summer 2010, pp. 105-122.
- Hickman, Miranda B. “The Complex History of a ‘Simple Art’”. *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 35, no. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 285-304.
- Jensen, Paul. “Raymond Chandler: The World You Live in”. *Film Comment*, vol. 10, no. 6, Nov-Dec 1974, pp. 18-22, 24-26.
- Luhr, William. Review of *Raymond Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe: The Hard-boiled Detective*, by John Paul Athanasourelis. *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 45, no. 2, Summer 2013, pp. 299-300.
- Merrill, Robert. “Raymond Chandler’s Plots and the Concept of Plot”. *Narrative*, vol. 7, no. 1, Jan. 1999, pp.3-21.
- Peters, Michael Scott. Review of *Creatures of darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir*, by Gene D. Phillips. *Literature/ Film Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2003, pp. 323-324.
- Rzepka, Charles J. “‘I’m in the Business too’: Gothic Chivalry, Private Eyes, and Proxy Sex and Violence in Chandler’s ‘The Big Sleep’”. *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 46, no. 3, Fall 2000, pp. 695-724.

## Author Note

Dr. Kalyan Chatterjee is Assistant Professor of English in the West Bengal Education Service (WBES) and is at present the Head of the Department of English at Government General Degree College, Manbazar-II, Purulia, West Bengal. Previously, he was the head of the Department of English at Jhargram Raj College and Government General Degree College, Singur, Hooghly and served as Assistant Professor of English at Hooghly Mohsin College and as Lecturer in English at Sri Ramkrishna Sarada Vidya Mahapith, Kamarpukur, Hooghly. He received his Ph.D. Degree for his research work on the writings of Jean Rhys from The University of Burdwan.