Politics and Society in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*

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Abstract

This essay examines the vision of society presented in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930). In contrast to critics who argue that Hammett brought a Marxist perspective to the novel, reflecting his support to the Communist Party later in the decade, this current article argues that *The Maltese Falcon* presents a vision of society with no fundamental order or meaning, in which all rules are arbitrary, and in which every attempt to present a grand narrative fails. This nihilist conception of society is in keeping with the rise of modernism and reflects the shift from a rural, agricultural, traditionalist society to an urban, industrial one. It is not, however, a Marxist view.

Keywords

Communism; Crime Novels; Dashiell Hammett; Great Depression; Marxism; Politics.

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This essay examines the vision of society presented in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), the author's third and best-known novel. *The Maltese Falcon* was published during the opening of the Great Depression (although Hammett finished it before the Depression began). The economic devastation—with the rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, and the ability of the Soviet Union to survive the collapse of the capitalist world—radicalized a generation of workers and intellectuals and saw the rebirth of a militant labor movement and the growth of mass support for Marxism.

Some critics assert that Hammett brought a Marxist perspective to *The Maltese Falcon*, reflecting his support for the Communist Party later in the decade. The current article, in contrast, argues that *The Maltese Falcon* presents a vision of society with no fundamental order or meaning, in which all rules are arbitrary, and in which every attempt to present a grand narrative fails. This nihilist conception of society in which traditional religious morality has failed and in which nothing has taken its place is in keeping with the rise of modernism and reflects the shift from a rural, agricultural, traditionalist society to an urban, industrial one. It is not, however, a Marxist view.

In the article "Dashiell Hammett's Social Vision" (1985), Robert Shulman argues that in *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett "gives his social vision its fullest expression," and that "Hammett is concerned with stories and storytelling, with a market society world that systematically demands improvisation, acting, and the manipulation of appearances, people, and feelings." The novel, in this view, is "a judgement on the entire enterprise of single-mindedly pursuing wealth," and a critique of "early twentieth-century capitalism." Shulman continues:

> Because of the human isolation, betrayals, and obsessive pursuit of false goals, the novel renders a hell-on-earth, a kind of vital death-in-life that brings the outside American world to the test and finally brought Dashiell Hammett to an independent relation with the Communist Party (Shulman 400-402).

As I have argued about Hammett's earlier *Red Harvest*, there is a temptation to read Hammett's novels backwards, as advocating Marxism or at least pointing in the direction of Marxism.[1] For example, Norman Markowitz, a writer for the Communist Party's *Political Affairs*, describes Hammett as "a writer for the working class" and argues that he "wrote about the class struggle in America in works of popular fiction in the 1920s and 1930s and fought as a partisan of the working class in real life from the 1930s to his death in 1961." In contrast, this article posits that rather than Marxist, *The Maltese Falcon*'s social vision is ambiguous, reflecting the modernist dilemma of the meaninglessness of

industrial society without proposing an alternative political meaning.

The Maltese Falcon's Ambiguity

Most analyses of *The Maltese Falcon* emphasize that the novel plays with ambiguity, meaning, and truth. Frederick Burellbach observes that "a basic theme of the novel is ambiguity and illusion, or the questions 'What is truth?' and 'What is fiction?'" (3-4). Sinda Gregory describes the novel as "a declaration of the omnipotence of mystery and of the failure of human effort (on the part of both the reader and the detective) to ever dispel it" (89). Nothing is as it appears, nobody tells the truth, and it is impossible to cut through the deception to an underlying meaning. This ambiguity, while reflective of the politics of the interwar period, and of modernist literature more broadly, undercuts the argument that the novel was written from a Marxist perspective.

Sam Spade is central to *The Maltese Falcon*'s ambiguous and cynical vision. His very name points to this, as Burellbach explains: While Sam is short for the biblical Samuel (Hammett's own given name), which means "name of God," it could mean Samael, "who is a Satan indeed" whose "name means 'poison angel' and in rabbinic literature [...] is the angel of death and prince of demons" (5-8). Spade, as gamblers know, refers to the death card, and a spade is used to bury corpses. At the same time, the name invokes the need to "call a spade a spade," i.e., to tell the truth—something Spade does not often do.

Spade is both a hero and a devil. The detective, Hammett informs the reader in the novel's first paragraph, "looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan" (1). Later, the novel describes how his "eyes were shiny in a wooden satan's face" (62). Unlike the serpent in the book of Genesis, who tempts Eve with the ability to know good from evil, Spade offers a different type of knowledge: good and evil do not exist, and God—and the divine meaning he represents—is an illusion.

The Falcon is a totem imbued with power by Caspar Gutman, Joel Cairo, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy, who dedicate their lives and their fortunes to finding it. Yet none has seen it or proven its existence. Shulman calls the statue "a Satanic embodiment of fabulous wealth" (400), but the bird can represent either heaven or hell. The figure provides a reason for existence—a reason that proves to be false. In a discussion with Gutman, Spade touches on the Falcon that could be referring to the role of God in modern life: "'Oh hell,' he said lightly, 'I know what it's supposed to look like. I know the value in life you people put on it. I don't know what it is'" (122). If we take the "oh hell" literally and not as an innocent interjection, Spade could be referring to Satan and divine punishment. Shortly after Spade's announcement, Gutman asks him, in reference to Cairo and O'Shaughnessy:

> "They must know," he said only partly aloud, then: "Do they? Do they know what the bird is, sir? What was your impression?" "I can't help you there," Spade confessed. "There's not much to go by. Cairo didn't say he did and he didn't say he didn't. She said she didn't, but I took it for granted that she was lying" (123).

The discussion between Gutman and Spade invokes the biblical encounter between God and Satan. Spade has already been compared to Satan in the text; Gutman, a large (and by his name, possibly Jewish) man, is, as the title of chapter seven indicates, the "G in the Air." However, where in the Bible God torments his follower Job to prove to Satan Job's loyalty and devotion, Gutman reveals himself as nothing more than a self-interested fat man.

At the end of the novel, when Spade indicates he would help Gutman obtain the Falcon in exchange for sacrificing Wilmer, Gutman agrees, telling Wilmer that although the young man is like a son to him, "but, by Gad! —if you lose a son, it's possible to get another—and there's only one Maltese Falcon" (228). Unlike Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac in the Old Testament, or God's sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament, Gutman's sacrifice of Wilmer serves no divine purpose, only self-interest. Nonetheless, like these others, the sacrifice of Wilmer forms the foundation of an explanation of the world, that is, to help the police solve their case. But this narrative is a fabrication to allow Gutman, the other conspirators, and Spade to get away with the Falcon. Hammett suggests that religion comprises stories that explain the world but have no basis in reality. The Falcon is such a tale. It has no meaning except that which people invest in it, and when it is finally grasped, it turns out to be false.

The Police in The Maltese Falcon

The police as agents of state authority are central to *The Maltese Falcon* and Marxist theory, but Hammett's novel deals with the role of the police differently than Communists. In *The Maltese Falcon*, the police and the district attorney are the only characters unaware of the hunt for the Falcon, and, in this mystery novel, the only ones trying to solve a crime. The police represent an attempt to explain the universe rationally, but as with the other characters, their explanations are lies.

Police corruption is established when Lieutenant Dundy and Officer Tom Polhaus visit Spade's apartment at 4:30 a.m. to question him about the murders of Archer and Thursby. Dundy is wearing "a five-dollar-gold-piece [...] pinned to his necktie and [...] a small elaborate diamond-set secret-society-emblem on his lapel" (17). These accessories indicate Dundy's expensive tastes, and that his loyalties extend beyond the police department. Spade, who had

been drinking alone, refills his glass with Bacardi, offers the officers rum-filled wineglasses, and toasts to "Success to crime." Polhaus drinks his in one gulp, but Dundy "looked at his glass for a dozen seconds, took a very small sip of its contents, and put the glass on the table at his elbow" (18). Since police enforced Prohibition laws, joining Spade in drinking underlines their illegality. Polhaus's corruption is more enthusiastic than Dundy's, but the lieutenant's small sip indicates his willingness to break the law. Only after Dundy elaborates his theory that Spade killed Thursby does he finish his drink: even though he believes Spade to be a murderer, he is willing to drink with him.

During the discussion, Dundy tells Spade: "I've warned you your foot was going to slip one of these days" (19). This passage refers to the Old Testament's promise of divine justice: "To me belongeth the vengeance and recompense; their foot shall slip in due time: for the day of their calamity is a hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste" (Deuteronomy 32:35). This is the verse with which Jonathan Edwards began his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), to illustrate his argument, "There is nothing that keeps wicked Men at any one Moment, out of Hell, but the meer Pleasure of GOD" (5). Edwards asserts that only God's "sovereign Pleasure, his arbitrary Will, restrained by no Obligation, hinder'd by no manner of Difficulty" keeps man out of hell, and that God could revoke this at any time. *The Maltese Falcon* removes the concept of God from Edwards' vision, leaving only meaninglessness. It is predestination with no destination.

In chapter seven, the policemen arrive at Spade's apartment while Cairo and O'Shaughnessy are there. When Spade is reluctant to let them in, Dundy tells him: "It'd pay you to play along with us a little" (80). This underlines how the police create stories that lack essential, fixed truth. When Spade objects that the police are trying to blame him for killing Thursby and Archer, Dundy denies this. "But suppose I did," he adds. "There's a way of figuring it" (80). The three play verbal games—"charades" in Spade's telling—trying out possibilities, not believing any. Only when Cairo calls for help do the police insist on entering Spade's apartment.

When the police enter, Cairo accuses Spade and O'Shaughnessy of tricking and assaulting him. Brigid denies this, and Dundy responds: "What do you want us to think the truth is?" (85). After Spade's guests accuse each other, Spade intervenes and spins a tale of recently hiring Brigid, and trying to question Cairo. The police seek confirmation from Cairo, telling him to "try telling the facts." In response, Cairo states: "What assurance do I have that the facts will be believed?" (87-88). Spade changes track and explains to Dundy that the entire dispute was a joke on the police. When Dundy refuses to believe this, Spade replies:

> The point is that that's our story and we'll stick to it. The newspapers will print it whether they believe it or not, and it'll be just as funny one way as the other, or more so. [...] You haven't got anything on anybody here. Everything we told you was part of the joke (89-90).

The scene reinforces Spade's masterful manipulation. In the end, the police take Cairo in for questioning.

When he meets Spade after leaving jail the next morning, Cairo tells Spade: "You have always, I must say, a smooth explanation ready" (110). He claims he did not tell the police anything. He adds, "Though I certainly wished you had devised a more reasonable story. I felt decidedly ridiculous repeating it." Spade replies that the story's "goofiness is what makes it good" (110).

Later, Spade visits District Attorney Bryan, who asks him who killed Thursby. After Spade declines to speculate, Bryan replies,

> "Why shouldn't you, if you've nothing to conceal?"
> "Everybody," Spade responded mildly, "has something to conceal" (167).

Bryan assures Spade,

> "And please don't think I've any brief—much less confidence—in those theories the police seem to have formed" (167).

The dialogue underlines the falseness of all stories, which are guesses and theories that conceal.

The eighteenth chapter, "The Fall-Guy," returns to the theme of the state and the illusion of justice. Spade insists to Gutman that to avoid unwanted police attention once they obtain the Falcon, "The police have got to have a victim—somebody they can stick for those three murders" (204). When Gutman objects, Spade gives his theory of government:

> "At one time or another I've had to tell everybody from the Supreme Court down to go to hell, and I've got away with it. [...] I never forget that when the day of reckoning comes I want to be all set to march into headquarters pushing a victim in front of me, saying: 'Here, you chumps, is your criminal.' As long as I can do that I can put my thumb to my nose and wriggle my fingers at all the laws in the book. The first time I can't do it my name's Mud" (205).

When Gutman expresses disbelief, Spade continues:

> "Bryan is like most district attorneys. He's more interested in how his record will look on paper than in anything else. [...] I don't know that he ever deliberately framed anybody he believed innocent, but I can't imagine him letting himself believe them innocent if he could scrape up, or twist into shape, proof of their guilt. To be sure of convicting one man he'll let a half a dozen equally guilty accomplices go free" (210).

To Spade, the legal system—man's attempts to impose order and meaning on the world—is built upon lies. This is not, however, the Marxist concept of the capitalist state. According to Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, Marx believed that the state comprises "special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command" (394) that the ruling capitalist class uses to maintain power over the working class. To Marxists, the problem with the capitalist state is not that it lies, but that its role is to repress the working class to maintain the capitalist class in power.

Beams Falling and Capitalism Continuing

Spade spells out his vision of the world in the story of Flitcraft he tells O'Shaughnessy: "A man named Flitcraft had left his real-estate office, in Tacoma, to go to luncheon one day and had never returned" (68). In 1922, he left a successful business, a suburban home, a wife, and two children, "and the rest of appurtenances of successful American living" (69). In 1927, Flitcraft's wife hired Spade, who found Flitcraft, living under the name Charles Pierce in Spokane. When Spade confronted him, "Flitcraft had no feeling of guilt. He had left his first family well provided for, and what he had done seemed to him perfectly reasonable. The only thing that bothered him was a doubt that he had never told anybody his story before, and thus had not had to attempt to make its reasonableness explicit" (70). The tale is an example of constructing stories to rationalize and justify one's behavior.

Flitcraft explains to Spade that while he was walking to lunch, a beam from a construction site "fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside." This startled him, and "he felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works" (71). The experience demonstrated that life was not "a clean orderly sane responsible affair," but "could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam" (71). For two years he drifted throughout the Pacific Northwest.

> "I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma [...]. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling" (72).

The Flitcraft story exposes the absurdity of modern existence. For Steven Marcus, the passage highlights "the ethical irrationality of existence, the ethical unintelligibility of the world" (xvii). For Dean DeFino, "it is about the illusions of order, and how they reveal and conceal themselves" (76). Christopher Routledge describes the story as "a parable of modern life" that "takes the idea of the Modernist epiphany and exposes it as a fleeting moment with no lasting effect." Routledge adds, however, that the parable "lays down a vision of American life that reveals [Hammett's] radical politics and takes a pessimistic view of how much stomach people might have for principled and sustained resistance, even when issues affect their own lives." Bourgeois society with the "appurtenances of successful American living" has no meaning, but neither does rejecting this society. This parable demonstrates that cynicism and nihilism, not Marxism, permeate *The Maltese Falcon*.

Scholars have seen the Falcon as a criticism of capitalist society. Pointing to the story of the falcon as tribute from the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1530, Douglas Torgenson argues the bird "both is constitutive of the emperor's power and pays tribute to it in a manner that, in turn, serves to express the special status of the knights in relation to this power," particularly a "history of human domination" that the Crusades represent (210-211). Paul P. Abrahams and Andrea Marie Dominguez both see the story of the falcon as a parable about the role of the United States in international politics. Josiane Peltier asserts the novel "can be read as a commentary on value, worth, and monetary politics at a time when the United States was debating whether or not to maintain the Gold Standard," with the Falcon a metaphor for the lack of stable and fixed value under capitalism (21-22). These readings suggest deeper meanings of the Falcon, but do not succeed in turning the bird into a Communist symbol. In the end, finding *the* meaning of the Maltese Falcon is as frustrating as finding *the* meaning of *The Maltese Falcon* since it comprises layers of deception and meaning leaving one to doubt its existence in the first place.

A Communist Maltese Falcon?

The question of whether a piece of literature is Marxist or Communist (used here interchangeably) is complicated; does it refer to an author's attempts to use the writing to advance a Marxist perspective or a Communist program? Or does it mean the writing encompasses a vision of a world informed by Marxism? There is no consensus among Marxist thinkers or among writers (some of whom, especially those following in the tradition of Leon Trotsky, question the concept of Marxist literature altogether). Nonetheless, in the 1930s many authors sympathetic to the Communist Party attempted to create a body of Communist or proletarian literature. For example, Mary Heaton

Vorse published *Strike!*, a novel about the Gastonia, North Carolina, textile strike the same year that Hammett published *The Maltese Falcon.* Vorse, a longtime pro-labor writer who was sympathetic to the Communist Party, clearly favors the strikers in her novel. While one can parse the novel to examine if Vorse contradicts elements of the Communist Party's line (including by observing the fact that none of the characters are openly Communist), the general political perspective of her novel is clear. In 1935, Communist Party spokesman Joseph Freeman argued that "art, as an instrument in the class struggle, must be developed by the proletariat as one of its weapons" (9). Unlike Vorse or Freeman, Hammett does not use *The Maltese Falcon* to articulate a clear political—much less a clearly pro-working-class—vision of society.[2]

Hammett joined the Communist Party *after* he wrote *The Maltese Falcon.* It is likely true, as John Howarth argues, that the novel exists "as once a gripping mystery and a social comment" (32), but Hammett's commentary is ambiguous. The world of *The Maltese Falcon* is corrupt. Markowitz, writing on the website of the Communist Party's *Political Affairs*, argues that Hammett "took his experiences with the Pinkerton Detective Agency" as "the basis for a literature in which greed, exploitation, and corruption were motivations for both criminals, elites, and authorities." This describes Hammett's world, but not a Marxist analysis of twentieth-century capitalism. David Glover's reading is more nuanced. He describes the world of Hammett's fiction as one where "the line between crime and business, individual private gain and public affairs is hard to draw" and concludes that although there is no "overt display of political commitment" in Hammett's writing, they are "an index of Hammett's sharpening social vision" (29-30). What distinguishes Marxism is not recognizing corruption in the United States of the 1920s but offering a political program to change society. Marx and Engels saw class struggle as central to modern capitalist society and stressed the need for the working class to seize power through a socialist revolution. This is absent from *The Maltese Falcon.* Spade's society is steeped in the cynicism and corruption of modern capitalism, but he lacks the desire, vision, or means to transform society. In the novel, there are no classes, no class struggle, and no conception of transcending capitalism. Nor do the characters see themselves as belonging to any collectivity.

The Failure of Community in *The Maltese Falcon*

A central element of Marxist politics is the concept of collectivity. Marx argued that while society was divided into hostile classes, the future of humanity lay in the destruction of class oppression and the creation of a society in which the wealth of society belonged to society as a whole. Marx stressed in the

"Critique of the Gotha Programme" (1875) that:

> In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!

The Maltese Falcon presents a completely different vision. No community is possible in the novel since relationships are temporary and meaningless. The most benign example of a relationship was Flitcraft, who "loved his family [...] as much as he supposed was usual" but "his love for them was not of the sort that would make absence painful" (72). The novel's other relationships are emptier. Nils Clausson describes how "characters are constantly scrutinizing and appraising one another, calculating their value, usefulness, or disposability" (19). As David Glover describes Spade, "he expects to be used unless he can use others first" (28). Take Spade's partnership with Miles Archer: "'Miles,'" Spade tells O'Shaughnessy at the end of the novel, "'was a son of a bitch. I found that out the first week we were in business together and I meant to kick out as soon as the year was up'" (252). Spade's affair with his partner's wife may have influenced his view of Miles Archer, but his relationship with Iva Archer is no more sincere.

Spade's relationship with O'Shaughnessy is more heartfelt but means nothing. The relationship cannot be genuine because neither partner is genuine, and neither possesses a true self to share with the other. In justifying turning O'Shaughnessy to the police, Spade declares:

> "But suppose I do [love you]. What of it? Maybe next month I won't. I've been through it all before—when it lasted that long. Then what? Then I'll think I played the sap" (253).

Sexual relationships and gender identities are central to the novel's vision of the human condition. From Hammett's correspondence with his editor in July 1929, we know that Hammett resisted his editor's entreaties to excise what Hammett called "the to-bed and the homosexual parts" of the novel (qtd. in Layman 165). Much ink has been spilt over determining which, if any, characters are homosexual. Daniel Linder offers three possible

homosexual characters: Joel Cairo, Wilmer Cook, and Caspar Gutman. He argues that "Hammett wrote them in such a way that these characters could be identified as both homosexual and heterosexual depending on the key in which these segments were read." Linder concludes that "in no case are the sexual identities of these three characters made unambiguous and absolutely clear" (267).

Taken at face value, the novel *reinforces* traditional gender and sex stereotypes that are sexist and anti-homosexual; sexually active women are treated as deceitful harlots and gay men are subjected to stereotypical insults. One suspects most readers of the novel as serialized in *Black Mask* or published as a book would only see anti-gay and anti-woman tropes. Yet the novel's presentation of homosexuality could also be calling into question long-established gender norms. To use (post)modern terminology, *The Maltese Falcon* critiques essentialist concepts of sexuality and suggests gender and sexual identities are fluid rather than binary. The novel's treatment of sexuality can be read as an example of what sociologist Stephen Tomsen labels the "discursive deconstruction and a constant playfulness with sexual identities" offered by theorists to overcome an essentialist sexual dyad (390). In the case of Cairo and Cook, the characters' masculinity clashes with their sexual identities. As David Blackmore observes, "Cairo is the perfect stereotypical effeminate gay man, marked throughout the text by signifiers of conventional femininity" (70). For example, Cairo enters the novel after Spade's secretary, Effie Perine, presents the detective with Cairo's "engraved card," and declares, "This guy is queer" (46). When introducing Cairo, Hammett emphasizes his "slightly plump hips," his clothing, "his fawn spats," his "fragrance of *chypre*," his "short, mincing, bobbing steps," and his "high-pitched thin voice" (46). Cairo is weak, unsympathetic, effeminate, and ineffective.

Marc Seals observes that "Hammett's description of Cairo seems to be almost a parody of the physical markers that make up the cultural stereotypes of the Thirties toward homosexuality" (190). Seals concludes that "Hammett may be playing to his mainstream readers' homophobia, reassuring them that it is appropriate to ridicule and even despise such distortions of 'normal' masculinity" (190). *The Maltese Falcon* can be read as a criticism of the essentialism of such "cultural stereotypes" even as the novel reinforces those same anti-homosexual attitudes. That the novel can be read *both* as reinforcing and undermining traditional social norms of sexuality underlines its complexity but does not point to a clear political message.

An example of this ambiguity is Wilmer Cook. The character "is not nearly as identifiable [as gay] as Joel Cairo," according to Blackmore, "largely because Wilmer's most visible gender attributes mark him as conventionally masculine, which in popular terms makes him heterosexual" (77). Cairo is

effeminate and soft, but Cook's appearance has a "hard masculine neatness" (106). At the same time, Cook is described as "boy" nine times in two pages the first time he enters the novel. In the middle of this sequence, in the Hotel Belvedere, Spade asks Luke, the hotel detective, "What do you let these cheap gunmen hang out in your lobby for, with their tools bulging their clothes" (108). The comparison to prostitution is evident. The novel cuts down Cook's masculinity: "The boy looked at the two men, at their neckties, from one to the other [...]. The boy looked like a school-boy standing in front of them." This belittles Cook's masculinity and confirms Spade's judgement of Cook. Later Spade tells Gutman, in reference to Cook: "Keep that gunsel away from me while you're making up your mind. I'll kill him." (126).

The meaning of this passage, as endless commentators point out, hinges on the word "gunsel." If the word means gunman, as many readers assume, then Spade is simply telling Gutman to tell his paid thugs to lay off. But the primary meaning of "gunsel" is "catamite" (i.e., a boy kept for homosexual practices) from the Yiddish *gendzel* or gosling. Read this way, the passage is an eruption of anti-gay hostility. It is almost certain that *Hammett* knew the "true" meaning of the term, but decoding the passage requires understanding whether *Spade* is familiar with this meaning. Yet even if we allow that Spade understands the term, we still do not know how he means it to be understood since sexual insults are often not meant literally. Hammett could be making another point: inside every macho *gunman* is a kept *gunsel*, that is, machismo often is an envelope for homosexuality. Since a *gunman* is active, while a *gunsel* is passive, the passage suggests the difference between one and the other is interpretation.

There is no essential or fixed truth in sexual or gender narratives, and people no more have essential or stable sexual identities than they do other essential identities. According to Marc LaViolette, the novel presents truth "in a pragmatic way as malleable and ephemeral," and once proven, an "explanation of events is true until a better truth is thought of and proven by testing" (99). In this context, everlasting sexual or gender truth is no more possible than other everlasting truths.

If the relationship between Cairo and Cook is one of dominant and passive sexual partnership, there is another contradiction: the dominant effeminate man and the subservient tough guy. Taken together, the two characters emphasize the limitations of sexual stereotypes. Before becoming a writer, Hammett inhabited homosocial worlds as a Pinkerton detective and soldier in the First World War, where he likely met men with different mixes of masculinity and sexuality, including effeminate heterosexuals and hyper-masculine homosexuals. To read *both* Cairo and Cook as *homosexuals* means accepting that sexual orientation and gendered norms could clash,

because Cook's masculinity does not mean he is heterosexual. If we read both characters as *heterosexual*, we need to accept that Cairo's femininity does not make him homosexual. We could read Cairo as homosexual and Cook as heterosexual, but there is no textual evidence for this except a recourse to accepted gender norms. No matter how we "read" the characters' sexuality, that a character's sexuality depends on how he is "read" is a statement about the non-essential nature of sexual identity in the first place.[3]

Linder proffers another possible gay character, Caspar Gutman: "There is no direct textual evidence that would allow us to say that Gutman is homosexual, but there is evidence that Hammett wanted the reader to think of Gutman in some evidently sexual way" (269). Since Gutman "keeps" the gunsel Wilmer, he may be homosexual. Gutman's daughter, Rhea, appears in the novel which suggests, in Linder's reasoning, that Gutman is heterosexual. In any case, Linder asserts, "Hammett wanted us to perceive Gutman as a man of ambiguous sexuality" (270). In 2023, it is not difficult to imagine Gutman as a father *and* a homosexual. Again, there is a dissonance between elements of Gutman's sexual persona that would indicate that sexual identity is not clear-cut. It is possible that Gutman is a "father" in the literal sense (toward Rhea Gutman) and in the figurative sense (toward Wilmer Cook).

There is another possible homosexual character: Sam Spade. In addition to the moral ambiguity in the name "Sam," there is a sexual ambiguity: it is a shortening of both the male Samuel and the female Samatha. Spade exudes exaggerated masculinity. He has an affair with his partner's wife and sleeps with his client without creating a lasting or meaningful relationship with either woman. Then there is Spade's almost pathological hostility toward Wilmer Cook. While Spade assumes a detached disdain for the effeminate Joel Cairo, he threatens Cook with violence several times. Blackmore argues that "Wilmer so threatens Spade precisely because the young man is not easily recognizable as gay, because, unlike Cairo, he seems in fundamental ways to be similar to Spade." Blackmore continues, "Wilmer could be read simply as [Spade's] homosexual double, as a man who replicates Spade's identity in all respects except for his age and his sexual orientation" (79). In the novel, however, nobody is what he seems to be, especially Spade. Gregory observes of the detective: "His personality seems to be an endless series of roles and masks. Even when he is completely by himself, we cannot be sure we are seeing the 'real' Sam Spade" (104). The only time Spade allows himself to become emotional is when he is threatening Cook, but the reader cannot know if this is a glimpse into Spade's true emotions or another contrived persona. Is it possible Spade senses—even if on an unconscious level—that the line between him and Cook is as ambiguous and malleable as other divisions between truth and falsehood in the novel and his threatened violence demarcates the two

characters?

Here the term "gunsel" comes into play again. The term could be a shibboleth, a word used to distinguish members of a group from outsiders. In this reading, "gunsel" only has meaning in the sexual sense if Spade assumes Gutman understands its real meaning. Yet Spade would be indicating *he* understands its sexual meaning, which raises the question, how? As a private detective, Spade is familiar with the argot of diverse subcultures. Yet, unlike a uniformed policeman, Spade's value as a detective is that he can understand and operate in these milieus. In other words, Spade may not "be" homosexual, but he has enough familiarity with homosexual culture to call into question his own essential heterosexuality. This may explain his violent reaction to Cook: Spade does not want others to assume *he* too is a cheap gunman with his tool bulging in his clothes.

The Maltese Falcon does not allow the reader a peek inside the internal thoughts of the characters. To divine any character's sexuality requires evaluating the character based on his (or her) behavior. In other words, to gauge how each character measures up against a presumed sexual stereotype. Yet, this process in the end says more about the reader than the character. More fundamentally, since the characters seem to be willing to change their identity when suitable, how can we read the essential sexuality of characters who have no essence? The characters are not essentially heterosexual or homosexual because they are not essentially *anything*. Sexuality is a clear example of how modern society robs life of meaning.

No relationship in the novel is permanent or based on lasting sentiment. All are momentary and transactional. Gutman and Cairo are willing to use Cook as the fall man, albeit reluctantly, as the price to obtain the Falcon. Spade's hostility toward Cook, in this reading, stems not from the suspicion that Cook has sexual relations with men, but that he assumes the weaker position. Similarly, when Spade justifies handing O'Shaughnessy to the police, he announces, "I won't play the sap for you" (254). Sap, a word Spade uses repeatedly, highlights his ambiguous nature. The standard reading of this word in the novel connotes weakness, in the sense of a foolish, gullible person. Hammett (and Spade) no doubt knew the word could denote strength as a synonym for the old standby in hardboiled detective stories, the blackjack. Christopher Metress sees Spade's refusal to give in to his desire for O'Shaughnessy as "self-denial" that serves as "a way out of the individualism of the Gutman-Cairo-Brigid trio" (224). In this reading, Hammett "takes his hero from a self-indulgent individualism to a new individualism which seeks to wed collective and personal interests via self-denial" (226). This reading ignores that Spade's self-denial is self-interest: he turns O'Shaughnessy in to the police not out of a sense of justice, but to satisfy his own view of himself

and to extricate himself from legal danger—i.e., to free himself from secular attempts at morality.

Rather than weld his individual interests to the collective, Spade's actions cost him a possible romantic relationship with O'Shaughnessy and destroy the one genuine (if platonic) relationship he has enjoyed, with his secretary, Effie Perine. Keli Masten argues that Perine embodies the *femme fiable*, who represents trust, domesticity, and other human traits that hard-boiled detectives otherwise lack and "help show the detectives at their best, revealing their inner sentimentality" (38). When Perine reads in the paper that Spade betrayed O'Shaughnessy, she reproaches him. After Spade justifies himself by stating that O'Shaughnessy had killed Miles Archer, she "brokenly" replies: "I know—I know you're right. You're right. But don't touch me now—not now." In response, "Spade's face became pale as his collar" (256).

The book does not end yet, however. Perine returns to tell Spade that Iva Archer, his partner's widow, is calling. Spade shivers and replies, "Well, send her in" (256). When the book ends, Spade is not *physically* alone since Perine and Iva Archer are with him. But he is *spiritually* alone since one woman mistrusts him, and he mistrusts the other. It is possible Hammett's intention was to critique Spade's individualism as morally empty and a dead end. More broadly, one could argue that Hammett's social vision was a parody of human relationships under capitalism. After presenting such a nihilist vision, Hammett offers no alternative. This novel's inability to transcend modern alienation emphasizes its non-Marxist perspective.

Conclusion

The Maltese Falcon presents vision of the modern world bereft of essential meaning, in which men (and women) are incapable of creating effective communities. In this sense, Hammett's novel can be read as social commentary, but should not be read as offering an alternative, positive vision of society. Paul P. Abrahams asserts that Hammett's novel, along with its subsequent portrayal on film, "established the fictional detective as a fully-fledged social observer and critic" designed "to mock bourgeois pretensions of law, order, and progress." Spade, in this reading, "is neither immoral nor amoral," but embodies "syndicalist egalitarianism" and "the morality of anarchist/syndicalist freedom espoused by the International [sic] Workers of the World (I.W.W.) and associated with the wandering life of the unattached male" (97, 101). How a private detective—stool pigeon and labor spy—could represent the concept of freedom espoused by the radical Industrial Workers of the World, a victim of severe government and employer repression, poses a greater mystery than any *Black Mask* story. Beyond that, there is no textual evidence that Spade is a fully-fledged social critic, much less a working-class one.

Dominguez asserts, "hard-boiled narratives offered working-class stories for an emerging working-class readership" (163). Yet there are no workers in *The Maltese Falcon*'s San Francisco, and nothing *productive* happens in the novel; most protagonists are parasites (at least from a Marxist perspective). The San Francisco Bay Area had a significant labor movement: a few years after the book was published, the city's maritime workers shut down the city for 83 days in the 1934 general strike. Such a collective vision is absent from the novel.

Shulman writes, "It is not surprising that within a few years of *Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key*, Hammett had become actively engaged in the politics of the left, as if to achieve in the outside world the transformation he shows is necessary but which he refused to imagine in his fiction" (419). Hammett's becoming a Communist is no more surprising than anything else in his writings. Steven Marcus may be right when he writes in reference to Hammett's early stories that "the point of view is pre- rather than proto-Marxist, and the social world as it is dramatized in many of these stories is Hobbesian rather than Marxist" (xxxiii). Nonetheless, there is no straight line from Hammett's novels to his later political commitments. Hammett's writings are "pre-Marxist" only because he wrote them before joining the Communist Party. If with hindsight we can discern a deepening interest in politics in *The Maltese Falcon*, we cannot extrapolate a political vision. Like everything else in the novel, there is not one political truth; ambiguity, skepticism, and cynicism dominate. It is legitimate to analyze the political implications of *The Maltese Falcon*, but critics should avoid shoehorning it into the category of Marxist literature because Hammett later became a Marxist. The roots of Hammett's politicization do not lie in his writings, but in the 1930s: the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, and the birth of a militant labor and socialist movement. In a sense, Hammett's trajectory disproved Flitcraft's parable. The "beam" of the 1930s nearly fell on top of him, and he adjusted his life and became a Communist until his death—even as much of American society turned from radicalism in the Cold War. No reading of *The Maltese Falcon* would have predicted this development, since the novel was not influenced by Hammett's subsequent political outlook.

Notes

[1] This article uses the terms *Marxist*, *Communist*, and, in relation to literature, *proletarian*, interchangeably because the differences between them, while real, are beyond the article's scope.

[2] This paragraph draws heavily from Zumoff 2007, 122-23. For Vorse's relation to the Communist Party, see Zumoff 2021, 119. It should be noted that in arguing that *The Maltese Falcon* is not a Marxist book the current article does not imply that the book cannot be fruitfully examined from a Marxist perspective; a Marxist critic can examine the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Tale of Genji even though it is obvious that neither could have been influenced by Karl Marx.

[3] It is possible that Cairo is heterosexual, and Cook is homosexual. The lack of such a critical reading suggests more about the critics' reading than about the text.

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