

Possible topics for “The Baby In The Icebox” papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- The biographical note in the back of the anthology claims that James M. Cain never wrote a detective story, because “he anarchically didn’t like the idea of a criminal being caught in a tidy conclusion.” What do you think this means? What does it say about Cain’s ideas of what crime is, and what it says about human nature? Feel free to use outside sources for this one.

- Like many of the stories we’ve read so far, this one employs a first-person narrator who stands outside the main action of the story. How is this narrator similar to, or different from, the others? Does he serve the same purpose as Watson, or Dupin’s friend?

- This story is filled with distinctive personalities, but Cain doesn’t spend much time actually describing them. Instead, we get to know the characters by their actions. Talk about the ways in which Cain establishes character obliquely, through action.

- Cain wrote, of his characters’ diction, “I never forget that the average man, from the fields, the streets, the bars, the offices, and even the gutters of his country, has acquired a vividness of speech that goes beyond anything I could invent, and that if I stick to this heritage, this *logos* of the American countryside, I shall attain a maximum of effectiveness with very little effort.” How does his narrator’s distinctive diction inform the narrative and lend it meaning?

- Everything in this story is quite literal– it is what it is. But you can also read it as an extended metaphor about the power and gender relationships in a marriage, with the animals and baby standing in for various types of agency. What do all these animals “mean”? How about the snake oil salesman’s ring? The fact that the baby survived inside the refrigerator?

- From an interview with Cain in the *Paris Review*: “There’s more violence in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* than in my books. I don’t write whodunits. You can’t end a story with the cops getting the killer. I don’t think the law is a very interesting nemesis. I write love stories.”¹ If this is a love story (and I think it is), then what is romance fiction about? What makes this story a crime story? How is every love story a crime story? How is every crime story a love story?

- I’m sure that Cain would have disdained the label, but this story strikes me as being more “literary” in intent than most of the stories we’ve read so far. This word is almost impossible to define, but here I mean to suggest that the story is interested in the psychological, moral, and stylistic, rather than simply in moving the narrative forward and generating suspense (though it does indeed accomplish those as well). What do you think of this notion of “literariness”? Is it a meaningful distinction? Is Cain literary? Why or why not– and why or why not does it matter?

- Here’s another great Cain quote that I’m sure you will all love: “But novel-writing is something else. It has to be learned, but it can’t be taught. This bunkum and stinkum of college creative writing courses! The academics don’t know that the only thing you can do for someone who wants to write is to buy him a typewriter.”² Well, whaddya think??

1 <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3474/the-art-of-fiction-no-69-james-m-cain>

2 Ibid.