

Possible topics for *The Big Sleep* papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- This book is probably *the* classic “hardboiled” mystery, a genre categorized by a flat stylistic affect, a dark outlook on human folly, and plenty of sex and violence. And Philip Marlowe is the classic private eye of the genre— hard-bitten, alcoholic, with a strong moral code nevertheless laced with bitterness and cruelty. A good paper might subject him to a psychological analysis, one that compares him to some of the other detectives we've read.

- As often seems to be the case in our readings for this class, the book revolves around the social contracts between men and women. Analyze *The Big Sleep* for its message about the relations between the sexes, the relative positions of men and women in this society, and the role of misogyny in Marlowe's character (“You can have a hangover from other things than alcohol. I had one from women. Women made me sick”).

- A film version of this book, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, came out in 1946. It, too, is a classic— but is in many ways rather different from the book. Watch the movie and discuss those differences. What stylistic, moral, and narrative choices did the filmmakers make in order to give America a palatable version of this brutal story? Consider that the novel is a repudiation of Hollywood morality— and the irony of Hollywood giving it a second life on film.

- Marlowe is hardly an emotionless character, but his emotions are constantly subdued, suppressed, or channelled in unexpected ways. The same goes for other characters. Note the last paragraph in chapter 26, when Marlowe is walking in the rain. Or the bit where he leads Vivian out of the casino, and she trembles on the way to the car. Or Carmen's strange hissing. Analyze the way Chandler handles emotion in the book.

- Personally, I love the dialogue here— it's artificial, I suppose, but feels very “real” nevertheless. It's a truism of creative writing classes that dialogue should be used to express character, not to explain plot. But Chandler seems to do both at once. Choose some favorite passages to illustrate the way that Chandler's mastery of dialogue gives the story depth and complexity.

- There are a lot of references in this book to the film industry and mass culture, and the effect of both on society. A villain talks in the “elaborately casual voice of the tough guy in pictures. Pictures have made them all like that.” Elsewhere a crook studies his fingernails “as Hollywood has taught it should be done.” And of course there's the constant presence of pornography to show us that it's the image, not reality, that holds sway in this world. Consider the role, then, of movies and photographs in the book.

- Speaking of sexuality, the book is thick with it, from Carmen's mad come-ons to Vivian's failed seduction, to Marlowe's strange intimacy with “Silver-Wig” in the book's final chapters. Marlowe seems disgusted by sexuality in general (“I...tore the bed to pieces savagely”), and utterly repulsed by homosexuality (“a pansy has no iron in his bones”). The women are all tainted by sex, not liberated by it, and the men are forever under its pernicious influence. What strange sexual philosophy is Chandler presenting to us here? Can it speak to us in this supposedly more enlightened age?

- Note the way that Marlowe readily gives us clues without telling us that they're clues— of course he knows what they mean right away, but it might be twenty pages before he lets us in on his thoughts (e.g., the gray Plymouth, the missing bits of tapestry). This is a similar tactic to the one Hammett used in “Couffignal.” What effect does this have on the way we read the story? Does it propel the narrative forward, hold it up? Does this create suspense, or confusion, or impatience?

- As in many of the stories we've read, we have a detective who, at some point, gives us an elaborate philosophy of detection. Marlowe's is in chapter 30 (“When you hire a boy in my line of work it isn't like hiring a window-washer”). Compare Marlowe's philosophy to Holmes's, Dupin's, Poirot's, the Op's, etc. Consider their methods of investigation, their moral codes.

- We also get a cop's philosophy here, earlier in that same chapter, from Captain Gregory:

Being a copper I like to see the law win. I'd like to see the flashy well-dressed mugs like Eddie Mars spoiling their manicures in the rock quarry at Folsom, alongside of the poor little slum-bred hard guys that got knocked over on their first caper and never had a break since. That's what I'd like. You and me both lived too long to think I'm likely to see it happen. Not in this town, not in any town half this size, in any part of this wide, green and beautiful U.S.A. We just don't run our country that way.

How is this like, and not like, Marlowe's position on his work? How does it compare to the police's position in other stories we've read?

- Unlike some of the more fantastic plots we've seen, this one aims for a complex but gritty realism, one in which the chaos of human life holds sway. (One of the murders, by the way, is never even solved— did you notice? Chandler didn't, either!) L.A. and its inhabitants are seen as immoral, disgusting, uncaring. (“We seemed to hang there in the misty moonlight, two grotesque creatures...” “A small gun had gone off...but noises like that don't mean much any more.” “To hell with the rich. They made me sick.”) Analyze the book as a work of realism— then consider whether this “realism” isn't as much of a fantasy as, say, the elaborate puzzles of Agatha Christie.

- The book's syntax, particularly its dialogue, is extremely slangy. From chapter 26:

Harry Jones sighed. “Okey,” he said wearily. “She's in an apartment house at 28 Court Street, up on Bunker Hill. Apartment 301. I guess I'm yellow all right. Why should I front for that twist?”

“No reason. You got good sense. You and me'll go out and talk to her. All I want is to find out is she dummies up on you, kid. If it's the way you say it is, everything is jakeloo. You can put the bite on the peeper and be on your way. No hard feelings?”

Do you regard this kind of period colloquialism distracting, alienating? Or does it serve as a particular kind of rough poetry? Can a book so rooted in the common, the crude, be considered a work of so-called “high art”? Does it matter?