

Possible topics for “Gutting of Couffignal” papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- The protagonist of this story is known as the “Continental Op”– the otherwise nameless representative of the Continental Detective Agency. He is considered to be one of the first “hard-boiled” detectives in literature. Do a little research, and find out how this style of character originated and how he has evolved over time.
- Hammett's Continental Op is both like and unlike his forebears Dupin and Holmes. For instance, he is dedicated to his work, and does it for pleasure, not money. On the other hand, his morality is coarser and less forgiving; he is not above lying to manipulate events in his favor. Compare these three detectives in an essay.
- This story has an interesting structure– it opens presenting itself as one case, which is quickly abandoned for another. And then, in the end, the two appear to be the same case after all. This is one example of Hammett using sleight of hand to throw us off his tracks. How else does he use misdirection to keep the reader guessing?
- For some time, we think we're reading a conventional action story. But when the Op cracks the case, we get an impassioned speech from the Russian princess: “Outcasts easily become outlaws. Why not? Could it be said that we owed the world any fealty? Had not the world sat idly by and seen us despoiled of place and property and country?” She is of course talking about the Russian revolution of 1917, in which Bolsheviks overthrew the aristocracy, upsetting that country's lopsided class system and leading, ultimately, to the formation of the Soviet Union. What social forces in America was Hammett responding to by including this material in his story? And why does he force us to feel some sympathy for the princess here, right after revealing that she is responsible for the crime?
- The blunt prose style of this story is drastically different from the generous elaborations of Poe and Conan Doyle, and from the ironic gentility of Agatha Christie. Analyze the style by addressing sentence structure, simile, dialogue, and rhythm, and/or compare it to another writer's style.
- There is a disconnect between what the Op knows at any given time, and what he tells the reader. For instance, he has figured out that the Russians are to blame long before he reveals the information with the line “Well, he's your meat.” In so doing, he shows himself to be untrustworthy– what we call an “unreliable narrator.” What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach to storytelling?
- Most of the Op stories, including this one, were published in the pulp magazine *Black Mask*, which capitalized on the American obsession with crime and social mayhem of the 1920's and 1930's. Look into which historical and social forces popularized the pulps.
- Hammett slyly addresses class and the distribution of wealth here, starting with his opening description of Couffignal. Consider the story as an extended riff on social inequality.