

# The maltese falcon



## Sam Spade Character Analysis

Name: Sam Spade

Height: 6'0"

Eyes: Yellowish gray

Hair: Pale brown, almost blond

Age: 30s

Clothing: Gray suit, tweed overcoat, green necktie, dark gray fedora

If the cops had a file on Sam Spade, this is how his police report would look. But even though Spade isn't exactly in the police department's good graces, he's still supposed to be on their side. As a private detective, Spade has a professional code of ethics that he follows most of the time (but of course, not all of the time).

What do we mean by a professional code of ethics? Spade's #1 rule is to protect his clients, whether that means putting himself in harm's way or even breaking the law to keep his clients safe. But what about when Spade isn't on the job? Does he have a personal code of ethics that's separate from his professional code?

We'll get to that answer a bit later on, so stay tuned.

### A Blond Satan

When we first meet Spade, he's a hard-nosed and cynical tough guy, gruff and untrusting towards almost everyone. He favors Bacardi and prefers Bull Durham cigarettes. We're told in the opening paragraph of the novel that Spade is a " blond satan," and right there we get this mixture of Spade as the hero, but also the devil:

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Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down from high flat temples in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan. (1. 1)

This isn't exactly the most flattering physical portrayal we've ever read. If we didn't know that Spade's the novel's protagonist, we might have mistaken his angular features and yellowish-grey eyes for those of a villain. But there's no denying the cool factor of a blond satan in a fedora, and we'll take the narrator's word that Spade looks "pleasant." At the beginning of the novel, Sam Spade has a questionable set of morals that, on the one hand, allows him to sleep with his partner's wife without feeling much guilt, yet on the other hand, pushes him to seek revenge for his partner when he gets killed.

Good Guy or Bad Guy?

When Brigid walks into Spade's office, asking for his help, we want to warn him to stay away from her. Spade quickly becomes embroiled in a mad pursuit after the Maltese falcon, and we start learning that Spade is someone who will do more than bend a few rules, someone who is capable of practically anything. He's able to outgun the trigger-happy Wilmer, outwit the big boss Casper Gutman, and even outsmart the scheming Brigid.

Spade is always ready for the unexpected, and explains that his "way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey-wrench into the machinery" (86). Throughout most of the novel, Spade's motivations remain

private, so does that mean he has a personal moral code (an internal sense of right and wrong), or does he just do whatever suits his fancy?

The tricky thing with Spade is that Hammett doesn't make it easy for us to fully sympathize with him. We want to believe that Spade knows the difference between right and wrong, but at the end of the novel, can we say for certain that he does the "right thing"?

When he is faced with Brigid's tearful doe eyes begging him to save her, he still turns her over to the police, but his reasons for doing so are ambiguous. Although he shows a strong professional ethic by not letting Brigid get away with killing his partner, there's also an element of self-interest in his decision because Spade knows it's bad for business to let a killer get away. Is Spade only trying to protect his business from getting a bad rep? Does he turn Brigid over to the police to get the cops to leave him alone? Would Spade have saved Brigid if there were more money in it for him, say, another ten grand, give or take a grand?

Hammett never gives us an answer to these very good questions. But maybe that's the whole point. Maybe there's not supposed to be an answer.

Hammett's San Francisco is a city so corrupt that the line between right and wrong is blurry and impossible to draw. There's no escaping this level of deceit and corruption. It's everywhere we turn, lurking in every corner, following us around like our own shadows. And in this atmosphere of deception, even our hero (or should we say antihero?) Sam Spade has less-than-honorable motives.

One thing's certain, at least. In the end, Spade's feelings for Brigid were not strong enough to overcome the risks involved with letting her go free.

Spade's unapologetic calculation of risk, reward and duty suggests that Hammett is unwilling to provide a clear statement of Spade's morality. We could read this novel a thousand times and never say for sure which side of the law Sam Spade is really on.

**Sam Spade Timeline Summary** Spade is hired by Miss Wonderly to help protect her from a man named Thursby. He finds out the next day that his partner Miles Archer has been killed, as well as Thursby.

When Spade questions Miss Wonderly about the murders, she confesses that her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy, but she won't tell him anything else. Spade is held at gunpoint by Joel Cairo, who is looking for a black bird. Later, Spade notices that he's being followed by a young man who seems to be carrying a gun.

Sensing that Brigid knows Cairo, Spade organizes a meeting with both of them, but the police knock on the door right when Spade is in the middle of questioning them. The police take Cairo off to be questioned at the station. Meanwhile, Spade finally gets Brigid to spill the beans that she's in fact on a mission to find a priceless statuette of a black falcon. Brigid begs Spade to help her, and they end up sleeping together that night. But the next morning, Spade sneaks off to search Brigid's apartment.

Slowly, Spade figures out that Cairo and the man tailing him (Wilmer) are working for Casper Gutman, Brigid's former boss. Spade arranges to meet with Gutman and learns the history of the Maltese falcon, but gets drugged by Gutman and beaten up by Wilmer (ouch).

When Brigid disappears, Spade is able to figure out that she arranged a meeting onboard the ship La Paloma to meet with Captain Jacobi.

Later that night, a man stumbles into Spade's office and hands him a package, before collapsing onto the floor and dying. The package contains the black falcon, and Spade infers that the dead man must be Jacobi. Spade now has the perfect bargaining chip to use against Gutman.

Spade goes to Gutman's hotel and finds his daughter Rhea there, drugged and almost unconscious. Rhea tells him that Gutman has Brigid locked up in an abandoned house, but when Spade goes there, it doesn't look like it has been occupied.

When Spade returns to the office, he finds Brigid waiting for him and she begs him to protect her from Gutman. They go to his apartment only to find the whole gang waiting for them.

Spade offers Gutman the black falcon in exchange for ten grand and Wilmer as the "fall guy" to give to the police. Gutman agrees, but when he discovers that the falcon is a fake, he and his crew flee, leaving Spade alone with Brigid.

Spade then accuses Brigid of being the one who murdered Archer, in an attempt to frame Thursby. He turns Brigid over to the police, despite admitting that he may have feelings for her.

When Spade returns to the office the next day, he is met by a scornful Effie, who is angry at him for betraying Brigid. Effie tells him that Iva Archer is waiting for him. BRIGID O'SHAUGHNESSY

Character Analysis  
Trouble with a Capital T

Miss Wonderly a. k. a. Miss Leblanc a. k. a. Brigid O'Shaughnessy is the classic femme fatale.

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What's a femme fatale, you ask? Good question. A French term meaning "deadly woman," a femme fatale is a seductive, mysterious woman who uses her femininity to lure men to do her bidding, leading them into compromising, often deadly situations.

This description fits Brigid O'Shaughnessy to a T. She's an expert at taking full advantage of her beauty and sex appeal to get men to do, well, whatever she wants. And she's also an experienced liar, skilled at manipulating the truth and everyone around her. But she's also completely irresistible. We admit that if we had been in the room when Brigid first walked into Spade's office, we may not have been able to resist her charms ourselves because we'd be too busy picking our jaws up off the floor. Brigid is quite a looker, to put it mildly, and she sure knows how to make an entrance:

A young woman came through the doorway. She advanced slowly, with tentative steps, looking at Spade with cobalt-blue eyes that were both shy and probing. She was tall and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere. Her body was erect and high-breasted, her legs long, her hands and feet narrow. She wore two shades of blue that had been selected because of her eyes. The hair curling from under her blue hat was darkly red, her full lips more brightly red. White teeth glistened in the crescent her timid smile made. (1. 8)

On the surface, Brigid is soft-spoken and timid, evoking a sense of innocence and helplessness. But don't be fooled by her shy good looks. For one thing, her killer outfit has been carefully calculated to produce the strongest effect:

the two shades of blue she's wearing were "selected" specifically to complement her eyes (the better to lure in unsuspecting victims).

And notice the small, but very significant detail, that her cobalt-blue eyes are both shy and probing. She's looking for something, and the shyness is merely a cover-up. This red-haired bombshell has an agenda and she knows what she wants and she won't rest 'til she gets it.

### The Girl Who Cried Wolf

So how does Brigid set up her traps for the unsuspecting? Let's take a closer look at her interactions with Spade to find out.

Even though Spade might be falling for this stunning redhead, he knows better than to trust her completely. And Spade sets up his own trap to trick her. For example, in Chapter 6 after Spade's confrontation with Joel Cairo, Spade wants to know if Brigid had anything to do with it, so he mentions nonchalantly, "I saw Joel Cairo tonight." Brigid of course tenses up, and this is how the narrator describes her body language:

She got up from the settee and went to the fireplace to poke the fire. She changed slightly the position of an ornament on the mantelpiece, crossed the room to get a box of cigarettes from a table in a corner, straightened a curtain, and returned to her seat. Her face was now smooth and unworried.

Spade grinned sidewise at her and said: "You're good. You're very good." (6. 50)

We can see in this brief paragraph that Brigid is very experienced at controlling her emotions. In the span of time that it takes her to walk to the <https://assignbuster.com/the-maltese-falcon/>



fireplace, fuss with the ornament on the mantelpiece, light a cigarette, fix the curtains, and return to her seat, she succeeds in regaining her composure. If anyone else but Spade had been there, they would have surely been fooled by her acting. But nothing can escape Spade's hawk-eyes, and he sarcastically compliments her on her skillful acting abilities.

Why does Brigid only tell the truth when she's really pressed? Is it because she's a compulsive liar? Or does she think that lying is the only way to protect herself? At the end of the novel, Brigid makes one final desperate attempt to keep Spade from turning her over to the police by claiming that she loves him. Is this yet another lie? In some ways, Brigid is like the girl who cried wolf: she has lied so many times that it's impossible for Spade to believe her, even if he wants to.

But we also have to remember that Brigid is a woman trying to make her way through a world run by ruthless, vicious men. So maybe lying is the only trick up her sleeve that she can use to survive this masculine, aggressive society.

And in a way, Brigid is much more dangerous than our villain Caspar Gutman because at least Gutman is upfront about his ruthlessness, whereas Brigid plays the innocent schoolgirl act to disguise her real motives. But she's also an example of feminine strength and power because she fights for what she wants and doesn't let any man (or woman) take advantage of her. We wouldn't want to get on her bad side, but we also can't help admiring her gutsiness.

## CASPER GUTMAN Character Analysis

The Fat Man. That's how we're first introduced to our villain, Caspar Gutman. Wealthy, cunning, and obsessed with a black bird, Gutman is initially described almost exclusively in terms of his excessive weight:

Spade went in. A fat man came to meet him.

The fat man was flabbily fat with bulbous pink cheeks and lips and chins and neck, with a great soft egg of a belly that was all his torso, and pendant cones for arms and legs. As he advanced to meet Spade all his bulbs rose and shook and fell separately with each step, in the manner of clustered soap-bubbles not yet released from the pipe through which they had been blown. His eyes, made small by fat puffs around them, were dark and sleek. Dark ringlets thinly covered his broad scalp. He wore a black cutaway coat, black vest, black satin. Ascot tie holding a pinkish pearl, striped grey worsted trousers, and patent-leather shoes. (11. 39)

Beyond simply giving us a physical image of Gutman that we can visualize in our heads, what else does this description provide us with? What can we infer about Gutman's personality or background from this description of his physical appearance? And why might it be fitting that our villain is a "flabbily fat" man?

Gutman is a figure of excess, and the fact that he's overweight is another sign of his excessive lifestyle. He's rich and can buy anything he wants, yet he is driven by an uncontrollable desire for the unattainable falcon. We always want what we can't have, right? Gutman takes that to the extreme and sees nothing wrong with offering a few people to reach his goal. He's even

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willing to go so far as to give Wilmer to Spade as the "fall guy," saying that Wilmer is replaceable, whereas there's only one falcon. Now that's harsh.

Despite Gutman's ruthlessness, he does have one thing that we can't really criticize him for: at least he's honest about his ruthlessness. He doesn't deny the fact that he only cares about getting the falcon, and unlike Brigid, he doesn't try to hide his criminality.

This makes him a different kind of antagonist figure in comparison to Brigid, who uses her femininity to feign innocence. We're not saying that Gutman doesn't lie or try to play tricks on Spade (he does drug Spade at their first meeting, after all), but Gutman is very upfront about his desire for the bird, so Spade at least knows Gutman's full motivations.

At the climax of the novel, when Gutman discovers that the falcon is a fake, we would think that he'd finally give up his fruitless search and find something else to occupy his attention. But Gutman refuses to let go of his obsession, vowing to return to Egypt to track down the elusive black bird. In the end, the fact that Wilmer kills Gutman for betraying him emphasizes the idea that Gutman is unable to maintain healthy human relationships due to his relentless pursuit of wealth.

Ultimately, Hammett seems to suggest that this single-minded fixation on a pointless goal not only destroys Gutman's chance for happiness, but also reveals how the corrupting power of human greed. We'll say.

JOEL CAIRO Character Analysis

Joel Cairo works for Casper Gutman and is portrayed as a wimpy, delicate,

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sleazy " fairy." The character of Joel Cairo was based on a criminal Hammett arrested for forgery in Pasco, Washington in 1920. Hammett uses typical and offensive stereotypes of homosexuals as effeminate or womanish, which we can see in the opening description of Cairo's physical appearance:

The girl returned with an engraved card—Mr. Joel Cairo.

" This guy is queer," she said.

" In with him, then, darling," said Spade.

Mr. Joel Cairo was a small-boned dark man of medium height. His hair was black and smooth and very glossy. His features were Levantine. A square-cut ruby, its sides paralleled by four baguette diamonds, gleamed against the deep green of his cravat. His black coat, cut tight to narrow shoulders, flared a little over slightly plump hips. His trousers fitted his round legs more snugly than was the current fashion. The uppers of his patent-leather shoes were hidden by fawn spats. He held a black derby hat in a chamois-gloved hand and came towards Spade with short, mincing, bobbing steps. The fragrance of chypre came with him. (4. 132)

Notice the specific details in this paragraph: Cairo walks with " mincing, bobbing steps." He smells of chypre, a fragrance that is both citrusy and earthy. And he's wearing fancy gloves, a tailored suit, and patent-leather shoes. (If you want to see Cairo in action, check out this clip of Peter Lorre's performance in the 1941 film adaptation of the novel).

Hammett's description of Cairo is a pretty unflattering and offensive portrayal of homosexuality. Cairo comes off as neat and meticulous when it

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comes to his clothes and the way he dresses. But in this case, Cairo isn't like the lovable Carson from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* or style guru Tim Gunn in *Project Runway* (we can't really picture Cairo saying "Make it work" to Spade...).

In *The Maltese Falcon*, Spade is clearly suspicious and scornful of Cairo's appearance. Does Spade feel threatened by Cairo's homosexuality? In fact, many people have accused Hammett of being homophobic in these descriptions. Is Cairo a negative example of the dangers of homosexuality, or is Hammett simply providing a contrast to Spade's aggressive masculinity?

We know very little about Cairo's motives in the novel. We assume that he works for Gutman because he's in it for the dough, so he is ruled by greed to a certain extent. But what's more important to note is Cairo's blatant affection for Wilmer, who we guess is his lover. When Spade tries to convince Gutman to use Wilmer as the scapegoat, Cairo is the first to defend Wilmer. And after Spade knocks Wilmer unconscious, Cairo frets over him, petting his hair and anxiously trying to revive him.

Even though the novel pretty clearly looks down on homosexuality as unnatural and depraved, it is obvious that Cairo's feelings for Wilmer are genuine and heartfelt, something which can't be said of many of the other relationships in the novel.

#### EFFIE PERINE Character Analysis

Oh Effie. She's Spade's devoted secretary, and what can we say? Shmoop definitely has a soft spot for her. She's one of the few downright honest

people in the whole novel. She's down-to-earth, sensible, with a good head on her shoulders. Sam Spade needs a girl like that around.

In the opening scene, Effie springs to life in a single, simple sentence that perfectly captures her girl-next-door charm:

She was a lanky sunburned girl whose tan dress of thin woolen stuff clung to her with an effect of dampness. (1. 3)

Effie is shown as desirable, but not dangerous like Brigid. She is "lanky" (as opposed to Brigid's "pliantly slender" body), and "sunburned," suggesting a healthy, youthful glow that contrasts with Brigid's pale alabaster skin. Effie's warm brown eyes are "playful," and she wears a tan, woolen dress.

This minor detail of clothing is actually quite revealing. Unlike the green crêpe silk dress or the satin evening gown (in a shade of blue called "Artoise") that Brigid wears to enhance her seductive femininity, Effie's outfit is practical and the complete opposite of flashy.

Effie's loyalty to Spade is not only touching, but possibly the only healthy relationship that Spade has with any woman. Effie's the type of girl we'd want to have on speed dial to call whenever we're in a jam because we know we could always count on her and she would always have our backs.

#### WILMER COOK Character Analysis

Wilmer is Gutman's punk kid enforcer.

He is young and completely out-gunned and out-classed by Spade. We don't know much about Wilmer, except that he's steadfastly loyal to Gutman up

until the moment Gutman agrees to turn him over to the police. Even though Wilmer likely sees Gutman as a father figure, he cannot forgive Gutman for betraying him and kills him in the end. Wilmer is also violent, hot-tempered, and prone to being trigger-happy (he's killed three people in the novel that we know of: Thursby, Captain Jacobi, and Gutman).

The narrator also hints at the fact that Wilmer is Cairo's gay lover. Wilmer's delicate eyelashes and pale skin disturb Spade so much that he never misses an opportunity to insult or even assault the young man. As a homosexual couple, Wilmer and Cairo stand in stark contrast to the hyper-masculine, hardboiled tough guys like Sam Spade. For more on Hammett's portrayal of homosexuality, take a peek at Joel Cairo's " Character Analysis."

#### MILES ARCHER Character Analysis

Miles Archer is Sam Spade's partner. He's in his thirties, well-built, and jovial. We only meet him briefly in Chapter 1 when he is introduced to Miss Wonderly. Archer tails Thursby that night, but winds up murdered the next morning.

Spade spends the remainder of the novel trying to find Archer's killer. We can't tell for sure whether Spade and Miles were close friends because, on the one hand, Spade was sleeping with Miles' wife Iva, yet on the other, Spade does succeed in discovering and capturing Miles' murderer, successfully avenging his partner's death.

#### IVA ARCHER Character Analysis

Iva is Miles Archer's wife, but she's having an affair with Spade, so we're guessing the marriage isn't exactly smooth sailing.

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The narrator describes her as aging, but still beautiful. When we meet her in Chapter 3, she appears to be overly clingy with Spade and also pretty darn manipulative. Effie doesn't like Iva one bit and thinks that Iva had something to do with Miles's death. See, on the night of his death, Effie went to break the news to Iva, who pretended that she had been asleep the whole night. But Effie could see that the bed hadn't really been slept in and that Iva's clothes were still in plain view. Iva suspects Spade killed Miles, but of course Spade doesn't even bother denying her accusation.

We find out later from Sid Wise, Spade's lawyer, that Iva had in fact been out on the night of Miles's death. Miles had come home bragging to Iva that he was going on a date with another woman. Thinking that she could use this as ammo for a divorce, Iva followed Miles but instead of going to a restaurant, Miles was on the job tailing Thursby. Seeing that Miles had lied about the date, Iva simply went back home.

Iva comes off as the insecure, jealous type and even though Spade isn't really in love with her, he has to decide at the end of the novel whether to get back together with her.

Floyd Thursby  
Floyd Thursby was Brigid's partner, but he winds up dead before we ever get to meet him. We learn from Tom Polhaus that several years ago, Thursby was a St Louis gunman who got in trouble with the law several times for petty crime and battery charges. He got mixed up in the mob scene when he became the bodyguard for mob boss Dixie Monahan. But when Dixie had to go into hiding after being unable to pay off his debts, Thursby also fell off the radar. No one knows how he ended up in



Constantinople, working for Gutman. Brigid explains that she and Thursby worked together to steal the falcon and run off without giving it to Gutman. At the end of the novel, we learn that Brigid killed Archer in an attempt to frame Thursby for Archer's death. But she wasn't expecting for Archer to then be killed by Wilmer. Tom Polhaus Sergeant Tom Polhaus is a detective and seems to be mostly on Spade's side. Despite having to grill Spade a few times over the course of the novel (Spade is the #1 suspect on their list of possible suspects for Archer's murder), Tom is on good terms with the PI. The two occasionally have lunch together, and Tom lets Spade in on the news the police had gathered about Thursby. Even though Spade has a general mistrust of the police, he has a good opinion of Tom and considers him an honest cop. Lieutenant Dundy Dundy is a lieutenant in the police department and represents all the things that Spade hates about cops: he's self-important, inefficient, and condescending. Dundy is an arrogant bully who likes to push people around. He grills Spade on several occasions, constantly threatening to lock Spade up. But Spade knows that Dundy has no evidence linking him to Archer's death, and that these empty threats are merely an attempt to shake him up. Rhea Gutman Rhea Gutman is one seriously mysterious character.

She's Casper's daughter and appears for a very brief scene, in which she is drugged and barely conscious. She had been using a small pin to scratch her stomach to keep her awake until Spade came. She begs him to help Brigid, but not to tell her father about it or else he'd kill her. She explains that Cairo and Wilmer have taken Brigid to an abandoned house, but when Spade gets

there, the house looks as if it hadn't been occupied in weeks. When Spade returns to the hotel, Rhea has disappeared without a trace.

Did Casper set up his own daughter to outsmart Spade? We never find out what happens to Rhea, but it's possible that Casper may have killed her. Tom reports to Spade at the end of the novel that Wilmer shot and killed Gutman, but there is no mention of Rhea at all. This is one mystery that will remain unresolved.

Captain Jacobijacobi is the captain of the ship La Paloma, which arrived in San Francisco from Hong Kong. We learn from Brigid that she partnered up with Jacobi to bring falcon from Egypt to San Francisco. Jacobi is killed by Wilmer, but manages to bring the falcon to Spade. LukeLuke is the house-detective at Cairo's hotel, the Belvedere. He helps Spade a few times when Spade needs the inside scoop on Joel Cairo's comings and goings. Luke is an honest, straightforward guy, who is willing to give Spade inside information, as long as Spade doesn't lie about why he needs the info. Sid WiseSid Wise is Spade's lawyer, and seems to be pretty honest, as lawyers go. Spade advises Iva Archer to pay a visit to Wise in order to explain where she was on the night of her husband's murder. When Spade goes to Wise to see what Iva told him, Wise fills Spade in on the details, without holding back any information. It's clear that Spade trusts Wise, which isn't something that we can say often when it comes to Spade. District Attorney BryanDA Bryan represents the kind of corrupt institutional official who has let too much power get to his head. Bryan bullies and threatens Spade even though there is no evidence pointing to Spade as either Archer's or Thursby's killer. Bryan's a manipulative, power-hungry man, who seems less interested in

finding out the truth than in imposing his authority on others. Spade of course doesn't put up with Bryan's empty threats, and we wouldn't either if we were him. Kemidov is a Russian general who lives in a Constantinople suburb. We never met Kemidov in person, and only hear about him through Brigid and Gutman. According to Gutman, the Maltese falcon had made its way into Kemidov's possession, but Kemidov had no idea about the bird's real worth. But when Gutman made him an offer to buy it, Kemidov turned it down. Gutman wasn't sure whether his over-eagerness tipped Kemidov off to the bird's value, but Gutman couldn't take the risk so he sent Cairo, Brigid, and Thursby off to steal the bird.

In the end, we find out that Kemidov did in fact figure out the true history behind the Maltese falcon, so before Gutman's crew stole the bird, Kemidov had already replaced the real bird with a fake one. It appears that Kemidov has the last laugh.

#### THE MALTESE FALCON Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

We'll be honest with you, Shmoopers. This section is a bit tricky for The Maltese Falcon for a reason you might not initially suspect.

See, Spade searches a lot of pockets and a lot of apartments and uncovers a lot of things: an orchestra ticket for the Geary Theatre, leatherette cases, foreign coins, gold watches, colorful silk handkerchiefs perfumed with chypre (a fragrance known for its contrast between fresh citrus notes and woody oakmoss and musk accents). With this cornucopia of objects to choose from, you might assume that there'd be the same number of symbols, if we're

thinking of a symbol as a physical object or character that represents an abstract idea.

But in *The Maltese Falcon*, most of these objects turn out to be completely meaningless. These physical things have no symbolic value because they merely serve as evidence for Spade to solve the crime. There's no hidden meaning in these objects, and they're important only insofar as they provide clues.

But notice that we said most of these things have no abstract meaning. There is one thing, and one thing only, in the novel that does function as a symbol. Guesses, anyone?

### The Black Bird

If you said the falcon, then you've just won \$1, 000, 000! The only symbol in *The Maltese Falcon* is the falcon itself, a statuette once given by the Knights of Rhodes to King Charles V of Spain. Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy are driven by greed in their selfish pursuit of the black bird. They become so obsessed in their quest for fortune that they are willing to sacrifice anything to get it. In this sense, the falcon symbolizes the corrupting power of human greed and its pervasion through history.

### For Realsies?

Did the bird really exist? We're glad you asked (because we have told you anyway). The Maltese falcon dates back to the Knights Hospitaller, a religious order founded in the 11th century to provide care for poor and sick pilgrims to Jerusalem. In 1530, Emperor Charles V of Spain gave the Knights a large territory, including Malta (which is why they are also known as the <https://assignbuster.com/the-maltese-falcon/>

Knights of Malta), in exchange for an annual fee of a single—live, not jeweled—Maltese falcon.

While coming up with the plot hook for *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett became intrigued by what he called the "peculiar rental agreement" between Charles V and the Knights of Malta. The Crusades probably interested Hammett because of their mythic association with the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus drank from during the last supper. This link to the Crusades subtly elevates Spade to a knight on a noble quest.

### Falcon Hunters

But why a falcon? With so many birds of prey to choose from (snowy owl, hello?? We want our very own Hedwig, please), why all the fuss over falcons? Dating back thousands of years, falconry is the sport of training birds to hunt small prey. Well-trained birds were prized for their beauty, skill, and efficiency. Since the falcon is a fearless hunter, it has traditionally been a symbol of ruthlessness and prowess (sounds a bit like Sam Spade, no?).

But early Christians slightly altered the meaning of the falcon to reflect their own values. Instead of representing physical strength, wild falcons were seen as relentless killers and therefore became symbolic of evil, whereas tamed falcons represented Christian conversion and repentance. Coats of arms from the Middle Ages often featured falcons as a symbol of the pursuer, one who will not rest until his goal is achieved. This single-minded (almost blind) commitment to a single purpose should remind you of Spade and his fellow falcon-hunters.

Ultimately, the relentless quest in *Maltese Falcon* for the black bird ends in a wild-goose chase, bringing down the lives of all those who vainly pursue it. Greed destroys any chance for the characters to lead contented lives, yet they refuse to give up the chase. Even when Gutman realizes the bird is a fake, he vows to return to Egypt to pick up the trail again.

Of course, he gets killed before he can leave San Francisco, but his uncontrollable desire for the bird contaminates all his relationships with people (he was even willing to sacrifice Wilmer to the police). Hammett reverses the popular alchemic quest to turn lead into gold (by reducing the Maltese falcon from gold to lead).

#### ANALYSIS: SETTING Where It All Goes Down

##### San Francisco, California

The *Maltese Falcon* is set in the foggy, hilly, windy city of San Francisco in the late 1920s. Hammett knew San Francisco like the back of his hand (he worked there in his early twenties as a Pinkerton operative, and later returned to the city to write his novels). So reading *The Maltese Falcon* is like taking a (very long) walk through the different neighborhoods of San Francisco.

You can find the same hotels, the same restaurants, and the same small alleyways. Any San Francisco native will recognize the familiar street names that are sprinkled throughout the novel, streets like Geary and Leavenworth, Bush and Market, Sutter and Kearny, California and Powell. (If you're feeling especially ambitious, we challenge you to print out a map of the city and track the movements of the characters. They cover a lot of ground.).

## Not Exactly Paradise

San Francisco in the late 1920s was a pretty treacherous place. After the Stock Market Crash in 1929, the economy experienced a sudden collapse. Jobs were scarce and people became desperate to find ways to provide for their families. With the passing of prohibition laws that banned the sale and supply of alcohol, organized crime escalated at an alarming rate because it offered a quick (albeit dangerous) way to make money. Criminals like Al Capone, Bonnie and Clyde and John Dillinger were big headliners of the day. Chicago was the hardest hit when it came to mob violence, but New York, Philadelphia and Boston also experienced a huge increase in organized crime.

Where does San Francisco fit into this equation? Well, S. F. had a much lower rate of criminal violence in the 1920s and 1930s compared to the other big urban cities in the country. But Frisco still had to contend with its own fair share of gangsters and the atmosphere of criminal activity is very pervasive throughout *The Maltese Falcon*.

The best example of the dangerous atmosphere of the city appears in the second chapter of the novel. The chapter's title "Death in the Fog" already tells us to get ready for something bad to happen, and the scene opens with Spade answering the telephone. We learn that someone is dead (we don't know who yet), and this information is followed by two short, but striking descriptions of San Francisco:

Cold steamy air blew in through two open windows, bringing with it half a dozen times a minute the Alcatraz foghorn's dull moaning. (2. 4)

San Francisco's night fog, thin, clammy, and penetrant, blurred the street. (2.8)

In the first description, notice the eerie quality of the cold night wind and the "dull moaning" of Alcatraz's foghorn. It's an ill wind that blows no good. Also keep in mind that Alcatraz was a military prison in the twenties, so the sound of the foghorn wasn't exactly a friendly tooting, but rather a sinister reminder that dangerous prisoners were locked up just a few miles away out in the bay.

In the second description of San Francisco, this sense of eeriness is further emphasized by the fog, which is damp and clings to your clothes. We get chills just reading that sentence. The fact that the fog "blurs" the street, making it difficult to see clearly, can also be read more symbolically as a sign of the city's general state of confusion and lack of clarity. In a world full of corruption, characters' motives are unclear and ambiguous, and urban life is chaotic and hazardous.

**ANALYSIS: NARRATOR POINT OF VIEW** Who is the narrator, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

Third Person Narrator

Sheesh—thank goodness were not in any of these characters' heads, right?

That might be a little too close for comfort for Shmoop.

The Maltese Falcon employs a third person objective point of view, which means that the narrator is not a character within the story. In many cases, a third person narrator has direct access to the characters' inner thoughts, but in the case of Maltese Falcon, the narrator rarely goes inside the characters



head, and even keeps our protagonist Sam Spade at arm's length. This creates emotional distance between the reader and the characters, so we can only figure out what each character might be thinking by examining their physical reactions. Plus, you know, we don't have to feel like liars and murderers.

### Let's Play Detective

Even though the objective point of view relies a lot on action and dialogue, Hammett does give us clues to the characters' thoughts and feelings by describing their body language and facial expressions. So in a way, we the readers get to play the role of the detective interpreting signs. Let's take a look at the scene in Chapter 6 where Sam tells Brigid that Joel Cairo offered him money for the falcon to see how she'll react:

" He offered me five thousand dollars for the black bird."

She started, her teeth tore at the end of her cigarette, and her eyes, after a swift alarmed glance at Spade, turned away from him.

" You're not going to go around poking at the fire and straightening up the room again, are you?" he asked lazily.

She laughed a clear merry laugh, dropped the mangled cigarette into a tray, and looked at him with clear merry eyes. (6. 57)

How does Hammett's description of Spade and Brigid's reactions help us infer what they might feeling even though the narrator never tells us they're thinking? Let's figure out in three easy steps what is probably going through these characters' minds.

### Step One

Our first step as the detective reader is to study Brigid's facial descriptions. First, she bites down hard on her cigarette (a sign of distress or alarm, perhaps?), and then her eyes glance quickly at Spade before turning away. Why might she be avoiding direct eye contact with Spade? Is she afraid of giving something away? This seemingly minor act of breaking off eye contact already cues us into the fact that she must be hiding something from Spade.

### Step Two

Now that we've unpacked the implications behind Brigid's body language, our next step is to examine Spade's response. He takes a subtle jab at Brigid by asking her whether she's going to go "poking at the fire and straightening up the room" because the last time she did that, Spade could tell she was trying to compose herself and buy herself time to think up her next lie. Spade is hinting to Brigid that she better come clean with him because he knows she's up to something.

But Spade doesn't overplay his cards either. Notice how Hammett writes that Spade talks "lazily." What does the word "lazy" imply? A careless, nonchalant attitude, perhaps? Spade doesn't ask her angrily, or rudely, or viciously. If he comes off as too aggressive, he won't get anywhere with Brigid. Instead he asks her "lazily," testing the waters very carefully to see if she'll accidentally slip up. He pretends to be indifferent, when in fact he's watching her every move like a hawk.

### Step Three

And last but not least, our third step in uncovering the hidden SS is to go

back to Brigid and study how Brigid reacts to Spade's subtle questioning. She laughs a "clear merry laugh" and looks at him with "clear merry eyes." Why does Hammett repeat this phrase twice? Our hunch is that Brigid is back to her old playacting tricks. The repetition of the phrase "clear merry" smacks of deceitfulness. The last thing Brigid is feeling is merry, and she forces her eyes to look clear in order to keep Spade from seeing their hidden depths and whatever secrets they're holding.

And if that's not enough to convince you that Brigid's body language is masking her real emotions, the "mangled" cigarette is a dead giveaway that she's feeling tense and nervous.

So there you have it. You've just revealed the hidden implications of Spade and Brigid's conversation in three easy steps. But maybe you're still asking yourself why Hammett chose to limit our access to the characters' private thoughts and emotions? Well, for one thing, it creates more suspense. It keeps us guessing.

It also forces us to read more carefully. Since we have to play the role of the detective ourselves, we become like Spade analyzing Brigid's every reaction. We have to scrutinize the characters' words and body language in order to delve into what's going on under the surface.

#### ANALYSIS: GENRE Mystery

The Maltese Falcon involves both the solution of a crime and the unraveling of secrets, so that smells a lot like the "Mystery" genre to us. Throughout the novel, Spade is forced to work his way through a web of lies, first with

the double-crossing dame Brigid and then with the cunning crook Casper Gutman.

What starts off as the solving of two murder cases quickly escalates into a modern-day treasure hunt for the desirable Maltese falcon. Will the search end in success or wind up as a wild-goose chase? As we follow the characters in their pursuit after the black bird, we witness countless false leads, wrong turns, and red herrings, all of which heighten the obscure mystery surrounding this priceless statuette.

**ANALYSIS: TONE** Take a story's temperature by studying its tone. Is it hopeful? Cynical? Snarky? Playful?

Dark, Cynical

Since Hammett was a real-life detective, he had first-hand experience on how detectives act and talk. The Maltese Falcon is full of slang words that Hammett learned while working as a Pinkerton agent. Hammett is especially famous for the sharp rhythm and biting tone of his dialogue. We can practically hear Spade's words coming from a deep voice, made gruff with tobacco smoke. He's a man who has seen it all.

Ring... Ring... Ring... Anyone Gonna Answer That?

Hammett's extensive familiarity with detective work thus allows him to create an overall tone that is dark and cynical. Take, for example, the opening sentence of Chapter 2:

A telephone bell rang in darkness. When it had run three times bedsprings creaked, fingers fumbled on wood, something small and hard thudded on a

carpeted floor, the springs creaked again, and a man's voice said: 'Hello....  
Yes, speaking..... Dead?" (2. 1)

What we're presented with in these two sentences is only what the narrator observes from the outside of objects and actions (as in, we're not in Spade's head. See "Narrator Point of View" for more on this). Now try to "audio-lize" (you know, as in, visualize sounds) all the different noises that we hear in this passage:

a telephone ringing in the darkness  
bedsprings creaking  
fingers fumbling against wood  
something thudding on the carpet  
and finally a man's voice.

This detailed description of a series of sounds evokes a foreboding feeling that something bad is about to happen. And that's pretty much the tone of the entire novel. Ominous and sinister.

And as for the cynical part, that's where Spade's voice comes in. We only get one half of the phone conversation, Spade's half. The dialogue here conveys messages beyond the literal meaning of the page's words. Hammett uses ellipses very effectively here: instead of getting to go inside Spade's head to see what he's thinking, we have to literally fill in the dots ourselves.

Hammett thus creates an overall tone of cynicism by conveying the news of death with a complete lack of sentimentality.

**ANALYSIS: WRITING STYLE**Hardboiled, Bare, Understated

Dashiell Hammett is often credited with being the inventor of hardboiled

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fiction, a genre known for being unsentimental and brutally honest in its style. A combination of urban realism and wry humor, the hardboiled writing style is as tough as the characters that populate the novels. Hammett's crisp style grew out of his experience writing case reports during his stint as a Pinkerton operative. His professional just-the-facts approach colored his literary writing, too, creating a gritty realism that hit all the right notes for a voraciously reading public.

### Smoke Break

One of the best examples of Hammett's "bare-bones," minimalist writing appears in Chapter 2 when the narrator describes Spade rolling a cigarette after hearing the news of Archer's death:

Spade's thick fingers made a cigarette with deliberate care, sifting a measured quantity of tan flakes down into curved paper, spreading the flakes so that they lay equal at the ends with a slight depression in the middle, thumbs rolling the paper's inner edge down and up under the outer edge as forefingers pressed it over, thumbs and fingers sliding the paper cylinder's ends to hold it even while tongue licked the flap, left forefinger and thumb pinching their end while right forefinger and thumb smoothed the damp seam, right forefinger and thumb twisting their end and lifting the other to Spade's mouth.

He picked up the pigskin and nickel lighter that had fallen on the floor, manipulated it, and with the cigarette burning in a corner of his mouth stood up. He took off his pajamas. (2. 5)

In this scene, Spade's feelings are never once described, but the readers are told every detail of his careful, precise technique as he makes himself a cigarette. In fact, did you notice that the first paragraph is actually one single sentence? What is the effect of devoting such prolonged attention to Spade's seemingly minor act of rolling a ciggie? Well, keeping in mind that Spade has just found out that his partner is dead, Spade appears to be calmly lighting a cigarette, but he also finds the process itself calming.

On the surface, Spade seems unaffected by the news, but it's also possible that his cigarette rolling is his way dealing with how upset he really is underneath. Notice the "deliberate care" that Spade takes to "measure" out just the right amount of flakes. We can tell by Spade's efficiency that this isn't the first one he's rolled, nor will it be his last. And as Spade lifts the cigarette to his mouth and picks up his lighter off the floor to light it, we can sense that he seems to be trying to cope with the news and come to terms with his partner's death.

### No Frills

Hammett once said that he was influenced by his early work as an advertiser when he tried to make the most of "understatement, not to deceive, but to increase the impression made" (source). And in this smoking scene, we can see Hammett's masterful use of understatement, not only in the understated description of Spade's cigarette rolling, but also most effectively, in the very last sentence, "He took off his pajamas."

Pay attention to how short this sentence is compared to the two previous sentences. This description would be pretty unremarkable if we read it on its

own. But in the context of Spade's slow deliberation, this ordinary sentence is transformed into a brief, intense burst of words, like a sudden punch to the chin or slap to the face. In just five short words, Hammett drives home the point that Spade has steeled his nerves and is now ready to face the problem head-on.

Stylistically, Spade has often been compared to Ernest Hemingway because they share a similar minimalist approach to writing. Like Hemingway, Hammett uses a spare style with plain sentence structure and accessible language. It's a kind of writing that is hardboiled, but also boiled-down, so that what we're left with is only the really good stuff, the cream of the crop with no excess fat.

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