

# Dashiell hammett: the maltese falcon

Literature



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The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett is America's greatest detective novel that has been widely studied for its highly influential conception of the American private eye through its main protagonist Sam Spade and its conception of 'femme fatale' through Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Brigid O'Shaughnessy, under the pseudonym of Miss Wonderly hires Spade and his partner Miles Archer to protect her from former partner Thursby. Later, both Thursby and Archer turn up dead and the beautiful woman is back in Sam Spade's office, confessing that her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy, and asking him for further help.

Spade agrees to help for a huge sum of money. Then a "small-boned man" named Joel Cairo calls on Spade. He has his own special interest in Thursby, and to Thursby's relationship to a jeweled statue of a falcon. Brigid draws Spade into her plan to sell this jeweled falcon statue to her other former partners – Joel Cairo, Wilmer, and Casper Gutman. The plot, characters, and dialogue in The Maltese Falcon are well etched and intertwined by Hammett giving the novel a highly fast paced plot that later became the regular format for hard-boiled crime fiction.

Spade knows that Brigid had killed Archer. When Brigid absconds, Spade learns the history of the statue from Gutman, who drugs him. Beaten by Wilmer, Spade awakes in time to receive the falcon from the dying Captain Jacoby of the ship La Paloma. Brigid draws him into a trap with the four partners, but when Spade produces the falcon, it turns out to be a fake. In a carefully crafted manner, Spade divides the villains with different scenarios and finally all flee except Brigid, who suggests that Spade escape with her.

Turning them all over to the police, he learns from them that Wilmer has killed Gutman. Spade is thus a man who has done his legal duty and preserved his professional and personal integrity. Sam Spade is a fascinating character. His speech is ironic and bitter, but never comic. He is not a violent man and does not engage much in gunplay and fights. Spade's life – from his efficiency apartment with its fold-out bed to his "office wife" Effie – is a model of economy. He wastes no words, time, money, or love.

Spade is smooth, fit, and suit-clad. Beneath this sophisticated surface is a principled man who surfaces at moments such as these when he says: "I'm a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go....". In an embedded narrative, known as the Flitcraft Parable, Sam Spade also reveals that he follows the patterns in his client's life, rather than extraordinary events. He is therefore able to have a unique perception on human behavior.

Having deserted his family after a falling beam nearly killed him, Flitcraft returns to the same patterns of life he had abandoned: "he adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell and he adjusted himself to them not falling" (54). Man is adaptive and habitual, Spade intimates; in Brigid's case, he sees that her habit of lying is fundamental. Sam Spade can also be seen as a scoundrel without pity or remorse, taking his whiffs of drink and his casual amours between catching crooks, treating the police with a cynical contempt, always getting his crook by foul and fearless means.

Spade interacts with the three criminals: two of whom are homosexuals and the third is a sadist who abuses his daughter. They alternately hold Spade at gunpoint, tail him, drug him, and mug him in efforts to find out what he and

Brigid know about the falcon. Against them Spade employs his physical and mental toughness, his faithful secretary Effie Perrine, and his standing with San Francisco policemen Dundy and Polhaus. But Dundy turns on him, as they follow the leads in Archer's murder to Spade's affair with Iva Archer.

Meeting hostility everywhere, Spade sleeps with Brigid and searches her apartment before she gets up. Critic Edenbaum points out that " although Spade is no murderer, Brigid is his victim," because he alone knows everything, while Brigid does not know that he knows. She " is the manipulated, the deceived... finally, in a very real sense, the victim. " Caught in one lie by Spade, Brigid always found new lies to spin out of the old ones. Spade's habitual reply to her lies--" You're good, you're very good" (36, 58) sounds both ironic and admiring, for Spade shares the ability to construct a story quickly.

Spade's ability to switch from one interpretation of events to another is the source of his power over the other characters. This is especially evident in his dealings with Joel Cairo and Wilmer, neither of whom have the verbal dexterity of Spade or Brigid. Cairo, for example, complains that he was forced to face police interrogation due to a story Spade told them. Spade comes up with yet another story to explain to Cairo why he told the police what he did. Cairo replies a bit " dubiously," " You have always, I must say, a smooth explanation ready," to which Spade answers: " What do you want me to do?

Learn to stutter? " (100). Wilmer, who has the problem of stuttering, is often put down by Spade both physically and verbally. Having taken away the guns of Wilmer, Spade further humiliates him in front of his boss, Caspar

Gutman, by telling Gutman that the guns were taken by "A crippled newsie . . . but I made him give them back" (216). Apart from Cairo and Wilmer, Spade's also has verbal interactions happen with Caspar Gutman. Like Brigid and Spade, Gutman is also an adept liar.

In the chapter entitled "Horse Feathers," first Brigid, then Cairo, and finally Spade tell the police different versions of the events that have just transpired. Spade's version is actually farthest removed from the truth, and draws the description of "Horse feathers" (82) from Lt. Dundy. Spade's control of the police and the two criminals in this scene shows that his power originates not in reconstructions of the real events, but in reconstructions which purposely maintain their distance from the real. Regarding Sam Spade's character, Hammett says it best: "Spade had no original.

He is a dream man .... he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent by-stander or client". Today the name of Sam Spade has become synonymous with that of a tough hero, and one of the main attractions in reading the book is the uncertainty about his honesty. He lies, cheats, and masquerades. Yet he is talented and successful as a detective. The secret of his success and charm of his personality lies in the way he masters life by tricking others at moments.