

Racism as it relates  
to the detective:  
marlowe's negative  
stereotypes in 'the  
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BUSTER**

The middle of the twentieth century was rife with racial conflict and movement toward equal rights. Unfortunately, the characters of *The Long Goodbye* have a tendency to maintain this racist rhetoric that had such a negative impact on 1950's society and on interracial relations. Phillip Marlowe's discriminatory behavior towards Mexicans and other people of Latino descent not only exemplifies a popular problematic opinion of the time, but this dependence on stereotypes also perpetuates a problematic theme of racism in noir fiction.

One of the most pointed instances of racist dialogue is Marlowe's internal thoughts about the appearance of the Mexican man when Menendez surprises him at home. Marlowe said that the man " had a mustache and his head bulged with oily black hair," which does not paint a particularly favorable image (Chandler 345). Beginning with the facial hair, a mustache often carries a sleazy connotation and is not usually associated with friendly, positive people. While this characteristic could be written off as simply descriptive, the tone implies a deeper significance. Using the word " bulged" is also not the nicest way to describe a person's head. It projects an image of particularly visible veins and a physical manifestation of the feeling of anger. And finally, describing his hair as " oily" makes readers think he is dirty and greasy. This is continually more unfortunate when one notices that Marlowe is simply assuming this man is from Mexico based on these traits. As readers saw from his interactions with Candy, Marlowe has a tendency to lump all of Central and South America together under the title of " Mexico," which displays ignorance and racism. This man could be from a variety of

countries, but Marlowe bases his assumptions on his physical appearance, one he views as especially negative.

He continues to describe this man in a negative light. Marlowe claims the man “smelled of sweat,” which again could just be his detective mind noting things about the man, but does not entirely seem that way (Chandler 345). The way in which he says those words invokes the image of his lip curling up in distaste. This is also a segment toward the end of the novel, where his racist opinions toward Latinos is known, which may color the scene more than it is by itself. Additionally, sweat is indicative of many negative things. It can bring up the image of working in the sun and doing manual labor, often jobs performed by new immigrants. There are also the negative associations between races of generally lower socioeconomic standing and bad smells. This single line brings up so many negative racial implications, and it is only one of many. He continues to denigrate the man’s clothes when Marlowe calls the man’s hat a “dirty sombrero” (345). Firstly, the use of the word “dirty” brings up similar images to the sweaty shirt. It is not a symbol of refinement or high class. Sombreros were initially created to protect farmers and cowboys from the sun. But now, this term is simply reminiscent of spending a lot of time outside, indicating the person may do blue collar work. While it would be classist to claim that any area of work is less important than another, blue collar jobs generally require less formal education and involve some kind of working with one’s hands. Naturally these jobs are important and necessary for society to function, but they also tend to carry a degree of negative stigma in society.

The next significant thought is the series of sentences that make claims about Mexicans as a whole. Each sentence follows the same structure of “There is nothing... than a... Mexican,” with emotions generally inserted in the blank spaces (345). This is a series of stereotypes that Marlowe has developed throughout his life that he views as facts. Because he has spent so long as a detective and so much of his career relies on being able to make quick judgments, he also assumes these quick judgments are correct on a larger scale. Relying on these stereotypes so heavily makes him particularly susceptible to racism. This does not excuse his behavior; it simply establishes this behavior as a kind of necessity in noir. The combination of quick, stereotypical judgements and the negative view of the world most noir protagonists have create this theme of racism.

It is also important to note that, although Marlowe does hold a negative view of the world, his racism is not necessarily a direct stem from that. When he says, “There is nothing tougher than a tough Mexican,” he betrays a degree of fear (345). It is entirely reasonable to be fearful in this situation, but this is also Marlowe acknowledging that someone has an advantage over him, even if it is solely physical. Because Marlowe is generally so confident in his fighting ability, this fear is somewhat unusual. His racism and fear seem to feed off each other. Especially because this sentence is placed after three racist sentences, the reader can see that some of the fear comes from the man’s race and some of the racism comes from fear of the man. It becomes a vicious cycle. Because Marlowe holds these racist stereotypes, he behaves with antagonism in his interactions with Latinos, often resulting in fights.

These interactions further solidify both his fear of Latinos and his negative opinions toward them.

Fictional detectives rely on noticing small clues and making big inferences about them. Additionally, detectives have a tendency to doubt the veracity of people they meet to better do their jobs. These two aspects of detective work combined with the negative perspective taken in most noir works sets the genre up to often make broad, negative claims. Because Marlowe is so solitary and rarely changes his initial opinion of a person, he forms most of his judgements for people based on physical appearances and mannerisms. Therefore, he is bound to make racist assumptions. But within that, there is a deeper dislike for people he perceives to be Mexican, regardless of whether or not they are actually from Mexico. This is odd because the men from Central and South America in *The Long Goodbye* are not the most powerful and therefore not as worthy to inspire fear as someone like Harlan Potter. But still, Marlowe carries a remarkable fear and dislike of these men. The noir genre encourages this kind of behavior because it further isolates the “hard-boiled” detective and makes him seem tougher. But this use is incredibly problematic because there is no moment when Marlowe overcomes his racism and in fact, relies upon his racist opinions to determine that the world is a bad place. He believes that the perceived negative actions of minority groups contribute to a crime-ridden urban atmosphere, even though the majority of crimes in this novel are carried out by rich white people. This misalignment of logic brings into question his true skills as a detective, along with the thought that noir fiction should not emphasize a

quality that would seriously impede a character's ability to objectively view situations.