

# Guns and masculinity in the maltese falcon



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Maltese Falcon is a work of detective fiction by Dashiell Hammett that follows a private investigator, Sam Spade, as he tries to piece together the truth surrounding an ancient statue of a falcon. Spade embodies 1930's American masculinity - he's brawny, dominant, unemotional, and a "straight-shooter". Guns in the 1930s, similar to today, were seen as a symbol of power, masculinity, and dominance. Spade, the character most emblematic of masculinity, does not carry a gun throughout the novel because he does not need one. He relies on his brute strength and street smarts to get by. The male characters on the "other side" in this novel - Joel Cairo, Casper Gutman, and Wilmer Cook - all use guns and even pull them on Spade at various points in the novel. These characters' use of guns compensates for the different ways that each of them lack the traditional features of American masculinity and thus places them in opposition to Spade, which emphasizes his own masculinity.

Joel Cairo lacks traditional American masculinity in two ways - he's homosexual and he's foreign. Before he enters Spade's office for the first time, Effie Perine warns Spade that Joel Cairo is "queer" (42). In the 1930s, the word queer was used as an adjective meaning strange or odd, but also colloquially referred to someone who was homosexual (Oxford English Dictionary). In this case, it most likely means the latter. Cairo is described in a similar manner as Brigid. The narrative emphasizes his effeminate tendencies and appearance by highlighting things like his soft and well cared for hands, perfume, and snug fitting trousers (42-43). His hands are also described as "flaccid", which has phallic connotations and implies a lack of sexual potency (43). All of these traits, especially queerness, do not align

with traditional masculinity. Cairo also fails to align with American masculinity because of his foreign background. His name, Cairo, refers to his foreign roots and he is often called "Levantine." His status as a foreigner turns him into the "Other" in opposition to Spade and his masculinity.

Cairo attempts to use a gun against Spade to overpower him and force Spade to hand over the falcon. While Spade is distracted by Effie, Cairo pulls out "short compact flat black pistol" and instructs Spade to "clasp [his] hands together at the back of [his] neck" (44). Cairo is far too weak to overpower Spade physically and must use a gun to compensate for his natural lack of power. Even though Cairo technically has command over Spade in this moment, it is clearly unnatural for him. Cairo "cough[s] a little apologetic cough". "smile[s] nervously", and his "eyes [are] humid and bashful" (45). Despite the fact that Cairo holds the gun in this situation, he still does not hold the power. Spade waits for Cairo to begin to search him and then uses his physical strength to outsmart Cairo and strip him of his gun. "Cairo let the gun go the instant Spade's finger touched it" showing how easy it is for Spade to regain control of the situation (46). Rather than using the gun against Cairo, he punches him in the face to knock him out. This scene directly contrasts Cairo's lack of masculinity with Spade's masculinity. Cairo uses the gun to compensate for his lack of physical power compared to Spade, but Spade is still able to control the situation and emasculate Cairo by stripping him of his gun. When Spade strips him of the gun, Cairo cries. This show of emotion is typically associated with queerness or femininity and emphasizes that by stripping Cairo of his gun, Spade has also stripped him of his masculinity and power. The gun also has a phallic

connotation and seems “ small in Spade’s hand” emphasizing Cairo’s lack of sexual potency and masculinity in comparison to Spade (46). Cairo’s use of a gun represents an attempt to compensate for his lack of traditional masculinity but fails because Spade is the embodiment of this masculinity and thus holds the power in this situation.

Casper Gutman lacks traditional masculinity because of his lack of physical power and extravagant tendencies. As his last name implies, Gutman is overweight. He is constantly referred to as “ the fat man” and his initial physical description characterizes him as “ flabbily fat with bulbous pink cheeks”, “ a great soft egg of a belly”, and “ pendant cones for arms and legs” (104). Much of Spade’s masculinity is relate to his physical power and appearance. Spade’s physical descriptors include adjectives like “ thick”, “ big”, and “ strong” and the narrative at one point compares his body to that of a bear (12). Traditional masculinity emphasizes physical strength and power like Spade’s, therefore Gutman lacks masculinity because of his physical appearance. Gutman also lacks masculinity because of his extravagance and opulence. Traditional masculinity is simple. Men who embody masculinity are not flashy or opulent because those traits traditionally are associated with femininity. Gutman is wealthy, gluttonous and greedy and dresses himself up with things like pearls (106). His opulence is especially emphasized by the type of gun he attempts to use on Spade. Gutman, similar to Cairo, is also described by the word “ flaccid” which associates him with a lack of sexual potency and therefore masculinity (106).

After the characters realize the falcon was fake, Gutman asks Spade for the bribe money back and Spade refuses. Gutman then pulls out “ a small pistol, an ornately engraved and inlaid affair of silver and gold and mother of pearl” (203). Spade, not threatened by the gun, takes out a one-thousand-dollar bill before handing the envelope with the rest of the money back to Gutman. Gutman shrugs and because he is unwilling to argue with Spade leaves without the remainder of his money. Gutman must use a gun against Spade because he lacks physical power in comparison to him. His gun compensates for this lack of power and masculinity. Similar to Cairo, Gutman’s gun is small and represents a phallus, emphasizing his lack of sexual potency. The gun’s ornateness is effeminate and emblematic of Gutman’s opulent character. Spade does not view Gutman or his gun as a threat and by dismissing the gun, he strips away its power. Spade blatantly ignores Gutman’s request for the money which emasculates him and illustrates how even without a weapon, Spade holds the power in this situation. Gutman’s gun cannot compensate for his lack of physical power and therefore illustrates his effeminacy and lack of masculinity.

Wilmer Cook lacks masculinity because of his youthful nature and physical appearance. Cook is first described as an “ undersized youth of twenty or twenty-one” (59). He is referred to throughout the novel as “ the boy” and his stature and various features are described as “ small” (93). When standing in front Spade he’s described as “ looking like a schoolboy” (95). He’s young, inexperienced, and physically weak. However, he is Gutman’s “ gunsel” and personal security guard.

Cook shadows Spade for the majority of the novel and at one point, instructs Spade to come with him to see Gutman. Although Cook does not directly pull out his guns at this point, he makes it very clear that they are in his pockets which sends the message that he will use them if Spade does not comply. Spade complies and follows the boy to Gutman's suite but as they are walking down the hallway, steps behind him and overpowers him as the boy is "impotent in the big man's grip" (120). The use of the word "impotent" highlights the youthfulness of the boy and implies a lack of sexual potency. Spade strips the boy of two heavy automatic pistols before grinning at him and joking that the situation will put Cook "in a solid" with his boss (121). The two heavy pistols are symbolic of Cook's desire for power and compensation for his lack of physical strength. Spade takes advantage of his naiveté and is able to effectively strip him of his guns before Cook even realizes what is going on. After Spade takes the guns, Cook stops passing snarky remarks and doesn't bother trying to fight for his guns back because he recognizes that Spade holds the power in this situation. By taking his guns, Spade emasculates Cook because he strips him of the power and symbolic manliness that he held. Without the guns, Cook is just a scrawny kid pretending to be a man.

Men in this novel use guns as a way to compensate for the various ways that they lack masculinity and power. Cairo lacks masculinity because he's homosexual and foreign, Gutman lacks masculinity because he's overweight and opulent, and Cook lacks masculinity because he's young and weak. Guns provide these men with a false sense of masculinity that Spade easily strips

away with physical power. Their lack of masculinity emphasizes traits that distinguish Spade as masculine and the antihero of this novel.