

The chaos of
modernity in the
maltese falcon and
acquainted with the
night



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In the quest to diagnose the modern age with its particular ailment—is it apathy? Xenophobia? Cynicism? Class exploitation? Racism, sexism, some other -ism?—it’s been the task of modernist writers to explore the many afflictions skulking about the contemporary age, in the attempt to parse order from chaos. Or perhaps not. Perhaps the goal is not to achieve order, but to defy it, to weed out any remaining pockets of it and crush it before it reclaims the age and forces everything back into its rigid binaries. More than anything, the goals of modernist writers like Robert Frost and Dashiell Hammett seem to align with the subversion of the binaries that had caged previous generations of thought. The characters in Hammett’s novel *The Maltese Falcon* and the persona of Frost’s poem “*Acquainted with the Night*” are not pettily rebellious, but rather they illustrate how the chaos of modernity must be navigated by equally chaotic personalities—and how overstepping traditional boundaries may be neither wrong nor right, neither good nor bad, but necessary.

There is much to be said about how very necessary it is for Hammett’s protagonist, Sam Spade, to ignore the bounds established by traditional practices of law and order. In his attempt to navigate a series of destabilizing events in the already destabilized landscape of crime-saturated San Francisco, Spade is forced to adopt and enforce his own moral compass—one whose needle seeks truth and justice rather than ethics. Indeed, the moral code that binds his “*colleagues*” at the San Francisco Police Department ends up bogging them down; Spade’s subversion of morality and his adoption of amoral behavior allows him to continuously keep up with, and eventually thwart, the criminals he investigates. Throughout the novel, the

indifferent third-person point of view grants readers only surface images of the goings-on; as such it is evident that Spade's actions are consistently contrasted with those of the upstanding Lieutenant Dundy and Detective Sergeant Tom Polhaus.

The introduction of Polhaus could not be more different from the introduction of Spade: Spade, being the "blond satan," is immediately characterized as a person of great effect—whether that effect is wholesome or devilish is ambiguous, but it stands that his image is striking and elicits a reaction (391). He is sitting, seemingly bored and collected, seemingly expectant, almost assuredly ready for action at his introduction. Polhaus, on the other hand, is introduced as a man who "clambered" to Spade's side, a man with a "carelessly" shaved face, small eyes, jowls, and body covered by soil due to his messy (likely carelessly undertaken) task of investigating the body of Miles Archer (400). The effect is that of someone who is entirely ineffectual, and this is compounded by his seemingly inadequate presence as an informer to Spade, who fills in the blanks of Archer's murder quite easily. Even after his introduction, Polhaus is only ever referred to by his name, not his title as a detective for the police department; as a direct contrast to Spade, Polhaus is easily dismissed as a significant figure, let alone as an officer of the law. His presence is that of the law—the boundary—that exists merely because tradition dictates it, merely because this false, obsolete relic of the past maintains the image of public safety. Polhaus exists to be overlooked and to be defied, as Spade consistently demonstrates. The benign, morally superior position of Polhaus's version of police detective has served its purpose and, with the modern world's influx of easy violence and

social chaos, must now be displaced by a position of moral ambiguity and methodical pursuit of truth and justice rather than the surface maintenance of moral integrity.

Lieutenant Dundy presents an entirely different set of obstacles enforced by traditional standards of the law. Suspicious and churlish, Dundy is that stubborn rock of traditional value that refuses to budge and detests anything—cue Sam Spade—that might wriggle around it. As is the case with Spade and Polhaus, Dundy is described and immediately characterized in his introduction. His “compact” (i. e. sturdy and unyielding) body, too-neat attire, and meticulously maintained, “grizzled” hair announce the presence of one who takes himself quite seriously. He’s gone gray with age and experience, refuses to indulge Spade in his comradely offer of rum, and perceives all situations through “hard deliberate eyes” that leave no room for quibbling (403). (Not, of course, that Spade abides by this.) He also exudes the persistent threat of bodily force, lashing out at Spade after an extended session of “kidding around” (458). As the opposite of Polhaus, Dundy is too effective as an officer of the law. Dundy does not enforce law and order, he inflicts it on those who, like Spade, do not obey the rigid binary of upstanding citizen/dastardly criminal. Dundy represents law that perceives transgressive behavior as inherently criminal, regardless of its motives or its goals. Indeed, Polhaus’s “little playmate” “looks heartbroken” when he realizes that Spade’s ability to weave around laws and absurdly rigid moral codes ends up being the only truly effective route to apprehending Gutman and his crowd of criminals (584); the mocking addition of “little playmate” insists very clearly that the current state of the police department is little

more than a group of bumbling children making play at cops and robbers, and insisting that life is just as easily boiled down to who is “ good” and who is “ bad.” As illustrated by Sam Spade, the real work is done only when the constraints of morality are blurred and subsequently overstepped. As it happens, it is neither the clambering Polhaus nor the uncompromising Dundy who snare the criminals and deliver justice—no, it is the morally ambiguous, blond satan himself who finagles his way out of Gutman’s plots by straddling the line between delinquent and virtuous. As befits the modern age, and the modernist pursuit of abrading traditional thought and behavior, the antics of Sam Spade demonstrate the need for transgressing boundaries to sift out truth, and to achieve some semblance of justice.

The unnamed persona of Frost’s villanelle/sonnet “ Acquainted with the Night” reflects much of the same conflict inherent in the strict obedience of law, order, and tradition. While the persona illustrates quite clearly the external sources of conflict (people crying out in the night, unknown individuals following the persona, etc.) the bulk of this individual’s narrative insists that it is not just for personal safety and the pursuit of relatively noble endeavors (see Sam Spade) that he attempts to escape the city’s limits. More than anything else, the persona flirts with the boundaries of urban light and unknown darkness for personal satisfaction, for the pleasure of solitude and the pursuit of potentially illicit behavior.

The persona, who is “ unwilling to explain” (6) his motives and purposes to the policeman he passes, seeks not only to abandon the dubious “ safety” of the city lights and law enforcement, but also the scrutiny of law and other controlling elements of society. “ The persona’s conception of the night is <https://assignbuster.com/the-chaos-of-modernity-in-the-maltese-falcon-and-acquainted-with-the-night/>

ambivalent,” Keat Murray observes in his analysis of Frost and “the modern mind.” “He views himself as somewhat detached from the night, yet at the same time lured toward it as a suitable place for his loneliness. His acquaintance...lacks a clear identification with the night but also urges him to explore it” (372). His acquaintance with the night alleviates the pressure of scrutiny, of constantly being accountable for his actions. Hence, the persona having “outwalked the furthest city light” (3) (not for the first time, the poem implies) is at last enveloped in the mysterious, the unknown, in which he may seek solace; yet he is equally at risk from having distanced himself from the lights, under which he might be forewarned of threats. It is this state of risk, this perpetual flirtation with light and dark, known and unknown threats and pleasures, that motivates the persona and maintains his acquaintance with the night. Murray further argues, “[T]he desire to fathom [the night] is transformed into an artistic attempt to create out of chaos” (372); creation—in this case the creation of a tenuous relationship with the night—is but another attempt at control, at reigning in chaos. As with Sam Spade, the constant usurpation of control allows for the persona’s broader conception of boundaries—and how they must necessarily be crossed.

Murray’s understanding of the persona’s “attempt to create out of chaos” is due in no small part to the structure of the poem itself. The swift deterioration from single-line declarative statements to observations that seem to ooze from one line (a perceivable boundary) to the next in an unpredictable pattern suggests a slip in that creative/controlling routine. Indeed, it implies a gradual relinquishment of control as the persona

approaches the boundary between urban lights and mysterious darkness, a curiously appropriate sentiment for a sonnet. The form effuses flirtation and coyness, implying that the persona's "acquaintance" with the night, and all its illicit potential, is perhaps a bit more intimate than the title suggests. The persona's obvious past affiliations with the night suggest not a mere acquaintance, with all its ambivalence, but rather an affair kindled by the seduction of transgressive behavior.

The unknown, with its lack of structure and restraint, (as illustrated by the poem's ebbing sense of structure) offers not only promises of illicit thrills, but of solace, of comfort. The night envelops transgressive individuals just as easily as it consumes those who define themselves in opposition to it. The transparent are at risk; the transgressive are welcome and, indeed, enticed. Murray continues, "[T]he persona moves beyond light and seeks revelation in the darkness rather than being repulsed by its density and ambiguity" (373). Like Sam Spade, the persona is not phased by the chaos of the unknown, but instead thrives on it, "seeks revelations" from it; indeed, both characters are themselves chaotic enough to observe and comprehend the unraveling of social order, and to employ equally chaotic manners and behaviors to establish temporary order. For, quite clearly, the fate of modernity rests not on the backs of the morally transparent, but on the individuals half hidden in shadows.