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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Born in St. Mary's County, Maryland, in 1894, Dashiell Hammett left school at age fourteen because of his family's shaky finances. He held a series of odd jobs until 1915, when he joined the Baltimore office of the famous Pinkerton's National Detective Agency. Plagued by ill health, he left the detective agency for good in 1921. His first work was published in 1922. A year later, his fiction appeared in the popular pulp magazine *Black Mask*.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the Audio Guide.

Distribute the Reader's Guide essays, "Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961)" and "Hammett and His Other Works." Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what it learned.

Writing Exercise

Have students read Chapter 1 focusing on Hammett's use of dialogue. Ask students to write a two-page second chapter to begin to develop one of the characters. Ask them to use dialogue and action.

Homework

Continue to read Chapters 1–3. Prepare your students to read two or three chapters per night in order to finish reading the book in seven lessons. Hammett begins the novel in the middle of a typical workday at Spade and Archer's detective agency. What clues indicate that some things are out of the ordinary? How might these clues foreshadow the rest of the story?

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Maltese Falcon was written in the late 1920s, the close of a decade known as the “Roaring Twenties,” a period of prosperity halted by the stock market crash in October 1929. During this decade, writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald captured the disillusionment of the Lost Generation. In Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the main character struggles between riches and happiness. Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* captures the life of an American soldier, fighting for another country, adrift in Europe.

At the same time, American pulp magazines were at the height of their popularity. The publications were an inexpensive way for readers to enjoy new stories each month. Hammett’s style, developed while writing for pulps like *Black Mask*, dealt indirectly with such serious themes as alienation and the allure of the American dream. Foremost, Hammett wrote captivating mysteries to entertain the reader, and any grand aesthetic goals or existential dilemmas shadowed along behind. With the coming of the Depression, this entertaining fiction was just what the nation would need.

Discussion Activities

Read and discuss Handout One: San Francisco in the Roaring Twenties, Handout Two: Hard-Boiled Fiction and Hammett’s Writing Style, and the Reader’s Guide essay “Hammett and Detective Fiction.” Discuss the trends covered on the Audio Guide and in these essays. What major facts from these resources might inform your reading of the novel?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 4–6. Ask them to consider the voice of the narrator. Who is telling the story? Is the narrator objective or biased? How does this contribute to the tone of the novel?

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Maltese Falcon employs a third-person objective point of view. The narrator is not a character and does not participate in the events of the novel. Instead, the narrator simply tells what happens without stating more than can be inferred from the story’s action and dialogue. Using this device, the narrator never discloses anything about what the characters think or feel and remains a detached observer.

Discussion Activities

While the objective point of view relies heavily on action and dialogue, Hammett gives us clues to the characters’ thoughts and feelings by describing their body language and facial expressions. Examine the scene in Chapter 6 where Sam tells Brigid that Joel Cairo offered him money for the falcon.

“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.

How does Hammett’s description of Spade and Brigid’s reactions to one another help the reader infer the characters’ feelings? Why might Hammett have chosen to limit the reader’s access to the characters’ private thoughts and emotions? How does the emotional distance it creates contribute to the overall tone of the novel?

Writing Exercise

First-person point of view allows the reader to observe the private thoughts and emotions of the narrator. Ask students to rewrite the scene above in first-person point of view from Sam Spade’s or Brigid O’Shaughnessy’s perspective. How does the use of first person change the tone of the scene?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 7–9. Make a list of all the new characters in this chapter. Can we discern the inner motivations of these characters?

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Sam Spade, the hard-boiled detective in *The Maltese Falcon*, becomes embroiled in the quest for the elusive black bird after his partner, Miles Archer, is murdered. Throughout most of the novel, Spade's motivations remain private, but most critics agree that he is driven by a personal moral code—an internal sense of right and wrong—rather than a conventional desire to uphold civil law. In various ways the secondary characters serve as foils and antagonists to Spade's character, complicating his search for Archer's killer and the falcon itself.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Distribute the Reader's Guide essay "Major Characters in the Novel." Assign each group a character: Effie Perine, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Miles Archer, Joel Cairo, Casper Gutman, or Wilmer. Some of these characters lie about who they are and what they know. Ask students to review the chapters they have read, selecting passages that reveal information about the true nature of their character. Have them present the key attributes of that character, giving specific evidence from the text to support their answers.

Writing Exercise

Choose a secondary character who serves as an antagonist to Sam Spade. How is this person important to the story? What motivates him or her? Does the antagonist make Spade appear stronger or more flawed? How might this be important as the novel progresses?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 10–11. Ask your students to consider what Spade's reaction to Casper Gutman reveals about Spade's character.

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things.

A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things. Allegories and parables are forms of extended metaphors. An allegory uses characters, objects, and events to symbolize concepts of moral or social significance. Characters in allegorical stories are often personifications of abstract ideas such as envy, greed, or gluttony. Parables are metaphorical stories that use realistic characters and circumstances to make a point. They often carry a strong message that has meaning beyond its literal reading.

One of the most famous and important passages of *The Maltese Falcon* is a section in Chapter 7 known as “the Flitcraft parable.” Spade tells Brigid about a case he once worked on involving a man named Flitcraft who disappeared without warning. Hired by the wife to locate him, Spade finds him living—under an assumed name—a life very similar to the one he left behind. The man tells Spade that he was walking down the street after lunch one day when a beam “fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him.” Shortly afterward, the man left his family in an attempt to adjust his life to reflect his newfound understanding of the random nature of the universe. Spade tells Brigid, “He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.”

Discussion Activities

Discuss what the parable means. What concept is Spade trying to relate to Brigid? Why would Spade choose to tell Brigid this story at this particular moment? What message does the story carry? Does Brigid seem to understand?

Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write a short story of no more than two pages that functions as a parable. They should pay close attention to characterization and imagery. What makes the story a parable? How does it explain something about the world in which they live?

Homework

Read Chapters 12–14. In tonight’s reading, the students will learn more about the history and value of the Maltese falcon. Ask them to begin thinking of the ways the falcon works as a symbol within the novel.

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

The most important 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 selfishly pursue their own interests as they try to obtain the bird. Driven by greed, they become mired in the quest for fortune without considering the cost. Spade becomes embroiled in the pursuit after his partner, Miles Archer, is murdered.

Discussion Activities

Read Handout Three: The Falcon as a Symbol. Ask your students to think of the novel as an allegory. How do the novel's characters, objects, and events symbolize concepts of moral or social significance? Do their names provide any clues? Divide the class into four groups. Assign each group a character: Sam Spade, Casper Gutman, Joel Cairo, or Brigid O'Shaughnessy. If *The Maltese Falcon* is read as an allegory, what abstract ideas might each of these characters personify?

Writing Exercise

Ask your students to think about the qualities of a real falcon. Does the character they were assigned today share any of these characteristics? If so, what are they? Does the falcon represent different things to different characters? Have students support their answers with passages from the text.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 15–17. Ask the students to pay close attention to the phone call Effie receives from Brigid and the scene with Rhea Gutman. Do they feel Brigid can be trusted? Why or why not?

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

"Flat" or "two-dimensional" characters in a work of fiction do not experience a profound emotional change and personal growth during the course of the story. They serve to provide comic relief or help advance the plot. "Round" or "three-dimensional" characters have complex emotions and motivations. They encounter conflict and are changed by it.

The archetypal private detective, Sam Spade is motivated not by conventional standards but by an internal code of conduct. Like the criminals he encounters while pursuing the falcon, Spade divulges only what suits his purposes. He tells each of them what he believes they want to hear without revealing how much of the truth he has pieced together from their various stories. His motivations remain a mystery until the end.

The classic *femme fatale*, Brigid is beautiful but dangerous. She lies compulsively, revealing bits of truth sandwiched between falsehoods. Brigid feigns loyalty to various characters, but ultimately she betrays them all.

Discussion Activities

Discuss with your students the roles of "flat" and "round" characters. Ask them to identify some of their favorite fictional characters. What attributes bring them to life? Some critics feel the characters in *The Maltese Falcon* lack depth. Do your students agree? Which characters in the novel seem the most "real"? Why? Using your discussion of allegory from Lesson Six, ask the students to consider how using two-dimensional characters can sometimes enable writers to represent broad concepts.

Writing Exercise

Ask the students to write two paragraphs about the character they most trust. What particular actions or qualities contribute to that feeling? Have them support their answer with examples from the text.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 18–20. Ask your students to come to class ready to present the two most important turning points in the novel.

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The Maltese Falcon begins as a mystery novel, with the hard-boiled detective, Sam Spade, trying to solve his partner's murder. It evolves into a quest for the falcon, of course, but also for abstract concepts such as truth and justice. The chase leads to a final truth: the statue is a fake, a worthless piece of lead. The criminals blame one another and, in the aftermath, Wilmer shoots Gutman. Though Spade admits he might be in love with Brigid, he turns her over to the police, unwilling to protect her from punishment for Miles Archer's murder.

Discussion Activities

In small groups, have the students map a timeline that depicts the development of the story and the building of drama. This timeline should include the most significant turning points but also examine lesser events that build tension. As students develop their timelines, they should define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Groups will present their timelines to the class.

Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write a different ending to the novel.

Homework

Have your students come to class with three major themes of the novel.

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using textual references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Maltese Falcon* makes about the following:

- **Greed:** Gutman, Cairo, O'Shaughnessy, and Wilmer have been pursuing the falcon for quite some time. Spade has only recently joined the search. Discuss the various characters' motivations. Are Spade's more noble than the others'? Why or why not?
- **Trust:** After Spade discovers some of Brigid's lies, she pleads with him, "I've been bad—worse than you could know—but I'm not all bad. Look at me, Mr. Spade. You know I'm not all bad, don't you? You can see that, can't you? Then can't you trust me just a little?"
 1. Why does Brigid want so desperately for Sam to trust her?
 2. Does she trust him? Why or why not?
- **Human Adaptability:** Throughout the novel, circumstances change that are beyond the control of the characters. The way they adapt (or cannot adapt) reveals a great deal about their personalities. Discuss the various ways the characters react to the following situations.
 1. Chapter 7: When Lieutenant Dundy and Tom Polhaus pay a surprise visit to Spade's apartment, Cairo, Brigid, and Spade each react quite differently. How does the action of each character advance the plot?
 2. Chapter 19: Using his knife, Gutman finds that the falcon is made of lead. How do the various characters react? Do any of their actions surprise you? Why or why not?



Homework

Have students begin their essays, using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due at the next class.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Put these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Maltese Falcon*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Hammett provide through the third-person objective narration of this hard-boiled detective novel? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of Hammett's generation?

Split the class into groups. Have each group choose the single most important theme of the novel. Ask a spokesperson from each group to explain his or her decision. Write these themes on the board. Are all the groups in agreement?

Writing Exercise

If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have each student partner with another to edit outlines and rough drafts. Provide students with characteristics of a well-written essay.

Homework

Students should continue working on their essays. See the Essay Topics. For additional questions, see the Reader's Guide "Discussion Questions." Turn in outlines and rough drafts for the next class.

San Francisco in the Roaring Twenties

In 1920, more than half a million people lived in San Francisco, making it the twelfth-largest city in the United States. The city had rebuilt after the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire. As in the rest of America, many of the well-to-do were playing the stock market and drinking bootleg gin. Increases in manufacturing, especially of automobiles, were changing the American way of life. But the stock market crash of October 1929, which would herald the Great Depression, was lurking just around the corner.

All this fleeting prosperity had a flipside, and Fremont Older, editor of the *San Francisco Call*, exposed it in *My Own Story* (1919), an account of his years on that paper's city desk. An insider's look at crime on the streets of San Francisco, these terse stories, originally serialized in his newspaper, included many intimate details that could only be published after the fact. The serials mesmerized San Francisco readers with a glimpse of their city's corrupt politicians and crooked courts—a system easily glimpsed between the lines of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Geographically, the city was a different place from the one we know today. San Francisco Bay's two great bridges didn't go up until the 1930s. The 1920s were really the last decade in which the city stayed true to the one physical feature that originally induced people to settle there: namely, the greatest natural deep-water port on the West Coast. Cars were already menacing pedestrians in the city proper, the East Bay, and Marin County,

but driving from one of these places to another was virtually impossible. Instead, ferries transported people around the bay, and the Ferry Building at the foot of Market Street numbered among San Francisco's greatest landmarks. It still does today, but as a gourmet mecca, not the teeming transportation center it was during the 1920s.

With easy air travel years away, the international steamship trade accounted for most of San Francisco's foreign commerce. The Embarcadero, mostly a pedestrian and tourist destination nowadays, remained for decades a working waterfront. When Sam Spade checks the daily paper for the comings and goings of Captain Jacobi's ship in *The Maltese Falcon*, this is no exaggeration. A San Francisco newspaper in the 1920s would no sooner omit the shipping news than a radio station today would discontinue its traffic reports.

In the era of *The Maltese Falcon*, San Francisco celebrated its diamond anniversary by tucking into a banquet of prosperity and expansion, with a piping-hot side of debauchery. The stock market crash soon brought an end to what had appeared to be limitless growth for almost everyone—except, curiously, Dashiell Hammett. With the publication of *The Maltese Falcon* the following year, he was about to make his fortune as all around him were losing theirs.



Hard-Boiled Fiction and Hammett's Writing Style

Hard-boiled fiction is a literary term describing unsentimental stories and novels about violence, corruption, and sex, particularly among society's criminal element, and combining unflinching realism with an often flippant sense of humor. The name comes from hard-boiled eggs, whose last trace of softness has been thoroughly boiled out of them. The writing is gritty, understated, and tough. The stories are often set in large cities where graft and corruption are commonplace. The hard-boiled hero is usually a man at odds with society, whose motivation stems not from monetary reward but from a personal code and the search for truth.

Many hard-boiled detective novels were first published in serialized form in such pulp magazines as *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*. Popular from the 1920s through the 1950s, pulp magazines took their name from the cheap wood-pulp paper on which they were printed.

In an era before television brought entertainment into American homes, short stories were commonly popular with the public. Hammett wrote more than eighty short stories and five novels. His stories were popular in the pulps, his serialized novels found mainstream publishers, and filmmakers have enthusiastically adapted his work to the screen. He is credited with bringing detective fiction from pulp into the literary mainstream.

His crisp writing style and use of slang brought the language of the streets to the page, creating an urban realism that registered strongly with the public. He developed his style by writing case reports during his stint as an operative for the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. This “just the facts” approach colored his writing, creating highly readable, fast-moving stories. Hammett strove for the highest standard in dialogue, setting, and pacing.

Stylistically he has been compared to his contemporary Ernest Hemingway because they share a similar minimalist approach to writing. Like Hemingway, Hammett employs a spare style with plain sentence structure and fairly accessible language. Both are considered masters of dialogue. Conversations in their books convey messages beyond the literal meaning of the page's words.

But the pacing of Hammett's writing and his penchant for hairpin plot turns are what first endeared him to readers of the pulps, and later to millions of fans of detective fiction. *The Maltese Falcon* has an intricate series of plot twists, but the story is told in a straightforward, uncomplicated way. Hammett's style influenced a host of later writers of detective fiction, including Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Walter Mosley.



The Falcon as a Symbol

The Maltese falcon really existed, if not in a form Hammett’s readers would recognize. It dates back to the Knights of Malta, a religious order founded as the Knights Hospitaller in the year 1080 to provide care for poor and sick pilgrims to Jerusalem. In 1530, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain gave the Knights a large territory, including Malta, in exchange for an annual fee of a single—live, not bejeweled—Maltese falcon. Even though it has no territory today, the order survives and is considered a sovereign state, with observer status at the United Nations.

Dashiell Hammett drew on the history of the Knights of Malta when creating the plot hook for *The Maltese Falcon*. He explained this historical influence by saying simply, “Somewhere I had read of the peculiar rental agreement between Charles V and the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem.” The Crusades probably intrigued Hammett because of their mythic association with the Holy Grail, the cup used by Jesus at the last supper. The association with the Crusades subtly elevates Sam Spade to a knight on a noble errand, a ploy that intensifies the quest and, considering how ignoble many of Hammett’s characters are, mocks it at the same time.

Falconry, the sport of using trained birds to hunt small prey, dates back thousands of years. Well-trained birds were prized for their beauty, skill, and practicality. A fearsome hunter, the falcon has long been a symbol of prowess and ruthlessness—not

unlike Sam Spade, the detective who pursues it in Hammett’s novel. Early Christians borrowed pagan symbols like the falcon but altered their meaning to reflect their own values. Because they are relentless hunters, wild falcons often symbolized evil, while tamed falcons represented Christian conversion and repentance. Coats of arms from the Middle Ages often included falcons as a symbol of a pursuer, one who will not rest until his objective is achieved. This single-minded imperviousness to distraction, too, should remind readers of Spade and his fellow falcon-hunters.

A valuable prize that everyone in a story is chasing, as with Hammett’s falcon, is sometimes called a “maguffin.” Film director Alfred Hitchcock popularized the term to describe the elusive objects that so many of his heroes and villains pursued. In each case, the nature of the object is less important than how much everyone wants it.

In the book, greed destroys any hope the characters have for contented lives, yet they cannot give up the chase. They are driven by uncontrollable yearnings that eat away at their humanity and contaminate relationships. Reversing the lead-into-gold transformation familiar from alchemy, the Maltese falcon has been reduced from gold to lead, and down with it go the lives of all who vainly chase it.

