



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Maltese Falcon

by Dashiell Hammett



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Preface

Some people were surprised when *The Maltese Falcon*, a detective novel, appeared on The Big Read list. Yes, it is a detective novel—one of the best ever written. It’s also a brilliant literary work, as well as a thriller, a love story, and a dark, dry comedy. The only criticism one could offer Hammett’s private-eye classic is that it is so much fun to read, it might be hard the first time through to realize how deeply observed and morally serious it is.



“I’m one of the few—
if there are any
more—people
moderately literate
who take the
detective story
seriously.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Dashiell Hammett's third novel, *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), set the standard by which all subsequent detective fiction would be judged. Hammett's clean prose and sharp ear for dialogue produced an exceedingly readable novel with enough twists to keep the reader turning the pages in search of clues.

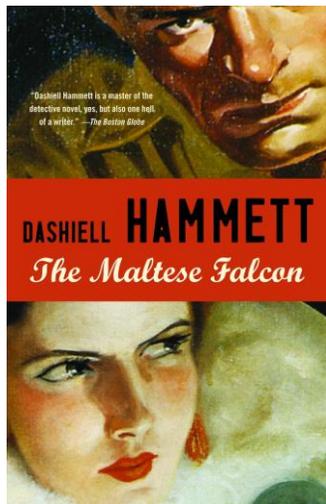
Set in San Francisco, the story takes place over a six-day period, beginning Wednesday, December 5, and ending Monday morning, December 10, 1928. A tough, independent detective, Samuel Spade is hired by the beautiful and mysterious "Miss Wonderly," who walks into his office pleading desperately for help finding her sister. This bogus job gets Spade's partner, Miles Archer, and a thug named Thursby killed that same night. Though he disliked Archer, Spade's personal moral code dictates that "when a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it."

The police question Spade's innocence because he and Archer's wife were having an affair. After Miss Wonderly summons Spade to her hotel the next day, she confesses that her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Spade knows he's being manipulated but remains uncertain about Brigid's motives.

He returns to his office, where the shadowy Joel Cairo pays a surprise visit and offers five thousand dollars for the return of a jewel-encrusted black bird.

Spade soon realizes that O'Shaughnessy, Cairo, and Cairo's boss, Casper Gutman, are all seeking an elusive falcon statuette once owned by the legendary Knights of Rhodes. Sam Spade is not a man to shy away from a fight, but he is also clever enough to play along in order to find the falcon and prove himself innocent.

Who murdered Spade's partner? Where is the Maltese falcon? Is Brigid O'Shaughnessy as guileless as she claims? Will Spade risk himself to save her? Among many other things, *The Maltese Falcon* is about what it's like to want something—a fortune, a lover, or even respect—so bad that you would kill for it, give up a chance at happiness to get it, until finally the chase itself means more to you than what you're chasing.



The Maltese Falcon is a bomb that starts ticking in the first chapter, ticks faster as it goes, and doesn't detonate until the last pitiless page.

Major Characters in the Book

Sam Spade

Cool and strong, grinning his way through his middle thirties, this cagey private detective becomes caught in a chase for the falcon after someone guns down his partner, Miles Archer, in an alley. Spade's personal code drives him to avenge the murder—though whether from honor or just good business is for readers to decide.

Miles Archer

Ten years older than Sam Spade and none too bright, Spade's lecherous partner has never noticed his wife's affair. He misses the holes in an attractive new client's story, too, and pays dearly for it.

Brigid O'Shaughnessy (aka Miss Wonderly)

The consummate femme fatale, Brigid is beautiful, manipulative, and dangerous. A compulsive liar, she tries to use her feminine wiles to charm men into believing what she says and doing what she wants.

Effie Perine

Sam Spade's secretary is devoted and trustworthy, if perhaps a little too trusting of Brigid. After Effie guards a dead body for Spade, he compliments her loyalty and grit by saying, "You're a damned good man, sister."

Joel Cairo

A polished but imperfect crook, Cairo first offers Spade money for the falcon, then holds him at gunpoint—twice—while searching his office.

Casper Gutman

Cairo's corpulent employer describes himself as a man not "easily discouraged when he wants something." His obsession has led him on a seventeen-year search for the falcon.

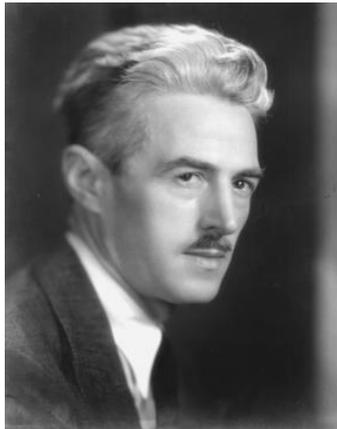
Wilmer

Gutman's sensitive young gunman has a smart mouth but not much in the way of brains. As Spade observes, "The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter."

About the Author

Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961)

It's possible that more people attended Dashiell Hammett's birth than his funeral. Samuel Dashiell Hammett was born in St. Mary's County, Maryland, on May 27, 1894, on the family farm called, with a touch of fateful poetry, Hopewell and Aim. Hammett grew to be a solitary teenager, quick to fight and hungry to read, a frequenter of libraries. The family's shaky finances obliged him to quit school at fourteen and go to work.



Dashiell Hammett, 1932
(Courtesy of Josephine Hammett)

In 1915 Hammett joined the Baltimore office of Pinkerton's National Detective Agency and subsequently filed three years of case reports, whose sparsely embellished style colored most everything Hammett ever wrote. When Hammett joined the U.S. Army in 1918, he never got closer to World War I than Camp Meade, Maryland, where he drove an ambulance until his tuberculosis led to an honorable discharge. Hammett then resumed his Pinkerton career in Washington state, where TB eventually landed him back in a military hospital.

There he met Josephine "Jose" Dolan, a nurse whose care proved so attentive that they moved to San Francisco and married in July of 1921. They welcomed their first daughter four months later. In October 1922, after a year of scribbling at the San Francisco Public Library, Hammett sent H.L. Mencken a very short story called "The Parthian Shot" for his magazine *The Smart Set*. The story was published, launching Hammett's career.

From *The Smart Set*, Hammett soon graduated to detective stories in the pulp magazine *Black Mask* about a nameless detective. In time, self-contained stories gave way to installments of serial novels, which Hammett then reworked into the books *Red Harvest* (1929) and *The Dain Curse* (1929). He published *The Maltese Falcon* in 1930, moved to New York, and wrote *The Glass Key* (1931) and *The Thin Man* (1934), his last novel.

By 1934, Hammett was written out. Though he had separated from Jose five years before and begun a lasting affair with the playwright Lillian Hellman in 1931, he remained a devoted absentee father to his girls in southern California.

More and more, Hammett concentrated his energies on politics. He gave considerable sums of money to help fight fascism in Spain, co-published a magazine called *Equality*, and gave many political speeches. In 1942, he rejoined the U.S. Army during World War II as an unhealthy forty-eight-year old private and served three years in Alaska, editing the base newspaper called *The Adakian*.

But his military service didn't save him during the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, when he spent six months in jail for contempt of court. Senator Joseph McCarthy even succeeded in yanking three hundred copies of Hammett's books from State Department libraries around the world, until they were restored by order of one highly placed fan: President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

None of this persecution was good for Hammett's ever-precarious health and finances. He died on January 10, 1961, in a New York hospital. Hellman, his sister, and three cousins buried him three days later in the military cemetery at Arlington, Virginia, roughly forty miles from his birthplace at Hopewell and Aim.

Hammett and Detective Fiction

The invention of the detective story predates the invention of the private detective by at least 2,500 years. If *Oedipus Rex*, the story of a Theban king on the trail of his father's killer, isn't a story of detection, what is? But credit for creating the first true detective probably belongs to Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), whose story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," pioneered the idea of a lone mastermind sifting clues and out-thinking everyone around him. The most popular fictional detective surely remains Sherlock Holmes, the London-based amateur sleuth created by Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930).

Dashiell Hammett, first in his short stories for *Black Mask* and later in his novels, transplanted the genteel British detective story to America and gave it an urban realism that would have baffled Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie. In the 1920s and 1930s, Hammett wrote more than eighty short stories and five novels. His crisp style and vivid slang created a gritty, street-level realism that registered strongly with the public.

Often set in large, corrupt cities, Hammett's stories tend to feature an independent-minded detective, a working man at odds with his violent society. His motivations—whether monetary reward, a search for truth, or the preservation of his integrity—remain for the reader to decide.

As Hammett's great successor Raymond Chandler wrote in his fine, funny essay "The Simple Art of Murder," Hammett "took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into

the alley.... [He] gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not with hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish."

In a phrase popularized by the great newspaperman Damon Runyon, a Hammett detective was "hardboiled": fundamentally a good egg, but far from soft. Hammett's genius lay in devising a style to match his masculine heroes. Even more than his heirs Chandler, James M. Cain, and Ross Macdonald, Hammett never wasted an adjective, refining a tightly visual vocabulary until everything inessential was boiled away.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Dashiell Hammett

1890s

- 1894: Samuel Dashiell Hammett is born in Maryland.

1900s

- 1905: Tsarist soldiers kill hundreds of petitioners in St. Petersburg, helping light the fuse for the Russian Revolution of 1917.
- At age fourteen, Hammett quits school and bounces from job to job, ending up at the famous Pinkerton's detective agency.

1910s

- World War I begins in 1914; armistice signed on November 11, 1918.
- Hammett joins the U.S. Army in 1918, lasting only four months before bronchial attacks lead to his discharge in 1919.
- 1919: Influenza outbreak subsides, after killing as many as 100 million people worldwide.

1920s

- 1920: The 18th Amendment, establishing Prohibition, becomes law.
- 1921: Hammett marries Josephine "Jose" Dolan, with whom he soon has two daughters.
- 1922: Hammett leaves Pinkerton and starts writing stories for pulp magazine *Black Mask*.
- 1929: Hammett publishes *Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse* and writes *The Maltese Falcon*.
- 1929: Stock market crashes, triggering the Great Depression.

1930s

- 1930: Hammett finishes *The Glass Key* and publishes *The Maltese Falcon*.
- Franklin Delano Roosevelt elected U.S. president, 1932; Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany, 1933.
- 1934: Hammett's last novel, *The Thin Man*, is inspired and perhaps partly cowritten by Lillian Hellman.
- 1939: In detective fiction's greatest leap since Hammett, Raymond Chandler introduces private eye Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*.

1940s

- Japanese forces bomb Pearl Harbor in 1941; America enters World War II. The Axis surrenders, 1945.
- 1941: John Huston writes and directs *The Maltese Falcon*, starring Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade.
- 1942: Hammett re-enlists in the U.S. Army, spending much of World War II editing a base newspaper in the Aleutian Islands.
- 1946: The Civil Rights Congress of New York elects Hammett its president.

1950s

- 1950: Senator Joseph McCarthy brandishes a list of alleged Communists in the State Department, heralding the dawn of the Cold War.
- 1951: Hammett refuses to testify in court about his Communist associations; he is sentenced to six months in jail for contempt.
- 1953: Dwight D. Eisenhower is inaugurated U.S. president, ushering in a period of economic prosperity.

Other Works/Adaptations

Hammett and His Other Works

Like many writers, Hammett came nearest to autobiography at his career's beginning. In his first published story, "The Parthian Shot," Hammett featured a woman who leaves her family and heads west. When he wrote it in 1922, Hammett himself had already moved from New York to San Francisco. Within a few years he would leave his own family, although he'd continue to financially support his two daughters.

After this early sketch, Hammett's next breakthrough came a year later with the publication in *Black Mask* of "Arson Plus," his first story about an unnamed Continental Detective Agency operative (known for short as "the Continental Op"). Over the next few years, Hammett introduced several elements all but new to detective fiction: realism, nihilism, fallible detectives, and slang—both overheard and invented.

"The Big Knock-Over" (1927) was Hammett's longest story yet, and soon he tried out a serial novel in *Black Mask*. Serialization gave Hammett the chance to work over the novel twice, first in magazine installments, and later as the book *Red Harvest* (1929). There he brought back "the Continental Op" as an amoral antihero, a loner who rides into a corrupt town and calmly goes about setting two rival gangs at each other's throats.

That same year brought another serial novel, *The Dain Curse* (1929), in which "the Op" rescues a young woman from morphine addiction and no fewer than eight related murder raps. This new chivalry showed Hammett chafing against the character limitations of his anonymous corporate operative.

Along with *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Glass Key* (1931) contains some of Hammett's best, toughest writing. The story of a political fixer's eventual disillusionment with his boss, it's more of a gangster novel than a mystery.

Hammett created perhaps his most romantic characters in *The Thin Man* (1934): Nick and Nora Charles, two wisecracking socialites who investigate crimes between highballs. Hammett dedicated *The Thin Man* to the playwright Lillian Hellman, and a few have suggested that Hellman wrote more of it than he did.

In fact, according to scholar Richard Layman, Hammett wrote more of Hellman's plays than she ever wrote of his novels. Hammett gave her the idea for her first Broadway play, *The Children's Hour* (1934), and worked closely with her on several others. As a novelist, though, despite several false starts on a non-mystery called "Tulip," *The Thin Man* would stand as Hammett's own premature parting shot.

Selected Works by Dashiell Hammett

- *Red Harvest*, 1929
- *The Dain Curse*, 1929
- *The Maltese Falcon*, 1930
- *The Glass Key*, 1931
- *The Thin Man*, 1934
- *Crime Stories and Other Writings*, 2001

Hammett and the Falcon at the Movies

Hollywood and *The Maltese Falcon* have at least this much in common: They're each consumed with the pursuit of a foot-high golden statuette. Hammett probably deserved at least a shared Oscar for the 1941 movie, since most of its dialogue comes straight from the book, but his only nomination came for a different film years later. Even without *The Maltese Falcon*, Hollywood has Hammett to thank for more than a few good movies, and possibly an entire genre.

Filmmakers have adapted all of Hammett's novels at least once. Decades after Ben Hecht adapted *Red Harvest* as *Roadhouse Nights* (1930), Akira Kurosawa turned it into a samurai story in *Yojimbo* (1961), and Sergio Leone found in it the makings of his first spaghetti western, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). Paramount had a crack at *The Glass Key* in 1935 with George Raft and made it again in 1942, a bit better, with Alan Ladd. *The Thin Man* film series immortally paired William Powell and Myrna Loy as Hammett's husband-and-wife crime solvers through one superior and several inferior sequels. TV writer Robert Lenski turned *The Dain Curse* into an eminently watchable 1978 miniseries, with James Coburn miscast but well tailored as Hammett's "Continental Op."

Nevertheless, just as Hammett's literary reputation rests on one book above all, his movie legacy rests principally on one picture. John Huston adapted *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) with scrupulous fidelity to the book, knowing just where to cut and what to emphasize. He drew impeccable performances from a dark, wounded Humphrey Bogart, somehow perfect as Hammett's blond Sam Spade, and all the rest of his cast. It's a flawless movie, and film noir is unthinkable without it.

Film noir is shorthand for those doom-laden, black-and-white but mostly black crime stories that suddenly appeared on American screens in the 1940s. A few critics insist film noir started with an obscure, enjoyable Peter Lorre movie called *The Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), whose script the novelist Nathanael West helped write, but almost everybody else traces it to *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). This lineage makes Hammett at least the godfather of every noir, from *Double Indemnity* (1944) to *The Usual Suspects* (1995), whose ending is unmistakably lifted by screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie from Hammett's great long story "The Big Knock-Over."

So what movie earned Hammett his Academy Award nomination? Try *Watch on the Rhine* (1943), which he and Lillian Hellman adapted from her play, and which nobody

would call his best work. Its script deservedly lost the Oscar to *Casablanca* (1942). Perhaps Dashiell Hammett's most iconic monument rests in a place of honor at the Copyright Department of the Library of Congress: a black bird, machined as a prop for *The Maltese Falcon*, made of lead but worth its weight in gold.

Discussion Questions

1. *The Maltese Falcon* centers on detective Sam Spade, a character almost as elusive as the falcon itself. What aspects of his personality remain mysterious? Which of his choices retain their ambiguity?
2. Why does Sam Spade take the case, even though he suspects that "Miss Wonderly" is lying?
3. What kind of vision does *The Maltese Falcon* present of urban America? How important is San Francisco as the novel's setting?
4. The reader discovers some parts of the mystery at the same time as the detective, and other parts much later. At what point did you solve the crime?
5. Is Sam Spade a hero? How would you describe his personal moral code in a violent world?
6. Why might Hammett avoid describing any of the novel's murders in detail?
7. What do the novel's three women—Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Effie Perine, and Iva Archer—have in common? How different are their personalities and motivations?
8. In the 1930s and '40s mostly male writers adapted the femme fatale—a foxy, dangerous woman—to crime stories. How might a woman have written Brigid differently?
9. What motivates Sam Spade to find the falcon? Is he tempted by money or Brigid, or does he merely love the chase?
10. Does any character change or grow in *The Maltese Falcon*?
11. Are Sam Spade's actions in the novel's final scene consistent with his character? What would you have done in his place?
12. Although the reader is never privy to the thoughts of Hammett's characters, what might the falcon symbolize to each of them based on their actions?

Additional Resources

Resources on Hammett and *The Maltese Falcon*

- Brucoli, Matthew J., and Richard Layman. *Hardboiled Mystery Writers: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald: A Literary Reference*. 1989. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2002.
- Hammett, Jo. *Dashiell Hammett: A Daughter Remembers*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001.
- Johnson, Diane. *Dashiell Hammett: A Life*. New York: Random House, 1983.
- Layman, Richard, ed. *Discovering The Maltese Falcon and Sam Spade*. Rev. ed. San Francisco, CA: Vince Emery Productions, 2005.
- Layman, Richard. *Shadow Man: The Life of Dashiell Hammett*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.
- Layman, Richard, and Julie M. Rivett, eds. *Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001.
- Nolan, William F. *Hammett: A Life at the Edge*. New York: Congdon & Weed, 1983.

If you liked *The Maltese Falcon*, you might enjoy:

- James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 1934
- Dorothy B. Hughes's *In a Lonely Place*, 1947
- Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, 1953
- Ross Macdonald's *The Chill*, 1964
- P. D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, 1972

If you're interested in seeing other classic film noir, you might enjoy:

- *The Stranger on the Third Floor*, 1940
- *Double Indemnity*, 1944
- *The Big Sleep*, 1946
- *Kiss Me Deadly*, 1955
- *Touch of Evil*, 1958

Credits

Works Consulted

Brucoli, Matthew J., and Richard Layman, eds. *Hardboiled Mystery Writers: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald: A Literary Reference*. 1989. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2002.

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