

Introduction to Crime Fiction

Prof. Andrew Goldstone

(andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu)

TA: Anthony Tello (anthony.tello@rutgers.edu)

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how to write about literature: motive and thesis

Like the city it depicts, *The Big Sleep* has always appeared a labyrinthine and immensely tangled text. (McCann, 170)

At its heart, *The Big Sleep* is a gothic tale of the way that the wealthy survive by leeching the vitality of the forthright and honest. (170)

how to write about literature: evidence

Like those wells, too, the novel's patriarch, General Sternwood, is the almost lifeless "survival of a rather gaudy life"—a man whose "thin bloodless hands" signify the skeletal remains of nearly depleted natural resources (6, 7).

Like Carmen, Vivian Sternwood shares the attributes of the vampiric woman. Her face is "taut, pale"; her "dark parted hair was part of the darkness of the night"; her lips are "red and harsh"... (87, 89).

Marlowe makes the point more clearly later when he asks the Sternwoods' butler: "What did this Regan fellow have that bored into [the General] so?" The butler replies, "Youth...[SM's] and the soldier's eye." Like his daughters...General Sternwood yearns in virtually erotic terms to receive the violent masculine energy of an authentic lower order...(130).

McCann, 167, 168, 169.

how to write about literature: line of thinking

1. The basic terms of Chandler's novel: the contrast between the "earthy and vulgar" matter of bodily appetites and an immaterial "fiscal system" (167)
2. Wealth stems less from production than from predation (168)
3. Carmen is literally a "predatory" figure (168)
4. More subtly, Chandler suggests similar qualities in her father and her sister....The General resembles the predatory female beasts of turn-of-the-century fantasy (168)
5. The only way to avoid the vampirism that kills Regan, Chandler suggests, is to live the life of Marlowe (170)
6. In *The Big Sleep* and in *Farewell, My Lovely*, that hope [of saving the exploited "forgotten man"] has largely disappeared (170)

review: bros

“Did you know that worms are of both sexes and that any worm can love any other worm?” (191)

“I took a fancy to that boy.” (214; guess who)

He pushed a shiny print across the desk and I looked at an Irish face that was more sad than merry and more reserved than brash. Not the face of a tough guy and not the face of a man who could be pushed around by anybody. (123)

“Well, you fooled him, Harry,” I said out loud, in a voice that sounded **queer** to me. “You lied to him and you drank your cyanide like a little gentleman. You died like a poisoned rat, Harry, but you’re no rat to me.” (178)

The butler looked at me levelly and yet with a **queer** lack of expression. “Youth, sir,” he said. “And the soldier’s eye.” (215; cf. McCann)

one last tryst

A private world for Canino and me. (199)

He whirled at me. Perhaps it would have been nice to allow him another shot or two, just like a gentleman of the old school. But his gun was still up and I couldn't wait any longer....He reached both his hands for his stomach. I could hear them smack hard against his body. (202)

person of color

The man in brown said pleasantly...

“Take two jacks, Art,” the brown man said...

The brown man moved his eyes...

“That Art,” the brown man said. “He’s like all mechanics.”...

The brown man looked at the big car...

The brown man laughed...

The brown man and I were two strangers chance-met. (186–88)

(He found Canino’s thumb print on it, the only print the brown man had left to back up my story.) (208)

man of honor (redux)

“Now you offer me fifteen grand. That makes me a big shot. With fifteen grand I could own a home and a new car and a four suits of clothes. I might even take a vacation without worrying about losing a case. That’s fine. What are you offering it to me for? Can I go on being a son of a bitch, or do I have to become a gentleman, like that lush that passed out in his car the other night?” (228)

whodunit (redux)

- ▶ Try to make a table of bodies and murderers. What does it mean?

whodunit (redux)

- Try to make a table of bodies and murderers. What does it mean?

victim	killer
Arthur Geiger	Owen Taylor
Owen Taylor	...?????????
Joe Brody	Carol Lundgren
Harry Jones	Lash Canino
Lash Canino	Philip Marlowe
Rusty Regan	Carmen Sternwood
Guy Sternwood	Death, eventually

victim	killer	<i>fabula</i> order
Arthur Geiger	Owen Taylor	2
Owen Taylor	...????????	3
Joe Brody	Carol Lundgren	4
Harry Jones	Lash Canino	5
Lash Canino	Philip Marlowe	6
Rusty Regan	Carmen Sternwood	1
Guy Sternwood	Death, eventually	7

I remember several years ago when Howard Hawks was making *The Big Sleep*, the movie, he and Bogart got into an argument as to whether one of the characters was murdered or committed suicide. They sent me a wire asking me, and dammit I didn't know either.

Letter to Hamish Hamilton, March 21, 1949, in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. Dorothy Gardner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 221, [ACLS Humanities E-Books](#).

This trail of bloodshed is a false scent, designed to draw the reader's attention to guilt in the wrong places. The diversion is not dishonest, inasmuch as the guilt uncovered along the way is also real enough; the latter is simply not that with which the book is directly involved.

Fredric Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (London: Verso, 2016), 25.

justice

- ▶ Is justice served?

justice

► Is justice served?

Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights. (156)

[Capt. Gregory:] “Being a copper I like to see the law win....I'd like to see the flashy well-dressed muggs like Eddie Mars spoiling their manicures in the rock quarry at Folsom... You and me both lived too long to think I'm likely to see it happen. Not in this town, not in any town half this size, in any part of this wide, green and beautiful U.S.A. We just don't run our country that way.” (204)

Me, I was part of the nastiness now. (230)

the moral of the story is...

There takes place in Chandler a de-mystification of violent death.

Jameson, 28.

“What happened?” she gasped.

“Nothing. Why?”

“Oh, yes it did,” she giggled. “I wet myself.”

“They always do,” I said. (220)

next

- ▶ *The Big Sleep*, dir. Howard Hawks. Watch closely:
 - ▶ cinematography: camera angle, focus, tracking (camera movement), zoom;
 - ▶ editing: length of shots, use and type of cuts, relation of one shot to the next;
 - ▶ mise-en-scène: sets, lighting and shadow; costumes, makeup, blocking (where actors stand on the set), props; acting (expression, motion, delivery);
 - ▶ sound: diegetic sound (sound in the “world” of the story); music; overall sonic texture (noisy / quiet / dissonant...); sound editing (amplification, distortion...)
- ▶ something about a paper, I can't remember