

DREAMS, PARABLES AND HALLUCINATIONS: THE METAPHORICAL INTERLUDES IN DASHIELL HAMMETT'S NOVELS

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Dashiell Hammett has generally been regarded as the creator of «realistic» detective fiction ever since Raymond Chandler used his works in «The Simple Art of Murder» as the main argument against classic detective fiction:

Hammett . . . was one of a group –the only one who achieved critical recognition– who wrote or tried to write realistic mystery fiction . . . [he] took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley . . . gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse . . . He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk in the language they customarily used for these purposes. (13-15)

Chandler's views were based on Hammett's own statements on the pages of *Black Mask*, where he reminded readers that his stories were based on his first-hand experience with crime and criminals as opposed to fictional detectives like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or S.S. Van Dine's Philo Vance.

But we should not overlook the fact that Hammett had worked in the advertising industry before joining *Black Mask*, and that he knew very well how to sell a product, including literary products like his own stories. Accordingly, his editor Joseph Shaw wrote introductions to his stories, where he emphasized their «reality»: «If you kill a symbol, no crime is committed and no effect is produced. To constitute a murder, the victim must be a real human being of flesh and blood» (vi); Hammett himself supported this marketing strategy writing letters to the editor, as well as introductions and reviews where he used his past as a detective as his main asset to sell his stories and to contrast his realistic detectives and criminals with their fictitious

counterparts. This image of Hammett as a realistic writer is reinforced by his own statements in a 1940 lecture, although here from a Marxist perspective: «The contemporary novelist's job is to take pieces of life and arrange them on paper, and the more direct their passage from street to paper the more lifelike they should turn out» («Tempo and the Contemporary Novel» 57).

In this paper I will attempt to challenge this commonly accepted notion of Hammett as a realist focusing on a literary device that he used in all his novels: the inclusion of metaphorical interludes where he tried to overcome the limitations that the detective formula and his own hard-boiled style were imposing on his fiction. I will try to demonstrate that these interludes, whether they are parables, dreams or hallucinations, act as symbols and messages between the characters and are clues to the reader about the real meaning of the novels.

Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest*, was initially published in episodes in *Black Mask*. Each episode lays out a mystery which is solved at the end, while at the same time developing a plot about the «cleansing» of Personville, a city in Montana which has been taken over by criminals with the connivance of a corrupt police force. The story is narrated by the Continental Op, a detective who becomes involved in the violence of the city to such an extent that even his own colleagues end up deserting him. The Op had been used by Hammett in most of his previous detective stories, and had already become a prototype of the hard-boiled detective: tough, unsentimental, and with very personal ethics. And as a narrator, his tough personality allowed for a concise, colloquial language full of understatement as well as a detached, objective outlook on facts, which was very appropriate for the events described.

The story is realistic in terms of the description of violence and language used, but it also has an obvious allegorical subtext. The name of the city («Personville», but frequently mispronounced as «Poisonville») suggests its function as a fictional microcosm of the whole society, a society which, as the mispronunciation suggests, is poisoned by corruption and violence. These two levels of the story are linked in two hallucinations which also offer the reader an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the psychological reality inside the Op's mind behind his tough protective shell. The Op has been drinking gin and laudanum with Dinah Brand, a prostitute with whom he has entertained a very close relationship, until he passes out and starts to suffer hallucinations. In the first one, he is sitting on a bench with a veiled woman, somebody he knows well but whose name he is unable to remember. She leaves suddenly and he starts chasing her through streets that belong to several cities in the United States. He hears her call a name, although not his, but can't find her. Finally, tired and discouraged, he sits down in the lobby of a hotel. Eventually, she comes over to him and begins kissing him, which makes him feel embarrassed: «I was very uncomfortable because everybody stood around looking at us and laughing» (107).

The second hallucination also describes a chase, but in this case, «I dreamed I was in a strange city hunting for a man I hated. I had an open knife in my pocket and meant to kill him with it when I found him» (107). When he sees his enemy, a foreign-looking man with an egg-shaped head, he runs after him, treading on the heads and shoulders of the people standing in the square. The chase ends on the roof of a building, where the Op ends up falling off the edge while embracing his enemy and

trying to kill him. The hallucination ends in disaster: «We dropped giddily down toward the millions of upturned faces in the plaza, miles down» (108). When the Op wakes up, he finds his right hand holding an ice pick whose blade is buried in Dinah Brand's corpse.

These hallucinations have two clear functions. On the one hand, they are distorted perceptions of reality, misinterpretations of the events that were taking place while the Op was drugged. As such, they are part of the «whodunit» and offer clues to the reader as to the real nature of Dinah Brand's murderer. As we all find out at the end of the novel, and as the perceptive reader may suspect, there was indeed another person with the Op and Dinah, Dinah called out somebody else's name, there was a knife (the ice pick) involved, and the Op fought with a man.¹ It was not the first time that Hammett had used a similar device. In fact, in a couple of his earlier stories we find extremely subjective descriptions of violent scenes where the Op's focalization does not allow the narrator or the reader to ascertain exactly what is going on, which results in a very effective narrative immersion into the fight:

Down my spine ran jar after jar. Perhaps somebody was beating me over the head. I don't know. My head wasn't alive. The blow that had knocked me down had numbed me all over. My eyes were no good. Shadows swam to and fro in front of them –that was all. I struck, gouged, tore at the shadows. Sometimes I found nothing. Sometimes I found things that felt like parts of bodies. Then I would hammer at them, tear at them. («One Hour» 50)

But in *Red Harvest* the hallucinations are also clues as to the real nature of the Op and as to his attitudes towards love and death. Without getting into further psychoanalytical interpretations, any *Black Mask* reader would have perceived the identification between hunter and hunted which ends up in their joint destruction, or the Op's lack of scruples suggested by his stepping on the by-standers. We have to remember that the chapter where the hallucinations are described is aptly titled «The Seventeenth Murder», thus reminding the reader that, as a consequence of the Op's meddling in the city's affairs, the gangs have been fighting against each other and have reaped a «red harvest» of sixteen corpses. The Op actually gets drunk because of his

1. It is interesting to note that on this level, the level of the detective formula, Hammett is accepting the rule of «fair play», i.e., he is offering these clues to the reader just as his detective is looking at them, thus finding a solution to the problem of the lack of a «watson» figure. In most of the classical examples of the formula, the author uses a «watson» as narrator, a character who accompanies the detective and tells his stories from a close, but external, perspective. Using the detective as narrator allows for an interesting narrative voice but makes it difficult for the writer to play according to the «fair» rules of the game: the detective must withhold his own thoughts and suspicions or the reader might find the solution to the riddle too quickly. In the Op's case, his own tough personality makes it easy for the reader to accept the lack of explanations, but it is more difficult to see inside the narrator's mind. Hammett uses these hallucinations as a door into the subconscious without breaking the «fair play» rules or the hard-boiled code of conduct.

feelings of guilt: «I've arranged a death or two in my time, when it was necessary. But this is the first time I've ever had the killing fever . . . Play with enough murder, and it gets you one of two ways. It makes you sick, or you get to like it» (102). The Op actually justifies his unjustifiable behavior blaming the city itself («It's this damned burg. You can't go straight here», 102), but the reader is able to think otherwise and perceive two voices in the story: the Op's, which justifies his own acts as nothing else but a job which had to be done, and Hammett's, which is offering a critique of the hard-boiled hero, as he had been doing in some of his earlier non-detective stories.² It is precisely in this sense that the hallucinations play a crucial role: we can see an image of identification of the Op with crime that leads him to his own death. In the act of taking the law into his own hands to murder his enemy, he kills himself, a metaphor of the moral destruction the Op is undergoing in *Red Harvest*. It is no wonder therefore that when he wakes up, he himself turns out to be the main suspect of Dinah Brand's murder. Neither the Op nor the reader is able to know whether he has committed this crime or not, and the rest of the novel is a desperate search for the truth and his own innocence.

The intensity of this hunt is reinforced by the nature of the relationship between the Op and Dinah. The tough hero's stoic character would never allow him to admit his feelings, but the text offers several clues to the reader as to the real nature of the relationship. Dinah is in fact a very atypical *femme fatale*, a rough female version of the hard-boiled hero with whom the Op maintains a very affectionate relationship throughout the novel. The Op is supposedly using her as a source of information, but the camaraderie and confidences between them suggest a deeper relationship, as do other characters' comments or dialogues like the following. The Op and Dinah are hiding in the forest and watching a suspicious hut:

I spread the blanket there and we settled down.

The girl leaned against me and complained that the ground was damp, that she was cold in spite of her fur coat, that she had a cramp in her leg, and that she wanted a cigarette.

I gave her another drink from the flask. That bought me ten minutes of peace.

Then she said:

«I'm catching cold. By the time anybody comes, if they ever do, I'll be sneezing and coughing loud enough to be heard in the city».

«Just once» I told her. «Then you'll be strangled».

«There's a mouse or something crawling under the blanket».

2. In his very first short story, «The Barber and his Wife», Hammett wrote about a macho character who lost his wife by behaving according to the hard-boiled stereotype. And in other short stories («Afraid of a Gun», «The Man Who Killed Dan Odams», «Ruffian's Wife», or «Ber Bulu»), he explored the contradictions within the tough hero of westerns or adventure stories. As these stories show, Hammett was interested both in the creation of the hard-boiled hero and in the deconstruction of some of the features of the fictional stereotype.

«Probably only a snake».
 «Are you married?».
 «Aw, don't start that!».
 «Then you are?».
 «No».
 «I'll bet your wife's glad of it».

I was trying to find a come-back for that wise-crack when a distant light gleamed up the road. (93)

These dialogues may remind the reader of the relationship between Nick and Nora in *The Thin Man*, or the dialectical competition of the protagonists of «screwball comedies» in contemporary Hollywood. To this we should add that, although there is no reference to sex, there is an ellipsis of a whole night inside the hut they had been watching that the reader would undoubtedly have understood correctly.

Furthermore, the first hallucination offers some additional psychological insight into the relationship. On the one hand, the Op knows the «veiled» woman very well, but he is unable to remember her name, suggesting an incomplete, somehow immature relationship, with veils or barriers between them. And on the other hand, he is able to look for her across several cities in the United States (another allegory about the role of Personville as a symbol of the whole country), but he can't admit his feelings openly, and is therefore embarrassed by her kissing him in public. Some critics have been puzzled by the Op's reaction when he discovers Dinah's corpse: he does not make a comment and starts to coldly analyze the room and the features of the corpse. But his reaction should not surprise us: he is acting professionally, precisely as his code has taught him throughout years of facing murder, and therefore follows the routine that he knows will help him solve the mystery. This does not mean that he lacks feelings; in fact, if we consider the novel as a whole, most of the violence is motivated by his feelings, in particular by his hatred and desire for revenge against the corrupt chief of police. What happens here is that the hard-boiled hero's code of conduct does not allow him to *express* those feelings, because he would appear a vulnerable character. Thus, the hallucinations act as an escape valve to let the reader understand those feelings and escape the constraints of the hard-boiled code and the first-person narrative voice, and therefore offer the reader another way of considering the Op's attitude towards love and death.

Apart from this dual function, both as clues to the «whodunit» and as insight into the real nature of the Op, some critics have suggested deeper meanings. William Marling, for instance, has stressed their role as quests:

the first, for a personal emotional life, ends in shame; the second, for a man (reflecting the Op's occupation), ends in death. Taken sequentially, the allegorical thrust of the dreams is that the admission of emotion leads to death. The Op has been warned, like heroes of Grail quests, by «supernatural» means after taking a potion (he is drugged with laudanum). (120)

Alternatively, James F. Maxfield has offered a Jungian interpretation which links the first dream to the Op's «anima», or feminine intuitive side of his nature, and the second dream to the Op's «shadow» or more primitive, destructive impulses within him. Besides, there are several images of life and death in the hallucinations (the veil as a symbol of death in the one about life-engendering love, the egg-shaped head as a symbol of life in the one about death) which suggest the contradictions and confusion in the Op's moral values: if the only act he can accomplish is an act of death instead of an act of love, and if both chases end up in frustration and death, the Op appears on a symbolic level as morally responsible for Dinah's murder, even if he can find the real murderer. In fact, since her death is another result of the «red harvest» started by the Op, he is never completely cleared of guilt.

Encouraged by his success in *Red Harvest*, Hammett decided to try the same procedure in his second novel, but he failed to achieve similar effects. *The Dain Curse* is a very peculiar detective novel, which has been considered «postmodern» (Gatenby) because of its metafictional games and its epistemological overtones. In it, Hammett was trying to play with one of the conventions of the detective genre, the fact that the whole story must be reinterpreted at the end by the detective, who appears, therefore, as the depository of the Truth, the definitive version of the facts: «I am a detective. I know everything», said the Op quite cynically in his short story «Dead Yellow Women» (39). Hammett was a skeptical man, and in this novel he tried to play with this convention and show that in literature as in life that kind of absolute Truth does not exist. Therefore, he sends off his detective to try to solve riddles that need to be reinterpreted again and again, until even the last interpretation seems to be only an informed guess. The use of hallucinations and visions seemed to be a good device to try to explore this subject and show the contradictions between reality and fiction, so Hammett decided to use it again in one of the Op's cases, a con game disguised as a cult based on the so-called Temple of the Holy Grail.

In this Temple, the detective is made to breathe poisonous gas and starts to suffer a sort of hallucination, described by the Op in a style which has been linked with the «stream of consciousness» (Marling *Dashiell Hammett*, 59) and which, as shown before, he had already tried in the description of fights in his short stories:

I shook my head, trying to clear it of the muddle settling there. Lilies-of-the-valley, moonflowers –flowers that had died– was honeysuckle one of the flowers? The question seemed to be important. The flashlight was heavy in my hand, too heavy. Hell with it: I let it drop. (202)

Under the effect of the gas he is breathing he sees a kind of supernatural being (the chapter is titled «God») with whom he tries to fight:

Not more than three feet away, there in the black room, a pale bright thing like a body, but not like flesh, stood writhing before me.

It was tall, yet not so tall as it seemed, because it did not stand on the floor, but hovered with its feet a foot or more above the floor. Its feet –it had feet, but I don't know what their shape was. They had no shape, just as its legs and torso, arms and hands, head and face had no shape, no fixed form. They writhed, swelling and contracting, stretching and shrinking, not greatly, but without pause. (202)

However, compared to the polysemous hallucination in *Red Harvest*, this passage is hiding only a slightly distorted perception of reality, because this «ghost» is actually nothing more than an «arrangement of lights thrown up on steam rising from a padded pipe that had been pushed into a dark room through a concealed opening in the wainscoting under a bed» (210). The Op's function is therefore similar to the classical detective's: just to denounce and explain what had been taken as a supernatural mystery through the use of reason.

Besides this straightforward, and somewhat disappointing, use of hallucinations, Hammett attempted in *The Dain Curse* the use of another type of interlude, in this case a message between characters, which he would later develop more successfully in *The Maltese Falcon*. This technique is actually part of the metafictional game taking place in the novel, in which Hammett is placing his hard-boiled detective in the context of a classical detective setting: a wealthy detached house where the crimes, the confrontation with the villain and the revelation of «truth» take place. Fitting perfectly in this setting, the detective finds a letter that the dead Mr. Legget had written before dying, a «message from the grave» which had become a standard device in classical detective fiction. In this letter, the deceased tells a romantic, adventurous story of murder, betrayal, prison and escapes with clear echoes of Dumas and French popular fiction. The letter is first interpreted as a suicide note, but the Op reinterprets it later as only the confession of a run-away. It will only be in the final chapter that the writing of this letter will be interpreted as one more of the mischievous schemes of the villain.

Although the story works well on the «whodunit» level of the plot, it does not seem to add any further metaphorical meanings, and it is only another piece in the metafictional game that Hammett is playing with his readers: the letter is interpreted again and again, and even the validity of the final interpretation is undermined and presented as another fiction created by the detective. However, the idea of using the frame of a message between his characters for his interludes probably gave Hammett the idea for a much more successful instance of this in *The Maltese Falcon*.

In this novel, without any previous warning, the detective, Samuel Spade, starts telling the main suspect, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, an enigmatic story about a man named Flitcraft who once left his job and his family to vanish into thin air. Spade was assigned to the case and he found him by chance a few years later happily married again and leading the same kind of life he had left behind. His explanation was that the day he disappeared he had suffered an accident that had almost killed him: a beam from a building site had fallen and smacked the sidewalk beside him. This near-accident made him think about life and death:

The life he knew was a clean orderly responsible affair. Now a falling beam had shown him that life was fundamentally none of these things. He, the good citizen-husband-father, could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam. He knew that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them. (336)

The man decided to adjust himself to this new vision of life: «Life could be ended for him at random by a falling beam: he would change his life at random by simply going away» (336). Therefore, he decided to drift away until he finally found another job and a new wife, only miles away from his first family. And this is Spade's favorite part and his last and only comment: «He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling» (336). After telling the story, Spade interrupts it as abruptly as he had started it, offering no interpretation, while Brigid's only response is to say «How perfectly fascinating!» (336).

William Marling has traced the origins of this narrative to a character called Norman Ashcraft in a 1924 story called «The Golden Horseshoe» and to the biblical parable of the prodigal son (*Roman Noir* 126-147). Like Flitcraft, Ashcraft also leaves his wife to lead a new life. But unlike Flitcraft, Ashcraft is a prodigal son who does not come back to his previous kind of life, but ends up committing suicide. The parable has also been related to Hammett's own personal situation, since he had left his wife and daughters behind only a few months before publishing the novel. Finally, this story may also remind the reader of Hammett's «From the Memoirs of a Private Detective», a collection of personal anecdotes as paradoxical as the Flitcraft story itself.

Every Hammett critic has tried his hand at interpreting this enigmatic parable with extremely contradictory results. There are critics who assume that the meaning of the parable is that Spade is just *like* Flitcraft (Ross Macdonald for example calls Spade «Flitcraft's spiritual twin», 204), whereas others infer that Spade is completely *unlike* Flitcraft: «Spade is saying that to be truly alive one must be aware of how tenuous life is, and that he is not like Flitcraft, who forgot about death's constant threat and returned to his secure life-style» (Charland 211). In fact, the ambiguity of the story fits perfectly well with the ambiguous personality of its narrator, who has been called «an unscrupulous rogue and a heartless crook» (Maugham 126) as well as «the apotheosis of the everyman of good will . . . everyman's romantic conception of himself» (Paterson 31).

What many critics have overlooked is that the parable is not just a story for the reader, but a message from Spade to Brigid in a book full of stories told by characters who are fighting a dialectical battle and are always trying to deceive each other. In fact, these kinds of stories could be considered a convention of detective fiction, since the investigator's main role is to find the truth underneath the contradictions in the characters' stories. Other examples in this novel are Gutman's or Cairo's stories about the Falcon, or Brigid's false story about her sister. In narratological terms, we are dealing with a hypodiegetic narrative embedded in another diegetic narrative. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan considers three main functions for hypodiegetic narratives:

actional (to maintain or advance the action of the first narrative), explicative (to offer an explanation of the diegetic level) and thematic (to establish relations of analogy, similarity and contrast). Adapting this scheme to our purposes, we should ask ourselves three questions concerning the Flitcraft parable: «Why does Spade tell Brigid this story?», «What does the story tell the reader about the characters?» and «What does the story say about Hammett's view of life?». Most critics have concentrated on the last question, assuming that the parable encapsulates Hammett's philosophical vision, and have overlooked the fact that we are dealing with a multifunctional narrative.

What makes this hypodiegetic story so flexible and ambiguous is that it is an open parable, a parable without a moral, which at first leaves the reader as perplexed as Brigid because of its apparent lack of connection with the main narrative. However, the parable is only superficially open, because Hammett provides its closure when the book comes to its climatic end: the moral is understood by the reader and Brigid at the same time, when Spade decides to turn her over to the police. So, answering our first question, the reason for Spade telling his story to Brigid is to warn her that he, like Flitcraft, is adaptive, that he adjusts to circumstance; that there are no absolute values except those which lead to personal survival; and that, depending on the turn-out of events, he might take the money and the girl or he might, as he does in the end, turn her over to the police and go back to his office and his relationship with Iva Archer. In other words, the message is anticipating the reasons he gives at the end of the book for sending her to prison: he is telling her in a deliberately obscure and very ironic manner that he «won't play the sap for her», that she should not be too sure that he is as «crooked as [he is] supposed to be» (439). Brigid, of course, pretends not to have understood the moral of the story until the very end, when Spade hands her over to the police.

Therefore, the denouement is also helping us to answer our second question: the parable is suggesting to the reader that Spade is not a clear-cut hero, but a complex character with very personal ethics, thus reinforcing his characterization as a «blond Satan», as Hammett suggests in the very first lines of the book, or as a «daemonic agent» who plays with his victimizer-turned-victim, as Robert Edenbaum puts it. The parable fulfills thus a similar function to the Op's hallucination in *Red Harvest*, opening the door to the possibility of a guilty hero, and thus turning the personality of the detective into one of the most important elements of the «whodunit». Only with this complexity in mind (frequently forgotten because of the influence of the Humphrey Bogart icon in Huston's adaptation of the novel) is it possible to understand the list of reasons that Spade enumerates for sending her to prison. Any other detective would not have needed to justify why he is sending his partner's cold-blooded murderer to jail, but the Flitcraft parable, together with other elements like Hammett's extremely objective narrative method or the development of the plot itself, had opened the door to the complexity of a character whose ambiguous ethics do not allow the reader to take for granted a conventional response to crime.

And finally, the parable does say something about Hammett's existentialist view of life and the universe: «men died at haphazard . . . and lived only while blind chance spared them» (336); and the only solution is to adapt your life to circumstance

and live while you may. Or, as William Marling puts it, the «instrumental lesson of the Flitcraft parable [is that] the universe may not be rational—random events like falling beams do occur—but rationality is still the best instrument with which to go hunting» (*Roman Noir* 146). The allegorical meaning provided by the Flitcraft parable fits very well in a detective novel unusually full of symbolic overtones, including the characters' names (Leblanc as a murderer's pseudonym, Gutman as the villain, Spade as an inverted heart) and the chase after the falcon itself. After all, the statuette hides nothing but lead in a metaphor of the void hidden behind riches which has been linked by critics with a Grail quest or the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

Hammett's next novel, *The Glass Key*, used the same narrative voice and focalization as *The Maltese Falcon*: an external perspective that never went inside the characters' minds or offered an explanation about their behavior. The result was rather contradictory: many critics agree with Hammett himself and consider it his best novel because of its ambiguity and complexity, whereas others find it a failure. One obvious problem was that of creating complex characters with such a limited narrative voice, or, as Sinda Gregory puts it,

The Glass Key attempts to develop mystery through the structure of a psychological novel. Hammett's efforts are less successful because its mystery is achieved primarily by avoiding the notation of people's thoughts—a notation that is the very essence of the psychological novel and whose absence, at a very minimum, has the perverse effect of turning *The Glass Key* into a sort of «antipsychological» novel. (146)

In fact, as in previous novels, an important part of the «whodunit» is the personality of the investigator himself, Ned Beaumont, self-defined as «a gambler and a politician's hanger-on», who, lacking the attributes of the detective and without the support of a narrator's arguments, is never completely trusted by the reader. In fact, we may never be sure about the motivation behind his acts: he says he is investigating the murder to try to clear his friend and protector Paul Madvig, but, once Paul is cleared, Ned deserts him and takes the girl Paul loves, Janet Henry, with him.

Once again, to try to overcome the limitations of his narrative technique and offer the reader some insight into the characters' minds, Hammett resorted to metaphorical interludes, in this case in the form of Janet's and Ned's dreams, narrated near the end of the novel. Janet Henry has been helping Ned to investigate the murder and has developed an ambiguous relationship with him. Ned says he does not trust her, and, as a reason, he tells her his dream: he was fishing and he caught an enormous fish. After showing it to her, she threw it back into the water. Then Janet tells him her dream, which gives the novel its title. It begins as a variant of the Hansel and Gretel tale: they (Ned and Janet) were both lost in the forest, tired and starving, and arrived at a little house, which was full of food. The house was locked and nobody answered, but they found the key under the door-mat and managed to open it. However, the house was full of snakes which they hadn't seen, so they climbed on the roof, let the snakes out and managed to get inside and eat the food. When she finishes, Ned tells

her he does not think it is true, and he turns out to be right, because several pages later, after Janet's father is revealed as his own son's murderer, she tells Ned the real end: «the key was glass and shattered in our hands just as we got the door open . . . we couldn't lock the snakes in and they came out all over us and I woke up screaming» (586).

Critics have offered all kinds of explanations, ranging from Freudian psychoanalysis to allegory, but, bearing the scheme provided by Rimmon-Kenan in mind, we should not forget the actional function of these hypodiegetic narratives: these characters are, first of all, telling these stories, which may be true or not, to influence each other's behavior, and in fact Janet lies the first time and she does not believe Ned when he tells her his dream. Actually, these are not the only untruthful messages Janet sends in the novel: she had written false notes to try to incriminate Paul, so both the reader and Ned may have good reasons to be suspicious of her stories. Therefore, answering our first question, when these two characters are telling each other these dreams, they are flirting, suggesting their mutual sexual attraction in an indirect manner. We cannot forget the end of the novel, because, just as in the Flitcraft parable, these dreams are also open narratives which receive their closure after the solution to the whodunit is provided, when Janet tells Ned the real ending of her dream and they both decide to follow their mutual attraction and leave together. This could explain the sexual overtones of both dreams, because both fish and snakes are standard Freudian phallic symbols, and Janet's answer to his dream («I won't throw your trout back», 562) can easily be understood as a quite explicitly sexual message.

Apart from this actional motivation, the dreams also have an explicative function, that is to say, they explain something about the characters and about the story, they are a message from the characters' unconscious to the reader. Thus, the first dream reveals Ned's deep distrust towards Janet, both as a woman and as a detecting partner. As a matter of fact, Janet has been making up letters to incriminate Paul, and therefore has been misleading Ned in his investigations. These investigations, then, might be represented by the fish itself, whose capture (like the murderer's) is frustrated by Janet's intervention. And Janet's dream plays with the glass key as a powerful symbol, so meaningful that Hammett decided to use it as the title of the novel. The key is a very appropriate symbol for a mystery novel like this, since on the one hand it may refer to the key to the whodunit (the murderer's identity) and on the other may refer to the key to the personality of these inaccessible characters. In the first case, Janet's unconscious may be revealing to her that the result of their quest (their search in the forest as a traditional folk-tale representation of their search in real life) is the corruption and evil symbolized by the snakes: her own father has killed her brother. And the fact that the key is made of glass and that it shattered after opening the door, seems to be suggesting that the mysteries the key may open are elusive, difficult to gain access to; and, more importantly, that once you unlock the door to knowledge you cannot lock it up again. You have to accept what you find behind the door, no matter how hard you try to lie to yourself the way Janet did when she changed the ending of her dream.

And, as to the second mystery, the personality of these characters, the dream is used as a touchstone to show their evolution and changes. The fact that Janet changes the ending is an example of her own childish immaturity: she is only able to grow up at the end, after finding out the horrible truth about her father. Only then will she be able to admit and understand the complexity of life, the mixture of good and evil that traditional folk tales (like Hansel and Gretel's) also suggest, the fact that giving in to your desires may lead to disaster, the loss of innocence that represents finding out one's own close relationship with evil. After all, the dream is also a variant of the Garden of Eden story, with Janet playing Eve and finding the snake with the forbidden food. Her ability to accept this truth makes her more mature and enables her to openly ask Ned to take her with him. And her evolution seems to provoke a change in Ned's attitude, because he agrees to leave the city in her company, and thus shows more commitment towards a woman than any other protagonist in Hammett's previous novels.

In fact, this change in Ned's attitude leads us to the third, thematic function of the narratives, because Hammett's metaphorical interludes in these novels also seem to be related to the hard-boiled hero's personal ethics and attitude towards women. Thus, the hallucinations in *Red Harvest* are an allegory of the Op's inability to accept an open relationship with Dinah and link him symbolically to her death; Sam Spade uses the Flitcraft parable as his own ironic way of conveying his decision to reject commitment, which results in his sending to prison the woman that «maybe he loves» at the end of the novel; and the dreams in *The Glass Key* continue this line and show a slight, but significant, change in the characteristics of the hard-boiled hero. We should not forget the self-referential dimension that these dreams have, because the situation portrayed in Janet's dream is in fact surprisingly similar to the night that the Op and Dinah had spent in the hut they had been observing from the forest. Their intimate relationship in that hut led significantly to the woman's death, but now both the heroine and the hard-boiled hero seem to have evolved. They also go inside the hut, but they find out a more complex truth and accept its implications: the satisfaction of your desires involves accepting the existence of evil (the snakes hidden underneath the food) and losing innocence forever. Like Adam and Eve, Janet and Ned taste the forbidden fruit, fall from grace and have to learn to live with sin. But they nevertheless decide to leave town (their garden of Eden) and start their new life together. Thus, the hard-boiled hero in this novel accepts a degree of commitment never shown before in Hammett's novels, maybe because Ned is a gambler and is able to take the risks that human relationships entail.

Naturally, the way for Ned to accept it is as tough as he himself is: «Do you really want to go or are you just being hysterical? . . . It doesn't make any difference. I'll take you if you want to go» (585). And, just as stoically, he tells Paul: «Janet is going away with me» (585). James Naremore has suggested that «*The Glass Key* has a good deal in common with modernist literature in general, chiefly because it refuses to give the reader any comfortable position from which to judge the events it depicts» (68). And the truth is that these dialogues may be as uncomfortable and disconcerting as the last line of the novel, where the only piece of information provided by the writer is that «Janet Henry looked at Ned Beaumont. He stared fixedly at the door» (588),

through which Paul Madvig had just left. Hammett's stylistic choice did not allow for an easy interpretation of facts, but the bare action itself lets the reader perceive a significant change in the configuration of the hard-boiled hero: he still does not allow his feelings to come out, but he is able to act and let his feelings control his decisions. Or, as John S. Whitley has written, «the hero is *not* as ambiguous and sinister a figure as his predecessors, . . . love and loyalty, viciously denied in the first three novels, are given some small but resonant due here» (22).

This evolution leads Hammett to create a new kind of protagonist in his last novel, Nick Charles, a detective who is no longer hard-boiled or single. He is married to an intelligent woman who plays an active part in the novel and in the investigation. In fact, the witty dialogues and dialectical competition between Nick and Nora Charles are probably the best achievement of *The Thin Man*, a novel that disconcerts many readers because of its charming characters, its light tone and its ironic narrative voice. However, this comedy of manners (as it has frequently been described) about the New York elite right after the stock market crash hides a very grim view of life: most of the characters are motivated by greed and selfishness, and they are no better than the one who turns out to be the murderer. Violence, both psychological and physical, is frequent; most of the characters are married for convenience and have sex with others; they lie to each other and to the detective; and their actions are motivated by a mixture of greed, revenge, hate or jealousy.

Probably as a means of highlighting this radically pessimistic view of life, which might have remained hidden under Nick's ironic narrative voice and his delightful relationship with Nora (a reflection of Hammett's own relationship with Lillian Hellman, to whom the novel was dedicated), Hammett resorted again to a metaphorical interlude, although in this case he did not bother to imagine one but borrowed it from Maurice Duke's *Celebrated Criminal Cases of America*. When Gilbert, son of the missing scientist who is the main suspect but who turns out to be dead, asks Nick about cannibalism, Nick lets him read the story of a certain Alfred G. Packer, who «murdered his five companions in the mountains of Colorado, ate their bodies and stole their money» (636) in 1873. After finding his way to civilization, Packer said he had only killed one of his companions in self-defence, but evidence showed that he had probably killed all of them to steal their money and survive through the nourishment provided by their corpses. He later admitted that he «had grown fond of human flesh, especially that portion around the breast» (638). It is a very intrusive four-page narrative which has been criticized by some scholars as being «an irrelevant piece of self-indulgence in an interesting but flawed book» (Dooley 123). However, although less imaginative than the other metaphorical interludes used by Hammett, this narrative does not appear to be irrelevant, but helps to remind the reader of the implications of a plot which presents all the characters as metaphorical cannibals and potential murderers.

The narrative, then, does not have an actional function as important as the others we have seen so far: Gilbert is a secondary character, and Nick probably makes him read this piece just to let him know about his (and Hammett's) bleak view of life, not to send him a message with the implications of the Flitcraft parable or the dreams in *The Glass Key*. In fact, Gilbert is not affected by the story and he has no relevance

in the denouement of the plot. Therefore, the primordial functions are explicative and thematic: the Packer story is an allegory of the plot developed by Hammett in the novel. As George J. Thompson pointed out,

The Packer story reflects in a variety of ways the main action of the novel. The «truth» as Packer tells it turns out to be a tissue of lies just as the «truth» as articulated by Mimi, Dorothy, Gilbert and Macauley turns out to be webs of deception. Further, the Packer story functions as a paradigm of all the family relationships pictured in the novel. What we see in the Wynant family, the Quinn family, the Edge family, and the Nunheim family is cannibalism masquerading behind the illusion of the family compact. In each case, the motivation for their vicious behavior is a combination of greed and a feeling of the necessity of self-survival, precisely the ingredients of the Packer story. (146)

Just as Packer had killed his companions to steal their money and save his life, lying later about it, the characters in this novel lie, deceive, steal, kill and use each other in a manner that shows them all as man-eaters in an allegorical manner. Therefore, even though Nick reveals the identity of the murderer at the end of the novel, the other characters are not cleared of their guilt as is customary in classical detective stories: they are all guilty of their own sins and are openly shown as potential criminals. Thus, even this «comedy of manners» shows an existentialist perspective which links it philosophically to Hammett's previous novels. We should not overlook a couple of self-referential details which help the attentive reader to relate this interlude to previous ones: on the one hand, the Leggett letter in *The Dain Curse* contained quite explicit references to cannibalism, and, on the other, Duke's *Criminal Cases of America*, the book where Nick finds the Packer story, was shown as Samuel Spade's favorite in *The Maltese Falcon*. This might be Dashiell Hammett's ironic manner of showing the connection between this interlude and the others, of reminding the reader that his detective may have changed and even got married, but the writer's philosophical outlook is as bleak as it was in *Red Harvest*.

The Packer story is, after all, an inversion of the myth of the American Dream. When the pioneers were going West, not all of them were able to find their golden dream of individual success. The ambition and self-concern which lie behind this all-American myth led some of its pursuers to crime and death. And what are hard-boiled novels, or *roman noir* (and *film noir* afterwards), after all, but a reflection of the dark side of the American dream? Hard-boiled detectives, and in particular the ones created by Hammett, have frequently been linked to the western hero, to the pioneer who, having run out of territory, took refuge in the city, where he found the American nightmare, the American dream gone wrong. The Packer story is used then by Hammett as another metaphorical interlude which, although less original than the others, helps him to show what has become of the old myth of the American Dream at the beginning of the depression era: a society of cannibals ready to use and even kill each other for personal gain.

Hammett was so fond of this device that he even tried to use it again in «Tulip», the non-generic unfinished novel which Lillian Hellman included in the short-story collection *The Big Knockover*. In this case, both the narrator (Pop) and Tulip, representing two different approaches to story-telling, start narrating tales to each other, and Tulip even produces a review that Pop (Hammett himself) had written in 1924. It is a review of a book about Rosicrucian history whose pompous style is not liked by either Tulip or Pop any longer. This interlude is not really too relevant in an unfinished piece which seems to be concerned with metafiction and the process of writing in a very post-modern manner, but is nevertheless another good example of how fruitful Hammett had found this technique during his writing career.

This last example should be enough to question the «realistic» label commonly attributed to Hammett. After all, his merit is not that he represented life more realistically or more precisely than other detective writers, but that he used different and more convincing literary conventions to achieve better results³. Hammett's novels manage to convey an illusion of realism through style: colloquial, direct language, the description of a violent society and some morally ambiguous characters who help him show a skeptical and almost existentialist philosophical vision. But within this framework, he used plots and characters whose realism is at least doubtful. After all, as Albert Camus said, talking about *roman noir* in general,

This technique is called realistic only owing to a misapprehension . . . it is perfectly obvious that this fictitious world is not attempting a reproduction, pure and simple, of reality, but the most arbitrary form of stylization. It is born of a mutilation, and of a voluntary mutilation, performed on reality. (265-6)

And to try to overcome the drawbacks of this mutilation, together with the limitations imposed on his fiction by the detective novel conventions and his objective narrative method, Hammett resorted to an anti-realistic device: the metaphorical interludes which have been analyzed in this paper. Taking advantage of the fact that detective novel conventions call for ambiguous hypodiegetic narratives between characters, Hammett decided to include messages, dreams, parables, letters and hallucinations which are extremely rich and polysemous, having not only actional or explicative functions (common in detective stories) but a thematic function too. Working independently or simultaneously as clues to the whodunits, keys to the inner world of the characters or metaphors of Hammett's philosophical views, these interludes proved to be a multidimensional literary device that allowed him to question the configuration of the hard-boiled hero he was creating and trying to deconstruct at the same time. Thus, he was able to escape the constraints of popular fiction and extend the reach of his novels out of their generic boundaries and into the realm of literature.

3. As Pop himself said in «Tulip»: «Realistic is one of those words when it comes into a discussion sensible pick up their hats and go home» (327).

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