

1973

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John M. Reilly

*University at Albany, State University of New York*

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### Recommended Citation

Reilly, John M. (1973) "The Politics of Tough Guy Mysteries," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 10: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol10/iss1/4>

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# The Politics of Tough Guy Mysteries

John M. Reilly

While one might lament, as did Raymond Chandler, the shortage of “top-drawer critical writing about the murder or mystery novel,”<sup>1</sup> the great amount of small talk that mysteries generate among their readers is important. Enthusiastic statements of preference for one type of plot or another, attempts to compile lists of the “best” authors or novels, and the eager comparisons of an author’s latest with earlier works testify to a power of engagement unmatched by other species of fiction. The literary opinion makers who edit book reviews and write essays on the trends of modern fiction can consign mysteries to a less-than-serious category of literature, but even as the audience for mysteries accepts such a category it refuses to believe that mysteries are trivial, for writing that is so decidedly founded on our need to master reality simply has to be significant.

The predominant characteristic of the species of fictional tale known variously as the murder, detective, crime, thriller, or mystery story is its representation of action devoted to the resolution of a problem occasioned by an anti-social act of violence against life or property. The resolution can be managed by an official agent of society, a policeman or perhaps an attorney, but most often it is a free lance detective who works out the problem. The detective’s means of operation range from empirical investigation in the story based upon police routine to the employment of methodical inference or intuition in the story of a free lance.

With all literature the mystery shares the function of providing a pattern for the apprehension of reality, but because of its tendency to formula—all mysteries are about the same thing—the organization of the world that it offers is uniquely crystallized. The plots of mysteries relate episodes in the careers of individuals who obviously function within society and for it rather than themselves. The actions of the detective are guides to social action, and the perceptions and motives upon which he bases his action constitute for the reader a politics, that is, a description of the way the community is or ought to be organized.

The “classic” mystery developed during the 1920’s, flourishing particularly in England, and represented, say, by the work of Agatha Christie clearly reflects and promulgates a politics of order. The comparatively well educated detective embodies a conservative appreciation of hierarchy appropriate to the higher social class with which he identifies. Respectful of the social structure he seeks out the villain who is a misfit because of uncontrolled greed, inappropriate envy or ambition or vengefulness. Focusing narrowly on the process of detection, the “classic” mystery conveys the notion that a developed human mind, coupled with will, can maintain order, because, it is implied, society is an aggregate of personal relationships. The

detective becomes involved in the problem of violence solely to integrate it by inferential explanation into a rational theory of reality. Otherwise, it is to be understood that he lives comfortably, psychologically as well as materially, in the ahistorical world.

There can be no point in denying the appeal of the "classic" mystery which continues to be widely read in a time as self-conscious of history as our own; yet, perhaps we should be careful not to describe a literary form so evidently informed by elite values as popular. For a truly popular type of mystery we must look to the variety of mystery tale known as the tough guy story. An American innovation usually credited to Dashiell Hammett, tough guy mysteries project a distinctly popular politics. To begin with, the detective who is normally a free lance, though he may also be a police officer, belongs to the lower social classes and has the personal manners indicative of his origins. His speech, dress, and interests are much like those of the underworld characters with whom he contends; consequently, he mixes freely among them and appears to be, as much as they are, determined by the material forces that are the basis of all relationships in the tough world. The tough guy detective, therefore, is always involved in the circumstances that produce violence and disorder. Violence, overt or subtle, is in fact the normal substance of his world, and for that reason individual will and rationality are merely contingent to understanding or resolving the problem which faces the detective.

Yet a further contrast between the "classic" mystery and the tough guy story lies in the social detail that interpenetrates the latter. Because the tough guy tale cannot narrowly focus on the rational means of detection, milieu assumes great importance. An outstanding example of the significance of social milieu can be found in Hammett's first full-length novel *Red Harvest* (1929).<sup>2</sup> Here the setting is Personville, Montana which the Continental operative tells us in his first person narrative he came to understand as fully deserving its nickname Poisonville. The town is literally owned by Elihu Willson. Besides the mining company that is the economic basis of life for the town old Elihu controls the bank, the newspapers, influences other businesses and even controls the State legislature, governor, mayor, and other elective or appointive officials who are supposed to be the representatives of popular will.

Willson's typicality as a monopoly capitalist is further enforced by revelation of the historical events that produced the need to have the Continental Op called in. After the World War the miners' union had called a strike which lasted eight months without winning concessions from Willson. To beat the union Willson called in thugs and scabs who effectively destroyed the workers' organization, but ironically they took as their pay control of Personville which they converted into a wide open town for rackets. Old Elihu cannot break with them and throughout the novel veers from wanting a complete clean up to minor reforms that would put the lid on open killing, and back again.

Interestingly the Continental Op gets his briefing on the town's history from an IWW organizer, but union power is dead and apparently Personville can only be handled by an operative whose ethics differ from the predators but not his methods.

In brief, his methods are to stir things up by setting one force against another and to reap resolution as the gangsters kill each other off. At one point he counts up sixteen deaths that have occurred since his arrival in town, and any reader can see that objectively at least the Continental Op shares responsibility for those deaths.

Despite the bloody trail, Hammett has no intention of lumping his narrator with Elihu Willson and the racketeers. It is to be understood that the Op's purpose is to produce a tentative order. Absolute ethics are irrelevant to the job to the extent that they will delay or obstruct its completion. When it is necessary, therefore, the Op fails to abide by the workmanlike code of turning in reports to his home office, and, when it is possible, he coerces old Elihu into providing him a legal document to justify whatever actions he finds he must take.

Reading *Red Harvest* one must be careful not to take the narrator as some sort of epic hero. His will achieves a goal not because of innate power but rather because social circumstances are available to be exploited by the Op. He does not create the circumstances. Likewise, while Hammett suggests that the Op is guided by a personal code of aggressive action, he also demonstrates that the Op is inextricably part of the scene in which he works. He gets the killing fever from the town (p. 102).

Because Hammett's narrator is personally so involved in the milieu the book's politics gain emphasis. Personville is corrupt in a way that is historically familiar to all Americans. Economic power has become so strongly centralized that there is no longer any effective check on it. The gangsters whose deeds bring the Op into town simply replicate the process by which Elihu Willson works. Not a pretty picture nor a comforting commentary on democracy to be sure, but in *Red Harvest* it is a fact of life. It can be understood in terms of historical development, and one can talk about a political and economic revolution that would do away with the circumstances producing corruption in Personville. In Hammett's novel, though, there is no socialist vision and no serious attention to the possibility of eventual change. Rather the politics are immediate and concern the establishment of an order that will at once benefit the ordinary citizen of the town; thus, the Continental Op is the agent of the little person who senses he has no power to make long range changes and must prefer to have things set right so that he can live his day-to-day life in relative peace.

None of Hammett's later tough guy novels have the explicit social documentation of *Red Harvest*, for as his art developed he came to embody more of his world view in the techniques of the narrative. *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) begins in a search for the killer of Miles Archer and gradually that quest sinks to a secondary importance as it is shown to be part of a larger, more complex struggle for the power of wealth. The significance of the plot is varied. On one level it demonstrates the interconnection of events in the world in a way that suggests its mastery by neatly logical categories is impossible. Then, too, the revelation of the motive linking the diverse personalities of Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Joel Cairo, Casper Gutman, and the gungel—to name only those who are dramatically rendered—conveys the impression that in an impersonal world the desire for unearned wealth may be the strongest basis of

association. The strength of this pecuniary motive is underlined by Brigid's involvement. Cairo and Gutman are clearly ominous figures, but when Brigid, whom one might love, is shown to be easily as devious, the atmosphere of the narrative becomes totally infused with the portent of alienation. Humanistic values are impossible when the responses of love along with everything else become the tools for monetary profit.

In such a world as the narrative of *The Maltese Falcon* symbolizes one might best suppress emotion as Sam Spade does, avoid entanglements with others, and live by an individual code even though the world is demonstrably collective. Sam Spade is not a nihilist, however. He struggles to achieve his means of survival without becoming robotized. At times the struggle makes him inconsistent. For example, he manipulates the feelings of Iva Archer, suggesting a detachment from emotion, but he is susceptible to the manipulations of Brigid O'Shaughnessy. He dislikes his partner Miles enough to have an affair with his wife but wants to solve his killing out of a vague sense of loyalty and decorum. The inconsistency, however, is as appropriate to the tough world as is a narrative that proceeds in loose episodes, for it reflects an average person's perceptions of day-to-day living in capitalist America. The picture of life in *The Maltese Falcon* is no prettier than in *Red Harvest*. In both novels it is impossible for the detective to be morally pure or certain. He is as involved in historical society as anyone else is, and at the same time he remains aware that after all his resources are limited. He can assert his will only within the context of innumerable intersecting other wills, hoping only that by being conscious of what he wants to happen he can exert a little influence on the eventual outcome.

What Dashiell Hammett established as the tough guy mystery in his influential novels Raymond Chandler worked to refine as art. It was Chandler who observed in "The Simple Art of Murder" the fundamental realism involved in describing a world where gangsters rule and where the tainted profits of brothels serve as the capital investment in hotels and apartment houses for the well-to-do,<sup>3</sup> and it was Chandler who then demonstrated in practice the subtle support that tone and imagery might add to that tough realism. But of course Chandler's esthetic refinement, which deserves separate study, in no way modifies the basic politics of tough guy fiction.

Thus, *The Little Sister* (1949) reveals in Orfamay Quest a woman who, like Brigid O'Shaughnessy, is disturbingly malevolent beneath an exterior that stimulates the detective's sentiments, while in *Playback* (1958), Chandler's last complete novel, the powerful rich man who for most practical purposes owns his town appears in the manner of Elihu Willson to have the power to determine the intimate lives of people who happen to live within his realm. If anything, Chandler's concern for the artistry of mystery writing works to emphasize the view of reality implicit in his narratives. By his own testimony he didn't take the mystery part of the writing too seriously,<sup>4</sup> and the result is to divert the reader's attention to character and social milieu. *Playback* offers us knowledge of events surrounding a killing but there is no legal wrap-up. In effect, the crime remains unsolved but that is because public revelation would injure one harmless person even though it would expose a racketeer. In the existential

situation the abstract requirements of law are irrelevant. *The Long Good-Bye* (1953) Chandler described as a fairly obvious mystery, but in writing the novel, he says, he “cared about the people, about this strange corrupt world we live in, and how any man who tried to be honest looks in the end either sentimental or plain foolish.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the episodes of this novel provide a relentless exposure of the corrupt world. Comparatively trivial observations by Marlowe on the commercialized Christmas season, society page “vomit,” the “sub-phallic” architecture of the rich, etc. are recorded along with the corruption of power-hungry policemen, dope doctors, and the bureaucratic phoniness of the District Attorney’s office. The reality of the moments in which Philip Marlowe responds to these instances of corruption is so concrete that the dynamics of the novel become Chandler’s insistence that readers generalize in their own consciousness the disparate experiences undergone by his detective. What is only implicitly a function of the “classic” detective mystery has therefore become in the artful practice of a master of tough guy stories a deliberate purpose.

Writers as different from one another as Chester Himes, Ross MacDonald, Thomas B. Dewey and Michael Collins continue to produce for contemporary readers novels of the tough world. Their work and that of many other authors might be viewed also in terms of its political content, but the possibilities for doing that ought to be clear by now. The more appropriate conclusion to this essay ought to be a consideration of the source of tough guy politics.

In their recent book *A Catalogue of Crime* Jacques Barzum and Wendell Hertig Taylor describe the tough mystery story of the 1930’s as an offspring of Marxism.<sup>6</sup> Their reasoning is that Hammett and Chandler were identified with the Marxist left. The Marxist left was and is naturally critical of American capitalism; thus, the critical view of American reality in tough fiction derives from Marxism. That is an easy enough inference to draw, except that tough fiction conveys almost nothing of the Marxist model of reality beyond materialism. In tough guy mysteries there is no clear evidence of class struggle, no conscious dialectics, and the tone of the mysteries is quite distinct from the humanistic optimism of Marxism. No, the source of the politics of tough guy mysteries lies in American popular thinking.

More particularly tough guy politics might be described as disillusioned populism. Historically populism is the protest of the rural Americans who formed farmers’ alliances and made overtures toward coalition with industrial workers to protect themselves against the monopoly power of big capitalists and to defend their right to participate in the American economy according to the ideal principles of individualism and egalitarianism. Rebellious rather than revolutionary, populism tried to make government its agency of defense. Obviously, populists underestimated the power of monopoly capital which readily adapted to the legislative reforms engendered by their movement, and understandably enough the populists also failed to prevent the tendency toward centralization of the economy, so that not only did they fail to achieve the goals of their program, they also saw their mass base in small farmers and craftsmen eroded.

Populist thinking is by no means dead in America, though. The populist concern for the rights of the little man has simply been carried over into the new conditions

of an intensively urbanized and industrialized society. Middle and working class people alike resent the weight of bureaucracy they feel does them no good, resist through apathy the calls of national leaders to support programs not designed for their understanding, and repeat as common sense the notion that everybody is out for the buck. Available though it is to the appeals of patriotism during times of national crisis, much of the political sentiment of Americans remains crystallized in the image of little people, lost now without a party or a program. Lacking any other focus for positive political feelings than the image of little people, the neo-populists' politics is that of frustration and a desire to set things right, at least temporarily, by any means, the simpler the better.

To the extent that tough guy writing projects a conception of reality that coincides with neo-populism it appeals directly to American popular thinking and constitutes a politics considerably more appealing and threatening than any so far espoused by formally organized reformers. Both the appeal and the threat must be taken very seriously.

When disillusioned with the existing mechanics of government, neo-populism tends to magical solutions similar to those evidenced in stories of comic strip heroes who apply their superhuman powers to smashing crime, corruption, and commies to make the country safe for ordinary people. The cynicism about motives and the emphatic individualism that we find in tough guy mysteries have their positive egalitarian aspect in so far as they repudiate a static social hierarchy, but these qualities also tend to reduce reality to a struggle of naked power. Remove Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe and similar characters who struggle to be humanists from tough guy fiction and it is ripe for mutation into fascism. Orwell's famous essay on "Raffles and Miss Blandish" bluntly states that the violence and sadism of James Hadley Chase's tough novel amounts to fascism.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel have pointed out that Mickey Spillane's stylized tough guy novels strip from the protagonist all value but that of acting out frustrations violently: give them as good as they do you; kill, kill, kill.<sup>8</sup>

Sociologists of literature must commonly concern themselves with the question of whether literature reflects or shapes culture. An examination of the politics of tough guy mysteries suggests the answer is both. Tough guy fiction makes concrete the audience's latent concepts of society; yet, in doing so it also gives credibility to the political style of resolving problems used by the detective. This is to say that tough guy fiction, like all of literature, functions to organize our responses to reality. The popularity of tough guy mysteries, both in terms of audience and source, indicates, however, that it may well be one of the most influential types of literature there is. Confronted with that possibility one might wish for an increase in thoroughgoing radicalism in tough guy mysteries, or conversely one might wish to encourage people to read "classic" mysteries for their implicitly conservative values. But to express either wish would be to make the issue exclusively literary. Tough guy writing gains an audience and significance only because it speaks to the real political needs of Americans. For many of us tough guy writing vivifies the reality of America, and to change the unflattering picture it presents of our country

will require our changing first the model from which it is drawn.

State University of New York at Albany

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Dorothy Gardiner and Katherine Sorley Walker, eds., *Raymond Chandler Speaking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), p. 53.
- <sup>2</sup>All references to Hammett novels pertain to the reprint *The Novels of Dashiell Hammett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).
- <sup>3</sup>"The Simple Art of Murder," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1944. Reprinted in *The Second Chandler Omnibus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), pp. 3-15. All references to Chandler novels pertain to this reprint.
- <sup>4</sup>*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, p. 49.
- <sup>5</sup>*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, p. 233.
- <sup>6</sup>Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor, *A Catalogue of Crime* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup>Reprinted in *George Orwell, a Collection of Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), pp. 139-154.
- <sup>8</sup>Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, "The Avenging Angels," in *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), pp. 142-163.



