Sara McCartney

The Maltese Falcon Presentation: February 18, 2016

1. The Character of Sam Spade
   1. In contrast to other protagonists we’ve read about
      1. Understands the world in which he lives

Like Archer, but not Jurgis or McTeague, evidenced by how easily he deals with the police, has many connections from which he can get information

Repeatedly refers to San Francisco as “his” city (177)

* + 1. Still reactive but in a different sense.

Both the mystery of the falcon and the falcon itself essentially fall into his lap. Still more of an active character than the protagonists that we’ve seen so far in that Spade actively tries to make his own fate and influence the reaction.

Spade still feels himself governed by external forces and codes as we’ll see later.

* 1. As Masculine Fantasy:

“He is a dream man in the sense that he is what most of the private detectives I worked with would like to have been, and, in their cockier moments, thought they approached.”

* Durshiell Hammett, Introduction to *The Maltese Falcon* 1934 edition

Sam Spade was written as an ideal.

* + 1. Calm, capable, but hiding a ‘wolfish’ temper.

We covered this pretty well last class. Spade mostly keeps his composure, even when (Hammett’s description tells us), he’s rattled up. (For example, his response to the dead Jacobi in chapter 16).  
Even when he does lose his temper, it feels calculated as a show of power. (For example, his confrontation with the DA in chapter 11).

Contrast between him and the “villains” of the story who are variously described as effeminate, infantile, and grotesquely out of shape.

* + 1. Resists Brigid’s charms

It is a common trope in hardboiled fiction for the femme fatale to manipulate and get their way with the protagonist.

Spade resists this. This can also be read as a show of his masculinity (he can be romantically involved with a woman and not get too attached).

He also seems eager to prevent his masculinity from becoming threatened by her power. Repetition of: “I won’t play the sap for you.”

Brigid’s repeated needs for ‘saps’ (Thursby, Jacobi, Sam) turns out to be her fatal weakness. Sam, in contrast, goes it alone, trusts no one, and gets out of all his trouble.

* + 1. Vice

Paradox: Spade’s compulsive consumption of cigarettes and alcohol shows his self-control (he can roll a cigarette in duress, he can hold his liquor)

The one time anyone really manages to get the better of him is by drugging his drink, taking advantage of his vices (130, end of chapter 13).

* 1. His code of ethics

Initially slimy, especially in his treatment of women, no qualms about his affair with Iva.

No qualms about searching people’s rooms, calling in favors, etc. He works around the law and even seems to see himself as opposing the law…

When he tries to convince Gutman and Cairo to betray Wilmer. The fact that they are not in favor of this (in contrast to Sam, who later betrays Brigid), challenges our conception of heroes and villains.

*Could this novel be rewritten with Sam Spade as the villain?*

The scene where Sam decides to give up Brigid could have been written as sacrificing his beloved in the name of something bigger (justice). Instead, he taunts her, and is portrayed as cruel and self-serving, citing his own desire to not be a sap or a suspect as a very important reason for turning in Brigid.

Sam was willing to let Gutman, Cairo, and (possibly) Brigid go free if he was paid. He tells Brigid that if the falcon had been real, he might have changed his mind about giving her up to the police (215).

*Is Sam motivated by greed or justice?*

Related.

*IS Sam guided by a code of ethics, or just his own self-interest?*

1. The MacGuffin

The titular Maltese Falcon is considered a classic example of a MacGuffin, a term coined by the great director Alfred Hitchcock to describe an object which drives the action of the story but the specificity of the object has no bearing on the story. (Hitchcock used this trope in *the 39* Steps; for modern examples: most Marvel films, Star Wars VII). The Falcon could be replaced by any other MacGuffin and the story would not change.

*Is there anything about the Maltese Falcon at an object that makes it more than a mere MacGuffin?:*

1. Reverse gilded:

In contrast to McTeague’s tooth and bird cage, and the preoccupation with the gaudy seen in both McTeague and The Age of Innocence, the Falcon’s true value (or lack thereof) is disguised by enamel. Is the value completely in Gutman’s head? Essentially.

Perhaps this furthers the Falcon’s status as a MacGuffin, since it turns out to be worthless.

1. *If the novel isn’t about a falcon, then what is it about*
   1. Justice for Miles?

Spade doesn’t care much for Miles, as evidence by the fact that he outright says so and has an affair with his wife.

Nonetheless: “When a man’s partner is killed he’s supposed to do something about it” (213). Spade seems to feel himself driven by an external moral code to seek justice for his partner. This speech at the end he seems to care about such an external moral code.

Said code also drives him to turn in Gutman et. al., despite his contempt for the law through the rest of the novel, because that’s what detectives do – it’s in his nature (214).

* 1. Greed or Obsession

Last class, we talked briefly about how greed is a motivator for these characters similar to the role of greed in *McTeague.*

Both Brigid and Sam Spade (but especially Brigid) follow the money in their loyalties.

Sam ends up not getting any money (its suggested he gives up his 1K as evidence against Gutman) choosing to value his own sense of justice over profit.

Analysis: Brigid is driven by greed, Gutman by obsession, and Sam Spade for justice. Only justice wins out, casting implicit judgment on the forces of greed and obsession.

*With this in mind, does Hammett mean for us to value Spade’s moral code?*

*If we have time: What do we make of the story Spade tells Brigid about the man who leaves his family after a rod falls on him?*