

Before Bogart: SAM SPADE

The Maltese Falcon introduced a new detective – Sam Spade – whose physical aspects (shades of his conversation with Stein) now approximated Hammett's. The novel also originated a fresh narrative direction. The Op related his own stories and investigations, lodging his idiosyncrasies, omissions and intuitions at the core of *Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse*. For *The Maltese Falcon* Hammett shifted to a neutral, but chilling third-person narration that consistently monitors Spade from the outside – often insouciantly as a 'blond satan' or a smiling 'wolfish' cur – but never ventures anywhere Spade does not go or witnesses anything Spade doesn't see.

This cold-eyed yet restricted angle prolongs the suspense; when Spade learns of Archer's murder we hear only his end of the phone call – 'Hello . . . Yes, speaking . . . Dead? . . . Yes . . . Fifteen minutes. Thanks.' The name of the deceased stays concealed with the detective until he enters the crime scene and views his partner's corpse. Never disclosing what Spade is feeling and thinking, Hammett positions indeterminacy as an implicit moral stance. By screening the reader from his gumshoe's inner life, he pulls us into Spade's ambiguous world. As Spade consoles Brigid O'Shaughnessy, 'It's not always easy to know what to do.'

The worldly cynicism (Brigid and Spade 'maybe' love each other, Spade says), the coruscating images of compulsive materialism (Spade no less than the iconic Falcon), the strings of point-blank maxims (Spade's elegant 'I don't mind a reasonable amount of trouble'): Sam Spade was Dashiell Hammett's most appealing and enduring creation, even before Bogart indelibly limned him for the 1941 film. For as Hammett reflected in his introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition of *The Maltese Falcon*:

Spade had no original. 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 what quite a few of them in their cockier moments thought they approached. For your private detective does not – or did not ten years ago when he was my colleague – want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent by-stander, or client.

—Robert Polito, from the Introduction to the Everyman's Library omnibus edition of *The Maltese Falcon, The Thin Man, Red Harvest* (978-0-375-41125-0). Copyright © 2000 by Everyman's Library.