DASHIELL HAMMETT’S SOCIAL VISION
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DASHIELL HAMMETT'S SOCIAL VISION

By Robert Shulman

DASHIELL HAMMETT HAS SUFFERED from a double stigma. He writes in a popular genre academics for the most part do not take seriously. And during the Cold War his politics were dangerous, and the most promising approach to his fiction was in disrepute. These conditions are changing. We are now in a position to develop the detailed criticism that intelligent evaluation of Hammett's work must be based on.

I

As Hammett knew, genre is more than a set of literary conventions, and the tough-guy detective novels he wrote are no exception. Genre also carries a concealed social message of its own, describes in fictional form the myths of a specific social system, and prescribes for its characters a set of interrelated dilemmas, all of which can be understood for Hammett as generated by the structures and values of his unstable, acquisitive America. In Red Harvest, The Maltese Falcon, and The Glass Key Hammett also brings alive the conflicting versions of individualism that society emphasizes. Particularly in The Maltese Falcon, Hammett is concerned with stories and storytelling, with a market society world that systematically demands improvisation, acting, and the manipulation of appearances, people, and feelings. In 1953 Hammett testified before a House investigating committee ostensibly concerned about "pro-Communist" books in the overseas libraries run by the State Department. Hammett refused to say whether he was a Communist but he did tell the committee he thought it "was impossible to write anything without taking some sort of social stand."1 In at least three compelling

and representative novels from some twenty years earlier, Hammett had elaborated in fictional form, in a version of the detective novel genre, a "social stand" which reveals a brilliant and penetrating analysis of a late capitalist acquisitive society.

The Maltese Falcon is his most precise and suggestive work but Hammett gives us a general outline of his characteristic world in his first novel, Red Harvest (1929). In it he exposes the violence and political corruption of Poisonville, a mess brought on when the town's upper class political boss had troops come in to break a striking union. The bad elements stayed to take over his control of the town. The Hammett detective, the Continental Op, is deeply involved in the underground, anarchic chaos and violence at the same time that he restores a kind of order. Hammett, who is fascinated with subterranean, anarchic energy, gives full expression to the individualistic violence and resourcefulness of the Continental Op. The order at the end is not in the name of the law or of official society but rather of the Op's desire to get the job done and his opposition to corrupt forces much like his own energies. His individualism differs from his opponents' in that he is not after political or economic power like those who make the allegorically named "Personville" into "Poisonville." Using as his vehicle the gangland warfare of the 1920's, through the Continental Op and his opponents Hammett thus develops a suggestively mixed view of the lawlessness, violence, and energy informing the surfaces and depths of an acquisitive, individualistic society. It is the America of Hobbes's war of each against all.²

In the best of the two books Hammett wrote immediately after Red Harvest, in his most famous novel, The Maltese Falcon (1930), Hammett also gives his social vision its fullest expression. As Ian Watt shows in The Rise of the Novel, Defoe bodied forth a myth appropriate to the individualistic society of his period. Hammett, in the tradition of Robinson Crusoe, does the same for the American version of that society 200 years later. In The Maltese Falcon, Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid O'Shaugh-

nessy ruthlessly pursue their own self-interest as they try to obtain the jeweled black bird, a Satanic embodiment of fabulous wealth. The bird is fake but the quest continues. The characters are exotic but their motives are all too familiar and their destructive results constitute a judgment on the entire enterprise of single-mindedly pursuing wealth. Much more deeply and acutely than in his earlier work and in a different mode than in his subsequent fiction, Hammett brings to a suggestive focus his concern with American individualism.

Through the motives, the dark milieu, and the structure of relations in *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett has created a myth of early twentieth-century capitalism, a world in which self-interested entrepreneurs fiercely compete for a property whose ownership is ambiguous. On the capitalistic model, contracts and the pursuit of wealth hold society together. In the novel, characters give their word, form temporary alliances, talk extensively about "trust," and do what they feel they need to in order to obtain the treasure. The literal murders are less significant than the resulting pervasive killing of human ties and relations. Because of the human isolation, betrayals, and obsessive pursuit of false goals, the novel renders a hell-on-earth, a kind of vital death-in-life that brings the outside American world to the test and that finally brought Dashiell Hammett to an independent relation with the Communist Party. In *The Maltese Falcon* Hammett has thus refined, complicated, and made much more precise the world of individualistic, Hobbesian violence, warfare, and systematic absence of trust he had imagined in *Red Harvest* and the Continental Op stories.


4 Jacques Barzun and Wendell H. Taylor observe that "the tough guy story was born during the thirties and shows the Marxist coloring of its birth years," *A Catalogue of Crime* (New York: Harper, 1971) p. 11. Hammett, however, developed his social stand during the twenties. John Reilly sees *The Maltese Falcon* as embodying a populist, not a Marxist, view of society, "The Politics of Tough Guy Mysteries," *University of Dayton Review*, 10 (1973), 29, and Steven Marcus sees it as Hobbesian. These differences in terminology are not crucial. Hammett is rooted in the American grain and in the con-
The creator of Sam Spade was deeply critical of an acquisitive society but his social stand was independent, not doctrinaire. Sam Spade represents a different style of individualism from the other characters in *The Maltese Falcon*. He is a "blond Satan" who functions in the dark underworld and who seeks the treasure, not, however, as property but for non-material reasons. Spade has his professional curiosity and his code — "I'll bury my dead" — and he pursues his objective with all of the independence, cunning, and ruthlessness of those antagonists he partly resembles. And he suffers the same alienation, intensified by the fact that he probably loves a woman he cannot trust and must turn in. Spade, moreover, betrays Archer and Iva even as Brigid betrays him: "merry-go-round" appropriately characterizes more than Chapter Twelve. Like the Continental Op and Ned Beaumont, Spade is flawed but like them his individualism is a source of moral strength as well as of alienation. As his story about Flitcraft reveals, moreover, Spade has a poetic depth of awareness about the contingency of human mortality. Spade is an ambiguous hero, tainted, mixed, and finally admirable. Much of the social drama of the novel is generated because Spade's style of individualism intersects and opposes the Gutman-Cairo-Brigid version of competitive individualism.

In a world of competing individuals, ideally contracts and the legal system are the referees and constitute the social bonds tying together the atomistic competitors. In *The Maltese Falcon* the legal system and official society are represented by the detectives, Tom Polhaus and Dundy, and the D. A., Bryan. Spade is as much at odds with them as he is with Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid. Of course he has Effie Perine and Sam Wise on his side but basically Spade is an American loner individualist, outside and opposed to both the official society and the underworld of

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the novel. Narrative tension results because Spade is under attack or suspicion from both sides and against powerful obstacles he must work things out for himself. Official society is almost as bad as the underworld and the law does not operate as a cohesive force, so that the sense of an atomized world is intensified.

Spade succinctly characterizes the official world and political system: “most things in San Francisco can be bought, or taken” (p. 48). Instead of examining the official world in any detail, Hammett simply takes its corruption for granted. His treatment of the underworld, however, illuminates official society, since Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid have the motives, rhetoric, and values of respectable entrepreneurs. To the extent we find these characters both more reprehensible and more fascinating than people in the “real” world, the negative judgment of the “real” world is intensified.

Joel Cairo says he heard Spade was “far too reasonable to allow other considerations to interfere with profitable business relations” (p. 44). “Reasonable” and “profitable” are key values in the world of competitive individualism, as are the “trust” and the “plain speaking and clear understanding” Gutman drinks to (p. 94). Even more important is Gutman’s explicit statement of what is pervasive and implicit throughout the novel, namely, that the archetypal embodiment of property, the jeweled black bird, “is clearly the property of whoever can get ahold of it” (p. 114). The principle and its deadly results are at the heart of the system that produced the robber barons and the corporate warfare of early twentieth-century capitalism. Through Gutman and the others Hammett goes beneath the facade of capitalistic theory and exposes its predatory practices. The implicit corollary of Gutman’s remark, moreover, is that the bird is valuable because so many people want to “get ahold of it.” Thus it is “property” as “commodity.” The bird is of no use to anyone (reinforced by the end of the novel where the actual object is revealed as black lead throughout), yet all the destructive energy of the novel’s characters has its source in the exchange of the bird. Every time it changes hands, the value goes up.

Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid are the leading players in the serious game of exchange. They live in a world of trading, decep-
tion, expediency, risk-taking, and self-interest. These social qualities create a world that has no stability or certainty, so that the basis for uncertainty and instability is social and economic. As in *The Glass Key* the fog and darkness Spade must grope through are metaphors for a social and moral condition. By displacing his social probing, by doing it indirectly, Hammett thus creates a dark world that is vital, threatening, and deep. Through this mythic world he is able to get at conventional values and relations in a basic way, more suggestively than before or after *The Maltese Falcon*.

II

In Hammett's dark, unstable world, the most intimate ties between people are also necessarily unstable or corrupt. Hammett examines a series of love or family relations, and their characterization contributes powerfully to the novel's exposure of an acquisitive, individualistic world as a hell-on-earth or death-in-life. Immediately before he makes his most loyal associate the fall-guy, Gutman says "I feel towards Wilmer just exactly as if he were my own son" (p. 160). So much for the ties of friendship and loyalty or the affection between a father and son. In a quite different way Cairo, with his scented handkerchiefs and effeminate manners, is in love with Wilmer. In some ways it is the most genuine love in the book but Hammett presents it as in its very nature compromised or tainted. Like other loves in the novel, moreover, it is one-sided, not reciprocated. Although Spade continually baits Wilmer as a "gusel" (underworld slang for "homosexual"), Wilmer is totally repelled by Cairo.

But it is through the central love relation in *The Maltese Falcon* that Hammett gives his most telling treatment of the death-in-life of his acquisitive society. Spade has his suspicions of Brigid early on, as he sees through her stories and pleas, but he is compelled by her nonetheless. A relation based on deception, pretense, and sex gradually deepens without ever losing the original duplicity and without Spade's ever encountering anything more or less genuine than Brigid's beauty, vitality, and consummate skill as an actress and inventive storyteller. He
is compelled but not deluded by these qualities. At first we are taken in but Spade shows his superior insight by detecting almost immediately the false notes in her speech. "'You're good,'" he tells her, "'you're very good. It's chiefly your eyes, I think, and that throb you get into your voice when you say things like 'Be generous, Mr. Spade'" (p. 32).

"Be generous"; "trust me" — these appeals to the cohesive values of generosity, sympathy, and trust recur again and again in the scenes involving Brigid and Spade. The words always remind us of the human qualities that are missing from their relation, a void that cumulatively gives their love the aura of a dance of the damned. The social vision of the novel is tragic, partly because Spade loves a woman he cannot trust, someone whose duplicity is rooted in the acquisitive motives and values of the social order. This nightmarish combination of love without trust brings into the open the painful isolation and destruction of human ties ordinarily concealed in the everyday social world.

Brigid involves Spade because she needs protection but she is only vulnerable physically, not intellectually or emotionally. She uses her femininity, variously playing the role of a rich heiress in need of help or a seductress who distracts Spade from vital questions by going to bed with him. But she is a woman who plays brilliantly in a man's hard world for the same dark stakes as the other competitors. She is one of the few women characters in American literature who are endowed with the energy, motives, and capacities of the male characters, and not at the expense of her femininity. The social criticism in the novel gains tragic force because Brigid's rich possibilities are blighted by her involvement in the world of competitive individualism. That involvement is tragically interwined with the very promise, qualities, and achievements which both elevate and undermine her. Brigid is the most tragic figure in the underworld because her death-in-life is inseparable from a saving vitality, so that her loss suggests the price of conventional success and constitutes a judgment on an entire value system and way of life.

The dilemma Henry Adams foresaw for the twentieth-century woman was that she could play the man's game in the world of
power and become as restless, mechanical, and desexualized as the American male. Or she could remain powerless but fecund. Through Brigid’s restless manipulation of her own and Spade’s feelings and sexuality, Hammett confirms this tragic insight. Brigid’s involvement in the acquisitive world is as fatal to her relation with Spade as it is to her own inner life. She is weary with herself and the perpetual lying, acting, and improvising she nonetheless continues with astonishing persistence and vitality. Her deceptiveness, manipulation, and fluidity of identity all have social sources: they answer to the demands of the market society. Because of her brilliant acting, we never know Brigid’s true feelings. Brigid may well love only the pursuit of the black bird, although Spade’s intelligence, force, and personal presence are not negligible. We do know, however, that a genuine union between Brigid and Spade constitutes the most promising force of human cohesion and renewal in the world of the novel. Through the course of the book this possibility is simultaneously suggested, brought to imaginative life, and destroyed. At the end, Brigid manipulates the central value of love and loses. She ends up imprisoned, separated from Spade and the world, and under the threat of the death penalty. For his part, at the end Spade is alone and shivering. Their situation epitomizes and judges what are for Hammett the divisive realities of the market society world he has transformed into the myth of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Central to the dark, unstable world of the novel is the need to act, to invent, and to deceive. Brigid in particular has facade beneath facade, story within story, lie on top of lie, and all compelling, as she is in her resourcefulness, beauty, and sexuality. She says her name is Brigid O’Shaughnessy but she also calls herself Miss Wonderly and Miss LaBlanc. As Spade says, she has one name too many. In a fluid, unstable society, identities are also fluid. “‘I’m not at all the person I pretend to be’” (p. 49), she tells Spade, and we can never be sure of the person she is. The unstable marketplace society of trading and deception is itself a world of appearances; in her rootlessness, lack of identity, and skill at manipulating appearances, Brigid is the perfect embodiment of that society.
On Hammett's vision this society demands acting and storytelling, the systematic manipulation of surfaces, feelings, and values. In her first story Brigid, a brilliant actress and storyteller, acts the part of a daughter deeply concerned about her parents and sister. In the story she invents she wants to bring the family together again; in her version Thursby is the blocking force. Brigid's story plays on and subverts the cohesive value of family love, so that from the opening scene this central unifying value exists only to be exploited and thus degraded. The full consequences appear as Hammett develops the world Brigid lives in and embodies: deceptive, acquisitive, exciting, ruthless. In this hell-like version of the market society love exists to be manipulated, as Brigid manipulates Thursby and attempts to do with Spade. In her initial story the most direct irony is that Brigid presents Thursby as a dangerous seducer, as a person exploiting love for gain, although Thursby is loyal and she is the predatory seducer exploiting Thursby's love and the reader's desire to believe in family love and a concerned, upper-class daughter and sister in distress.

Hammett, however, does not allow us the ease of simple, direct inversions. In Brigid's world it is almost impossible to tell truth from falsehood. What we have instead is a constant process of invention, improvising, of making up stories. A convention of detective fiction, the motivation of "story," checking on a "story," seeing if a "story" fits the facts, becomes in Hammett a brilliant way of playing across different codes of explanation. Thus rather than explaining events, the social values of cohesion, loyalty, and trust are revealed as so many stories told for very different ends; the personal and psychological value of a stable identity likewise becomes an effect produced by the telling of stories rather than the origin of stories; and the epistemological ground of the "facts" dissolves into a seemingly endless chain of stories about stories about stories.

Spade is as good as Brigid at the process of inventing stories. To account to the police for the fight between Cairo and Brigid he improvises a story that includes a joke within a lie within the story. Spade always has a plausible explanation — for Iva, for Cairo, for Gutman. When Cairo challenges him about his
facility he asks, "'what do you want me to do? Learn to stutter?'" (p. 86). Spade gives the impression of knowing but he is groping in the dark, trying to find the truth. He bluffs, he acts as if he knows more than he does to find out something so that he can continue the baffling, dangerous process of finding out more. Brigid, apparently his ally and lover, consistently withholds, distorts, interferes. When Gutman tells his story about the missing $1,000 and Brigid tells her version, Spade brings it to the test and finds out.

For the most part, however, empirical validation is either not possible or requires Spade to penetrate a labyrinth of deceptions and obstacles. Because of the socially generated network of stories, deception, and ruthlessness, Spade does not live in a neatly patterned world where empirical truth sits fixed and quiet for the observer to discover it. Instead he and the others live in a predatory world where in order to find the truth Spade must improvise, throw a monkey-wrench in the machinery, and get out of the way if he can as the parts fly. Spade lives in a world where beams fall at random but people systematically tell stories and use any means necessary to gain what they seek. In this ruthless, acquisitive world of stories and storytelling, what counts is not the truth but whether or not the story covers most of the facts in a way people will believe.

Spade's methodological scepticism is so deep that after he sends Iva to his lawyer he is simply neutral about the story she tells. He neither believes nor disbelieves it but he thinks it will work. Even Spade, however, must sometimes act on the stories he hears. As far as we can tell, he believes Rhea Gutman but in any case he goes on a wild goose chase as a result of her drugged act and story. The handling of point of view systematically avoids the inner processes of thought and feeling. As a result we can never be certain of what Spade or Brigid think or feel. Spade periodically voices his suspicions of Brigid but until the end we do not know what his feelings are. He acts as if he cares for her; she acts as if she cares for him. To an extent both are acting, telling stories to each other, but to an extent they may also be in love. This radical uncertainty about and manipulation of
basic human feelings and ties is central to Hammett's commentary on the market society.

Brigid, in an especially touching confession, says "'Oh, I'm so tired, . . . so tired of it all, of myself, of lying and thinking up lies, and of not knowing what is a lie and what is the truth'" (p. 79). Like other great actresses and storytellers, she may well be telling part of the truth but she is also manipulating Spade and she immediately goes to bed with him to keep him from finding out what he is after. We have a deep need to believe Brigid, to have her confirm our sense that systematic deception is destructive. We have a deep need to wake up from the nightmare of "not knowing what is a lie and what is the truth" because as human beings we crave the truth. Brigid is a significant modern character partly because Hammett endows her with a sensitivity to this human need and the ability simultaneously to violate it in the interests of her even deeper need to acquire the falcon. Brigid's ability is uniquely personal but her motives, her weariness about her identity, her self, and her related need to deceive, to invent stories, to manipulate people, feelings, and appearances—all these are rooted in the social order she emerges from and brilliantly embodies.

As Spade shows, to survive in this painfully uncertain world a person has to make up stories systematically. Survival also calls for a disciplined control over one's feelings, for an ability sometimes to disregard, sometimes to manipulate other people's feelings, and for a final ability to read other people's stories accurately and to deny even those feelings of love which momentarily redeem the darkness of deception and self-seeking.

In Hammett's hell-like version of the market society the cohesive values of love, trust, generosity, and honesty exist almost exclusively in stories people tell to gain advantage for themselves. As in Brigid's stories, these positive values are mixed with themes of betrayal, deception, theft, and killing. The events of the novel reinforce these grimmer themes. Even casual stories further this sense of betrayal and dishonesty, of people out for themselves. A movie-house owner tells Spade a story about a cashier he suspects of theft. Iva tells her story to bring the police down on Spade. Sometimes characters believe their own stories;
sometimes the stories seem accurate and we believe them, as we
do the movie owner or as we believe Tom Polhaus's story about
Thursby.

Although not every story is a lie, the unstable, acquisitive
society of the novel generates a ruthless world of stories and
storytelling, of manipulation and deception, of truth mixed with
guesses mixed with half-truths and lies. For Hammett this social
condition has the metaphysical consequences he has Spade de-
velop in his story about Flitcraft. Unlike the other characters,
Flitcraft comes from the ordinary world of settled commercial
life. Because he comes from the straight world, his realiza-
tions are especially telling. When for no reason at all he is nearly
killed by a falling beam, Flitcraft is shaken into the awareness
that he lives in a world where beams fall at random. "He felt
like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the
works" (p. 56). He comes to see that beneath its placid suburban
surfaces existence is conducted under the aspect of arbitrary,
unmerited death. "He knew then that men died at haphazard
like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them" (p.
57). An intuitive existentialist, Flitcraft acts to get in step with
existence, changes his life, and then in Spade's wry joke, Flitcraft
resumes a routine identical to the one he had left. "He adjusted
himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he
adjusted himself to them not falling" (p. 57). Spade carefully
tells a metaphysical parable that also recognizes the way ordi-
nary people are.

Although we cannot be sure about Spade's motives in telling
the story, they are probably mixed. Perhaps the story is a mon-
key wrench he throws in to find out how Brigid will respond.
She ignores the suggestive power of the story and immediately
returns to her story, to her act, trying to get Spade to trust her.
She has her work cut out for her, since the man who has told
the Flitcraft story has ideas about what goes on under the sur-
faces of things. Spade has narrated his view of existence as pre-
cisely as he can. Whatever his other motives, he wants to tell
his story as clearly and accurately as he can. Unlike Brigid, who
has told her story so often her manner betrays her to Spade,
Spade himself "repeated a sentence slightly rearranged, as if it
were important that each detail be related exactly as it had happened” (p. 54). Honesty is the final test of a style for Whitehead. As a response to a metaphysical world where beams fall at random and a social world where people ruthlessly manipulate appearances to gain advantage, the morality of style is also important to Hammett. Telling the story precisely is one of the few redeeming possibilities in the dark social and metaphysical universe Hammett imagines for his characters. The Flitcraft story, moreover, is one of the few chances Hammett gives us to glimpse what goes on inside Spade and to sense Spade’s view of what goes on in the depths of things.

Brigid’s story about her family and Thursby, Spade’s story about Flitcraft, and Gutman’s story about the Maltese falcon are the most compelling of the countless stories that give the novel its characteristic texture. Like most of the stories that form the context for the Flitcraft story, in his story Gutman narrates a tale of theft and buccaneering, of predatory robber barons on the grand scale and more recent thieves on a smaller scale, of kidnapping and ransom, of concealment, intrigue, and deception. The evidence he presents is circumstantial but his manner is authoritative and he gives his account the authenticity of an encyclopedia article on an arcane subject. He claims an “oblique” reference in a French source — “oblique to be sure, but a reference still” (p. 111). Is this valid inference or the interpretation of a man with Sir Thomas Browne’s quincunx in his head? The quincunx, Brown tells us, is a five-sided figure. Once you have it in your mind, you see five-sided figures everywhere.

Gutman also claims “a clear and unmistakable statement of the facts” in an unpublished source. Maybe yes, maybe no, although why would Gutman invest a fortune and seventeen years of his life if he at least did not believe it? An eighteenth-century source vouches for the existence of the bird as among the wedding presents of King Victor Armadeus II to his wife. That seems like solid evidence but what follows is more ambiguous and depends on the evidence of “a Greek dealer named Charilaos Konstantinides [who] found it in an obscure shop” (p. 112). Do we believe the story because even a wily Greek accepts it or do we dismiss the story as the invention of a wily Greek dealer? Effie
Perine's uncle in the Berkeley History Department is excited over the possibility that the story could be true "and he hopes it is" (p. 124). Effie, though, is wrong about Brigid and Uncle Ted may or may not be just as wrong about the story. Spade maintains a wary scepticism: " 'that's swell,' " he tells Effie about Uncle Ted, " 'as long as he doesn't get too enthusiastic to see through it if it's phony' " (p. 124).

What we know for sure is that like Uncle Ted, we also hope the story is true. In the face of all the ambiguous evidence do we accept the story finally because this tale of deception and ruthlessness in pursuit of a fabulous treasure satisfies our sense of the way things are and appeals to our desire to believe? Are we, then, like Ratliff in *The Hamlet*, the victims of a socially generated myth of buried treasure, a story that exposes the grim practices of a predatory society and, through our acceptance of the story, our own involvement in that society? Maybe yes, maybe no. We do know for sure, however, that in the novel there is one object that is under its surface exactly what it appears to be: the lead falcon Gutman chips away at to reveal black lead right through to the center. This is as certain as the fact that for Hammett Gutman's ruthless, exciting quest is deadly and leads to his death, that Brigid and Spade are separated, and that at the end Spade is alone and shivering.

III

Like any writer who has found a perfect vehicle for his vision, after *The Maltese Falcon* Hammett was faced with the problem of continuing. Unwilling simply to go over old ground, he was impelled to move away from the comprehensive myth that had allowed him to satisfy his deepest sense of social complexity within the conventions of the tough guy mystery he was at the same time elevating into serious fiction. After *Red Harvest* and *The Maltese Falcon*, moreover, Hammett could assume rather than directly expose the acquisitive individualism of his society. In *The Glass Key* (1931) he accordingly concentrates on the positive and negative features of the alienated individualism this
Dashiell Hammett

society produces and on the moral, epistemological, and personal impact of an unstable American world.

Hammett renders this world through the sensibility of a displaced gentleman, Ned Beaumont. Beaumont has been picked up from the gutter by Paul Madvig and has an independent job as right-hand man to this boss of a local political machine. "'I don't believe in anything,' " Ned Beaumont says, "'but I'm too much of a gambler not to be affected by a lot of things.'" He does, however, believe in doing his job right and equally important he believes in his personal obligations to Paul Madvig. These motives impel Beaumont to probe into increasingly darker territory. Through his code of personal loyalty and his need to succeed as his own man on his own terms, Ned Beaumont also holds his personal world together and gives his life that degree of dignity and meaning it has. This precarious enterprise is rooted in the social fragmentation of his American world and in the moral individualism that is part of the American legacy along with the acquisitiveness and eroding of communal bonds that Hammett had exposed in Red Harvest and The Maltese Falcon.

Ned Beaumont's gambling is a metaphor for the uncertainty and contingency of the dark, unstable world he chooses to live in. In direct relation to the fragmentation of the social order, to maintain his sense of himself Ned Beaumont desperately needs to reverse his losing fortunes, to win at gambling, and to collect his debts, all as tokens of self-worth. For him the money is not important in itself but to lose, to fail, is even more degrading than to be cheated. Similarly, he needs to satisfy the demands of his touchy pride and he also needs to keep people at a distance emotionally to protect his easily threatened core of integrity. He cannot rely on the supports of a stable, communal society to give him a sense of self-worth.

As in an intensifying mirror Ned Beaumont's personal isolation and bad health reflect the fragmentation of the American social world of The Glass Key. Ned Beaumont is even more alone than Sam Spade. He is estranged from his past; except for his loyalty to Paul Madvig and his affection for Madvig's

family he is cut off from those around him; and although at the end he is going to leave with Janet Henry, the conclusion enforces rather than counters the prevailing sense of isolation. On one interpretation, Ned Beaumont is caught between his love for Janet Henry and his loyalty to Paul Madvig, who for his part has been willing to sacrifice everything for her. Because of the novel's total reticence about Ned Beaumont's feelings, however, it is also possible that he does not love her at all but is leaving with her to protect his friend from an impossible involvement. In either case the ending is grim, since it severs the bond between Beaumont and Madvig, the main cohesive tie in the dislocated society of the novel. At the end Ned Beaumont has solved the mystery and won the girl but it brings no sense of fulfilment, only of loss, estrangement, and conflict with or because of his loyalty to his friend.

In his hard, unsparing way, Hammett thus gives human urgency to insights John Dewey had articulated more abstractly the year before *The Glass Key*. In a world of "impersonal and socially undirected economic forces," Dewey saw, "the significant thing is that the loyalties which once held individuals, which gave them support, direction, and unity of outlook on life have disappeared..." It would be difficult," he observed, "to find in history an epoch as lacking in solid and assured objects of belief and approved ends of action as the present." The tragedy for Beaumont, who "doesn't believe in anything," is that he either betrays or sacrifices himself to the personal loyalty that does give meaning and coherence to his life in a world in which the traditional supports are shattered. "Stability of individuality," Dewey stressed, "is dependent upon stable objects to which allegiance firmly attaches itself." But under the pressure of undirected acquisitiveness, for most contemporaries, Dewey perceived, "traditional object of loyalty have become hollow or are openly repudiated, and they drift without sure anchorage. Individuals vibrate between a past that is intellectually too empty to give stability and a present that is too diversely crowded and chaotic to afford balance or direction to ideas and emotions." Like Dewey, Hammett is sensitive to the connection between an unstable, acquisitive society and a tense, precarious
individualism. "Assured and integrated individuality," Dewey knew, "is the product of definite social relationships and publicly acknowledged functions." In his world and Hammett's these conditions are not satisfied.

Throughout the novel social surfaces are misleading and unreliable and everyone including Ned Beaumont plays a duplicitous role. Under their patrician veneer those at the top of this world, aristocrats like Senator Henry or the newspaper owner, Howard Mathews, men who traditionally provide leadership, are shown as weak and corrupt. Concealed behind his prestige, Senator Henry is gradually revealed as the murderer. The intensity of the social dislocation is rendered and judged by the violent storm Ned Beaumont struggles through to get at the truth when he finds Opal Madvig and the gangsters and patri- cians who are manipulating her all hiding out together in Mathew's isolated country retreat. The aura of darkness and impenetrable uncertainty intensifies as Ned Beaumont moves deeper and deeper into a corrupt, vital world of underground violence and disorder characteristic of both patricians like Senator Henry and gangsters like Shad O'Rory.

Suggestive as it is, the scene in the storm is secondary to the one in which Beaumont pretends to sell out to Shad O'Rory. In the guise of a betrayer but actually out of loyalty to Paul Madvig, Ned Beaumont enters an enclosed region and is drugged and beaten almost lifeless but in the camp of the enemy he gains the one piece of knowledge he needs. Almost swamped by the primitive violence he is subjected to, his intellect nonetheless manages to retain its acuteness, so that the novel sustains a tension between intelligence and loyalty precariously surviving the threatening, anarchic violence at the center of this recognizably American world.

As this outline indicates, an interpretive problem in The Glass Key is how much emphasis to place on the social milieu, since the novel also has moral, epistemological, and psychological implications. Among the latter Hammett is especially fascinated with the undercurrents of love and irrational hostility between

daughters and fathers, fathers and sons, younger women and older men, and in the topography of the self, of the drama of penetrating beneath the surface of consciousness into a dark region where vital, destructive, primitive impulses are given full play. Except in *The Maltese Falcon* Hammett slights his secondary characters, who are often stock figures. Like many twentieth-century writers, Hammett's main interest is not in conventional character development or in conventional psychological analysis. Instead, he concentrates his understated prose on elliptical insights into his central characters, their society, and the suggestively charged settings they inhabit. At his frequent best the combination of his own sense of complexity and the demands of the popular mystery story for excitement and violence but nothing too fancy in the way of intellectual analysis — this combination yields a fiction in which meaning is embodied in settings and emerges through action rather than through explicit statement or character analysis.

In Hammett the descent into the underworld, e.g., is often rendered by a literal plunge into subbasements or enclosed underground rooms where forbidden, antisocial impulses can be acted out. Throughout his work, moreover, logical connectives are withheld and meaning is conveyed through the techniques of the dream: through charged images and actions and abrupt juxtapositions and realizations intuited in advance of empirical evidence, often on the basis of strong, unarticulated feelings of love and hate. One of Hammett's major achievements is that he unpretentiously does justice to a complex of social, psychological, moral, and epistemological concerns. He also implicitly shows their interrelation, especially the connections between social and epistemological breakdown. In Hammett's work, moreover, the primitive Freudian tensions are not isolated psychological phenomena but they too reflect and intensify the pervasive sense of breakdown, as in the crucial revelation that Senator Henry, a pillar of the respectable social order, has murdered his son or that Opal Madvig has acted to incriminate her father on the mistaken belief that Madvig is the killer. As in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Dain Curse*, Hammett is sensitive
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to the breakdown or perversion of primary family ties as a symptom of a larger social breakdown.

In Red Harvest and The Glass Key as in The Maltese Falcon Hammett's social stand also includes his probing of the dangers of sexual and emotional ties. Hammett's novels are dominated by men but in Red Harvest and The Maltese Falcon he imagines forceful, dangerous women who speak to men's fascination with and fear of sexuality. In The Glass Key the women characters lack the substance of Dinah Brand or her successor, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, but Opal Madvig, Eloise Mathews, and Janet Henry continue to act as a compelling and disruptive force. In The Glass Key, moreover, love is either one-sided and damaging, as between Paul Madvig and Janet Henry, or it is alienating, as in the separation it causes between Madvig and Beaumont. In The Maltese Falcon the central bond of sexually charged love is abused and manipulated: in The Glass Key it is fragmenting and threatening.

The nightmares which dominate the ending of The Glass Key are especially charged with the threat of the fragmenting power of sexuality. Janet Henry has a nightmare of horror: in her dream the glass key breaks in the lock and because they cannot open the door she and Ned Beaumont are overwhelmed by snakes. In the waking world Beaumont does turn the key and open the door on the concealed horrors but the snakes may well overwhelm them nonetheless. Equally ominous is the suggestion of sexual threat and dislocation in the phallic images of the broken key and slithering snakes, hardly encouraging for the fulfillment of their love. The nightmare which provides the novel with its enigmatic title thus reinforces Hammett's pervasive view that sexual love is divisive, not unifying, a serious matter in a socially dislocated world.

Hammett treats sex so as to withhold systematically any sense of personal or social renewal. The tragedy for his sympathetic characters is that Hammett will not allow their lives to be fulfilled. Instead of giving us happy endings or personal fulfillments, Hammett stays true to his sense of modern life. The world his characters live in, for all its energy and their own vitality, is too fragmented and corrupt to deserve renewal, how-
ever much it needs to be transformed. Sam Spade, alone and shivering at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*; at the end of *The Glass Key*, Ned Beaumont staring fixedly at a door that leads nowhere — these are simply reminders of the way Hammett uses the tensions and failed promises of love and sexuality to underscore his social vision.

Reinforcing and reinforced by these tensions in sexual relations, in *Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key* Hammett gives a negative view of the acquisitive social order and an ambivalent one of the individualistic violence, energy, and alienation that occupy much of his attention. Not only does he show the close relation between the respectable world and the underworld but also, as Steven Marcus observes, "he unwaveringly represents the world of crime as a reproduction in both structure and detail of the modern capitalist society that it depends on, preys off, and is part of."8 It is not surprising that within a few years of *Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key* Hammett had become actively engaged in the politics of the left, as if to achieve in the outside world the transformation he shows is necessary but which he refuses to imagine in his fiction.

8Marcus, 373.