

If They Hang You:
Emotional Conflict in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*

Masahiko Seki

Dashiell Hammett, who aspired to be treated as a serious writer like Faulkner or Hemingway, has recently been receiving academic attention as he hoped. Particularly, his most famous work, *The Maltese Falcon*, is a very popular subject for criticism. Because *The Maltese Falcon* shows the culmination of his skills in the unique writing style and creation of an exciting drama of a hard-boiled hero, his third novel naturally deserves high estimation.

The Maltese Falcon is not only his representative work but also of the hard-boiled school, which values self-restraint, toughness, anti-feminism as the birthright of the genre¹. It features a tough detective following his own code (Sam Spade) and a treacherous though attractive woman (Brigid O'Shaughnessy). The detective strives to obtain a valuable statue of falcon and chases after murderers alone with his caliber and violence. The beautiful woman he apparently loves turns out to be a murderer of his partner. But he manages to restrain his emotion and refuses her solicitation for forgiveness. He consigns her to the police and becomes a hero of "anti-feminism."

Many critics argue about the relationship between Spade and Brigid. Spade is apparently a cynical and heartless man. He makes Brigid arrested without being moved by her plea. Emphasizing his "daemonic" feature², in his oft-quoted thesis, Robert Edenbaum calls Spade "a hero who has [no sentiment] and survives because he has none" (81). Therefore Brigid, "a woman of sentiment", is deceived and falls victim to him. But we can not clearly declare that Spade has "no sentiment" because the possibility of some sentiment is shown when Spade exposes Brigid's guilt. He "set[s] the edges of his teeth together" and says, "I won't because all of me wants to - wants to say hell with the consequences and do it" (583). He also enumerates no less than seven reasons (probably more if circumstances permit) to send Brigid to prison. It is highly possible that these too many reasons are devised to convince himself to give up the fact on the other side of the seven reasons - "that maybe [she] loves [him] and maybe [he] loves [her]" (582). So, it is not that Spade has no

sentiment. He tries to restrain it with utmost effort. The relationship between them, which requires Spade to act as if he did not love her, obviously plays a central part in this novel. Especially, the scene where he finally turns her in is the highest point of the novel unlike the anti-climax that the statue of falcon is found to be false. As one of points of contention, I will later discuss this issue and examine Spade's emotional conflict.

Hammett's unique writing style is also one of popular topics. His laconic, precise, and thoroughly objective description, often compared to Hemingway's style, is perfected in this novel. The third person narrative eliminates all unnecessary statement like psychological delineation and concentrates on describing what characters do or say.³ But this extreme objectivity brings about some problems. The problems will also be taken up and examined in this essay.

It has been widely discussed why hard-boiled novels became popular in the 1930s or how they were generated. But I think it has not been amply considered why Hammett chose to write hard-boiled novels. Of course, it was natural for him to write detective novels from his experience as an ex-Pinkerton detective. Pinkerton detectives obeyed the strict rules. In this regard, they are similar to the protagonists acting on a code. But then, why did he become a Pinkerton detective?

Discussing tough novels of the thirties and forties in *Rebel*, Albert Camus says,

Its technique consists in describing men by their outside appearances, in their most causal actions, of reproducing, without comment, everything they say down to their repetitions, and finally by acting as if men were entirely defined by their daily automatism ... This technique is called realistic only owing to a misapprehension ... it is perfectly obvious that his 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 ... It would seem that for these writers, it is the inner life that deprives human actions of unity and that tears people away from one another. (265-66)

I think Camus's indication perfectly applies to Hammett.⁴ He needed a hard-boiled style to avert his eyes from "inner life" – especially his own "inner life". In order to analyze *The Maltese Falcon*, we must examine his mentality.

In this essay, I will discuss the issues of *The Maltese Falcon* mentioned

above, emphasizing Hammett's emotional conflict which seems to be deeply linked to tangled emotions to his parents, especially to his mother. I hope that the analysis of *The Maltese Falcon* on the basis of Hammett's problematic relationship with his parents will add a new perspective to criticism on this novel.

1. The Code of a Detective

It is unquestionable that in America there has been an ethos which encourages worship of individualism. The popularity of the "frontier" was closely related to such an ethos because it was the very best place for believers of individualism. In the frontier there were minimum laws, and thanks to that an individual could acquire maximum freedom. A failure was an underdog while a person who made a fortune with his ability and skills was the best man. Because of this simplicity, the frontier attracted many people and was optimistically liked despite the problems of exclusion of the weak and minorities.

Though the frontier gradually disappeared with the steady increase of city-dwellers, belief in individualism seemed to remain unabated. In *The Maltese Falcon*, a best-selling book, the individual, who is "the cowboy adapted to life on the city streets"⁵, demonstrates his power at a maximum in the city as lawless as the frontier. Spade, the protagonist, is a private detective, who works on his own.⁶ In a degree, he is allowed to violate the laws. The police are undependable. The district attorney cares only about achieving satisfactory results. Failures are to die; the men who excel at ability and skills can get the drop on those who do not. An individual also crushes its antithetical concept, the masses. Spade fights against Gutman's group and finally destroys it.

But one can not do everything he wants just because the city is lawless; particularly the protagonist of the novel can't. He must be delineated as a hero. If he does as he pleases, he becomes much the same as villains.

Whatever his vocation, the hero is the "best man," and as such he has tremendous power over his fellows. Without self-restraint, he could become a despotic villain, for no one else is capable of restraining him, but his code makes him a sympathetic figure. (Hamilton 42)

It's even more so for the protagonist of a detective novel like *The Maltese*

Falcon. In a detective novel, characters other than a detective do not always tell the truth. If what a detective says is also dubitable, readers can not judge whether the mystery is finally solved or not. Therefore, a detective must be a reliable person and differentiated from villains, though there are exceptions like Gaston Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*. Of course, unlike Philip Marlowe, who is faithful to his clients and offers a glimpse of his conscience, Sam Spade is not a man we can place full confidence in. But in the conversation with Brigid at the last part of the novel we realize that he observes a so-called code from his reference to what a detective must do.

What his code is, however, is not clear. There is no explanation except for the unsatisfactory one that his vocation, a detective, requires a strict code. Certainly it is possible to regard his code as a code of professional ethics. But that does not explain why he has such rigid ethics that he must make the woman he loves go to jail. What is Spade's code and where does it come from? What are there behind this code?

2. Hate for a Father

Dashiell Hammett's father, Richard Thomas Hammett, was a hardly respectable man, just like his grandfather Samuel Hammett.

Both Hammett's father and grandfather were known as business failures, heavy drinkers, gamblers and ladies' men; proud, pugnacious, stubborn, independent and ambitious, though inherent lazy. (Hamilton 120)

Hammett, who was forced to give up school owing to his father's failing business, naturally detested him and did not conceal his revulsion as his daughter testifies.⁷ He often declared that he "would never treat a woman the way his father treated his mother" (*Layman Shadow Man* 8). When Hammett asked his father for money to set himself up as a writer, his father gave him no help, which intensified his ill feelings.

This hate for his father is shown in his novels quite directly. In *Red Harvest*, Elihu Willsson, the owner of Personville, brings "[his son] and his French wife home from Paris" to "clear the burg of vice and corruption" (11) and causes his son's death. It's "a damned nice fatherly trick" to "shake [his opponents] loose". (11) In *The Thin Man*, the senator kills his son.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, there is a pseudo parent-child relationship between

Gutman and his merry man, Wilmer. But this bond is very fragile and dubious. When, to get things under control, Spade asks Gutman to hand Wilmer over to the police as a culprit, the father-son relationship easily collapses.

Gutman smiled benignly at him and said: "Well, Wilmer, I'm sorry indeed to loose you, and I want you to know that I couldn't be any fonder of you if you were my own son; but – well, by Gad! – if you lose a son it's possible to get another – and there's only one Maltese Falcon."

Spade laughed. (563)

Spade laughs because the heartlessness of Gutman, who has no hesitation in choosing Maltese Falcon, not Wilmer, whom he calls a darling son, is utterly revealed here. A father is depicted as an untrustworthy person. In addition, after the falcon he obtains with the sacrifice of his pseudo son is found to be a fake, elated in spirits, Gutman immediately plans to set out on a journey to look for the genuine falcon.

In the first place, it is Gutman that causes Spade to look for the falcon at the risk of his life. Gutman guarantees the value of the falcon and triggers a commotion. We can read Hammett's relationship with his father here; that is, Spade's bitter struggle is likely to reflect Hammett's sense of futility caused by the fact that his life was run by his father.⁸

The falcon, the value of which only Gutman guarantees, is similar to what Hammett's father attempted to uphold and often failed – a family. As I will explain later, the family, which Hammett was told to admire and make an effort to keep up, turned out to be a fake like the falcon. Only disappointment, fatigue, and resentment remained. Therefore, it may be said that Spade gives Gutman over to the police to revenge himself on the fat man: the character resembling Hammett's father.

3. The Divided Mother

On the other hand, Hammett had very good relations with his mother. She loved him the best of her three children and taught him reading, which soon he became caught up in so intensely that his grades gradually dropped.⁹

[Hammett] was close to his mother [and wanted to live up to her expectations of him as a man of honour, but his temperament made this

difficult. (Hamilton 122)

A detective was the most suitable profession for Hammett, who, although trying to “live up to her expectations”, found himself walking the same road as his father after all. After he took a position at Pinkerton Detective Agency and learned its code, “the Pinkerton code allowed him to justify any action so long as it played some part in the defense of ‘good people’” (Hamilton 122). It enabled him to feel he was “a man of honour”, who protected “good people” as long as he followed it.

But Hammett's feelings for his mother could not be simply called love. His daughter notes, “when [Hammett] was little, he said, he liked to imagine that he was adopted, and one stormy night his ‘real’ father would come driving down the road to reclaim him” (Jo 20). From this episode, we can easily recognize his detestation for his father. But, if one hates his/her father and loves his/her mother, it is not so natural that he/she should hope to be “adopted” because being adopted makes him/her to leave his/her darling mother.

His biographer, Diane Johnson, also mentions an interesting episode.

His crisis of feeling about his parents was intensified by the death now of his mother. Hammett did not go East for his mother's funeral, but he grieved, he felt as orphaned as Jose. He signed some of his first stories “Peter Collinson”; in the underworld, Peter Collins was a name for nobody, a John Doe, so Peter Collinson meant nobody's son. (Johnson *The Life* 37)

In these episodes, we get glimpses of Hammett's complex feelings about his mother. Such feelings are clearly shown in *The Maltese Falcon*, especially in the most important element: the relationship between Spade and Brigid.

Thinking of Spade, who struggles to fulfill Brigid's demand though doubting her, one would be reminded that their relationship is similar to that between Hammett and his mother to some extent. It is often indicated that the reason Spade lets his partner, Archer, go when he receives the first request from Brigid is that Spade has suspicions against her from the beginning. In that case, there is no reason that Spade must risk his life to carry out his duty because Brigid is not among “good people” at all. Besides, the code of professional ethics does not require protecting the client who kills a detective. Therefore, Spade works hard not so much for a client as for someone whose requests or expectations he

must fulfill at any cost. Such a person for Hammett is obvious: his mother.

Probably owing to it, in front of Brigid, Spade, who rarely expresses his feelings with his actions though his countenance often changes, curses at Dandy and says to Brigid, "Childish, huh?" (461). But, shortly after that, he asks Brigid not to be childish by saying to her, "Don't brag about it. It's childish" (467).

But it's too simplistic to link Brigid with Hammett's mother without careful consideration. We must examine why Spade quietly consigns Brigid to the police.

Now, I would like to focus on Spade's secretary, Effie. She is a very strange character. She is the only character to whom Spade talks with his guard down in the novel where almost all characters tell lies or talk cautiously. It is often pointed out that women's participation in society increased at the time when hard-boiled novels were popular and that emotional backlash against it contributed to the creation of various villainesses. Yet though this explanation applies to the villainesses like Brigid and Iva, it does not explain Effie. Though it can be said that the relationship between Spade and Effie is based on the tradition of the western¹¹, there still remains a mystery in Effie's attitude: her intuitive and absolute confidence in Brigid. Spade interprets it as the feelings caused by her sympathy for the same sex. But his interpretation does not explain why Effie detests Iva.

It may be helpful to bear in mind that Effie is also a motherly character. The office where Effie spends most of the day is the place for Spade to return to and Effie always welcomes him warmly. In the following passage, we recognize less the relationship between a man and a woman than a mother and her child:

[Spade] leaned back until the back of his head over the chair-top rested against her breast...She murmured, "Poor head", and stroked it in silence awhile. (523)

Effie also strongly demands that Spade live up to Brigid's expectations and become "a man of honour".

"Sam Spade", [she] said, "you're the most contemptible man God ever made when you want to be. Because she did something without confiding in you you'd sit here and do nothing when you know she's in danger, when you know she might be - ." (524)

Here Effie commands Spade not to be "contemptible", a wish Hammett regarded as his mother's.

In a word, it can be said that Brigid and Effie represent different aspects of the same person: Hammett's mother. Therefore, Effie, as if she knew all about her, has complete confidence in Brigid and strongly asks Spade to help her.

Hammett hated his father but loved his mother. His mother, however, tried to keep her marital relationship, no matter how badly she was treated by her husband.

Trapped by the petty tyrannies of all ill, vain, Southern husband, Annie Hammett was nonetheless too proud to feel sorry for herself. If you can't hold a marriage together with love, she told neighbors, do it with sex.
(Marling *Hard-Boiled*)

If a son realizes his mother even thinks of holding a marriage with sex with the man he loathes, he may well begin to doubt the value of the thing she strives to protect. That is to say, it is quite possible that Hammett doubted if the family he belonged to was so valuable and that he came to a conclusion: no, it's not.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, a family's fragility and fictitiousness are revealed. A distorted family, which consists of Gutman (a father), Cairo (a mother), and Wilmer (a son), collapses all too easily as we have already seen. To Brigid, with a hint of sarcasm, Spade tells a story of Flitcraft, who reconsiders his way of life shocked by a beam's abrupt dropping close by him. Though Flitcraft leaves his family, he soon sets up a new one similar to the former. I think this episode emphasizes less a chaotic essence of life as is often pointed out than foolishness of the man who again appreciates the value of a family he once abandoned and spoils his determination to give it up.¹² Though he noticed the fictitiousness of a mild life and abandoned a family, Flitcraft comes to believe for no apparent reason that a family has some value.

Hammett lived with his wife and children for only five years. In 1926, due to the worsening of his lung tuberculosis, he began to live apart from his family and never returned to family life. Even before he divorced, he had affairs according to his daughter (Jo 66-67). After he finished writing *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett fell in love with Nell Martin, to whom *The Glass Key* is dedicated. Neither of them acknowledges the value of a family.

It interested [them] to question old ideas and old-hat notions: Which was the higher imperative – marriage vows or sexual attraction, not to mention love? What was the moral position of an Other Woman? ... What are the duties of a man to a wife he no longer loves? (Johnson *Dashiell Hammett* 79)

It will be useful to note the fact that his wife placed much value on the family like his mother. Because his wife “was always one to shift blame away from the family when she could,” she didn’t blame Hammett but “the sales meetings he had to attend” for drinking too much (Jo 49). She was not willing to divorce. “Legal separation or divorce was a disgrace” in her eyes (Jo 49-50). But Hammett “could not put up with the everyday clatter and confusion of family life” and “disliked the hypocrisy of showy family holidays like Christmas because the ideal of the loving family holding hands under the Christmas tree hadn’t been his experience” (Jo 69). Therefore, he divorced a domesticated wife, never to remarry.¹³

For a son who can not believe in the value of a family, it would be barely endurable that his darling mother engages in sex for the valueless family. It must have stirred up his anguish and doubts about her mother’s attitude. Then, it would be no wonder that, when he writes a novel, he should project the favorable part of his mother onto one character and the unfavorable – the part he does not know how to love – onto another.

Therefore, in *The Maltese Falcon*, a mother is divided into two characters: Brigid, a mother who attempts to accomplish a purpose with her sexual attraction and Effie, a mother who gives Spade selfless love without having sexual relationships with anyone.¹⁴ Spade, though doubting Brigid, does his utmost to live up to her expectations as well as Effie’s.¹⁵ His doubts about Brigid, who makes use of her sexual attraction to her advantage, blow out as anger when she seduces Spade. To Brigid, who says, “Can I buy you with my body?” (439), Spade expresses his outrage:

He kissed her mouth roughly and contemptuously...His face was hard and furious...He stood up and said: “Christ! There’s no sense to this!” He took two steps towards the fireplace and stopped, glowering at the burning logs, grinding his teeth together. (439)

His doubts about Brigid become so big that he eventually strips Brigid naked to

examine her. But he can not find anything to answer his doubts.

Though Spade gives Brigid over to the police in the end, this condemnation against a mother involves the severe pain on his part. Criticized about his cruel treatment of Brigid by Effie, "Spade's face became pale as his collar" (584).

But Spade does love Brigid although he forsakes her. His remark that "you're an angel. I'll wait for you ... If they hang you I'll always remember you" (579) does not seem to be a complete irony. Moreover, to send Brigid to prison is to send her to the place where men can not touch her (Kotaka 93). By doing so, Hammett separates his mother from sex.

4. Departure from the Mother's Code

Hammett expressed his hate for his father directly. But, because his mother was an object of his love on a superficial level, he avoided looking directly at his internal doubts about her. Such emotional struggle gives *The Maltese Falcon* a great deal of tension, which makes this detective novel a first-rate literary work.

I believe, however, considering depth of the affliction, that there is a further cause of his ambivalent feelings for his mother. As I stated earlier, Hammett was willing to follow what his mother instructed him. He eclectically read many books and was extremely reluctant to hurt anyone¹⁶, obviously influenced by his mother, who was "known as 'Lady' for her insistence on manners and morality" (Marling *Dashiell Hammett* 2). After he dropped out of school, he drifted from job to job until he found employment in Pinkerton Detective Agency. He welcomed its code, Synthia Hamilton says, mainly because it enabled him to feel he was "a man of honour" and guarded "good people". But let us see it from a different perspective.

Pinkerton detectives, in response to the deteriorating condition of public security, chase after criminals, look for stolen valuables, and guard important people. Not only that, however, they were known as strikebreakers. In those days, the labor movement was so active that there frequently occurred strikes. Detectives were hired by the rich to break them up, probably by violent means. So, Pinkerton detectives did not always work for "good people." There is a significant episode, which shows the dark side of the detective's work of those days.

Frank Little, a labor agitator, was kidnapped by some men one night. Then, in the morning, he was found dead. He hang from the trestle with his testicles cut off. It was clear that a mine owner ordered killing of the agitator and

Pinkerton detectives joined a conspiracy because “men had come to [Hammett] and to other Pinkerton agents and had proposed that they help do away with Frank Little.” (Johnson *The Life* 20) Hammett refused this proposal, but he kept working as a Pinkerton detective as if nothing had happened. This fact implies that Hammett knew he was one of the people who sometimes harmed “good people”. Given his later commitment to communism, it is highly likely that workers were among his “good people” as Diane Johnson says.¹⁷

What is important is that Hammett continued to work as a detective though he knew his job sometimes betrayed the expectations of his mother. This “sometimes” is significant because Hammett wanted the code, which is at once similar to and different from his mother’s.

Hammett’s mother, Annie Hammett, “held herself superior to her husband’s family.” (Marling *Dashiell Hammett* 1) Her son, who strongly sympathized with her, naturally followed her instructions, not his father’s. In fact, his profligate father was not in a position to teach him how to live. Hammett loved his mother and tried to follow her advice. Though he had changed jobs frequently due to his aloofness, which he possibly learned from his mother, he finally found the job that ostensibly seemed to be fitted for his mother’s code and worked as a detective for a long time.

But in America, where there are a belief in “self-made man” and a derogatory term “mama’s boy”, one must become independent of his/her parents, especially of his/her mother. So, while he felt very close to his mother, Hammett, probably unconsciously, left her little by little. He hated violence in actual life, but he liked to depict violent scenes in his works and made readers think he was a tough-guy overcoming many challenges. His pursuit for masculinity is obvious. He served in the war twice and, in the second service, was called “Pop” by young soldiers like Hemingway who also had an oppressive mother. Even his writing style may be related to his fascination with masculinity. Succinct and precise expression supports masculine reticence, and from a psychoanalytic perspective, it counteracts a chaotic, vague, almost borderless bond between a mother and a child.

However, because he loved his mother, Hammett could not openly reject her. He had to leave his mother unconsciously, being conscious of his loyalty. The Pinkerton code was ideal for such psychological need. It mainly encouraged him to fulfill his mother’s demand, but partially to go away from it. Therefore, primarily the code of detective requires responding to expectations of his mother, but behind it, linked with an aversion to her, works to eliminate her.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, it is clear that being faithful to the code of detectives leads to elimination of motherlike characters. When uncovering Brigid's crime, Spade enumerates seven reasons based on the code of detectives.

When a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it...He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it. Then it happens we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed it's bad business to let the killer get away with it. It's bad all around – bad for that organization, bad for every detective everywhere. Third, I'm a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go(581-82)

Brigid must be punished because Spade is a detective. The code of detectives requires it. After he made Brigid arrested according to his code, Effie reproaches him for it. He shivers, possibly feeling alone (585).

In *Red Harvest*, another mother figure is eliminated. After he failed in his attempt to bring peace to Personville with the peace conference, the Op visits Dinah, a rapacious woman, and complains to her. Dinah "smiled too softly and spoke too indulgently", saying, "It's not your fault, darling." (137) In this scene, the Op unusually betrays his feelings and speaks honestly. Dinah, who is depicted as an irresponsible and treacherous woman, consoles the depressed Op for no good reason.

But this mother figure, due to its pseudo motherhood, is killed soon after the scene. The Op is the prime suspect. After waking up from a dream caused by laudanum, he found himself holding the grip of the ice pick sticking in her breast. Though later he turns out to be innocent, the description of the death of Dinah gives us the impression that it is the Op that killed her – a mother.

The depiction of the Op's dream while killing of Dinah is being carried out is a rare scene revealing a character's consciousness and tells us much about Hammett's own consciousness. In his dream, the Op pursues the woman with a long black veil whom he knows well but forgets who she is. It would not be unreasonable to regard this woman as a mother because the Op has just talked with Dinah, a mother figure, before he falls asleep at her elbow. A black veil the woman wears probably has something to do with Hammett's doubts for his mother. Unable to know what his mother has in mind, the Op (Hammett) hunts for her real nature as Spade strips Brigid naked to investigate her. Before long,

the woman appears in front of him and begins kissing him. He is “very uncomfortable because everybody [stands] around looking at [them] and laughing” (142). It seems to show the pressure Hammett felt from American society, where “mama’s boy” is looked down on. So he feels embarrassed when the motherlike woman kisses him in public. Waking up from the next dream, where the Op killed the man he hated, he finds Dinah’s dead body with the ice pick he holds stuck. That is to say, he bids farewell to his mother, who kissed and embarrassed him. The closer he gets to his mother, the more intense his embarrassment becomes. Coming close to the mother generates the desire to exclude her.

Of course, unconscious elimination of his mother, whom Hammett loves much, torments him severely. His daughter remembers:

There’s always the theory, especially concerning writers, of drink as anesthetic – that its use was to deaden their psychic pain. Well, Papa carried around a ton of that. But if he drank to deaden it, it sure didn’t work.

What I believed as a child was that he drank to punish himself; when he was hurting others, he was hurting himself. That didn’t, and still doesn’t, make any sense to me. But maybe it makes as much sense as anything else. (Jo110)

His feelings for his mother are always ambivalent. It is no wonder that he tried to look away from disturbed emotions. His daughter says she regrets that she did not ask him about his mother. Her remark means Hammett did not talk about his mother at all while he expressed his hate for his father.

Owing to these ambivalent and problematic feelings, Hammett was reluctant to deal with “inner life”. For him, emotions were perplexing. Therefore, it can be said that his appreciation of self-restraint came from his fear of emotions.

Love, a strong emotion, is always enigmatic in Hammett’s novels and therefore must be repressed. Because his purest and most primitive love – the love for his mother – was tangled, love in his novels is destined to be ruined. In his second novel, *The Dain Curse*, Hammett thoroughly reveals the dangerousness of love. In this novel, the unimpassioned Op exposes guilt of his old friend, Fitzstephan, who crazily loves a woman and commits crimes to acquire her. Many critics point out the similarity between Hammett and Fitzstephan.¹⁸ Based on that, William Nolan indicates Hammett’s “split

personality”:

[Hammett] was half the pragmatic, tough-minded ex-Pinkerton detective and half the imaginative novelist conjuring up Gothic curses and doomed heroines. In the Dain book, he simply put these two opposite halves of himself on paper, playing them against each other as hero and villain. The detective is the final winner; the dreamer is defeated by the realist. (*Hammett* 84)

By punishing Fitzstephan, his sentimental self, Hammett tries to restrain his sentiments – especially his intricate love.

There is another point we should examine in *The Dain Curse*. In Hammett's novels, there sometimes appear the episodes with different tones from his stoic and matter-of-fact description such as the Op's dream and his monologue to Dinah in *Red Harvest*. In this novel, the scene where the quasi-ghost attacks the Op is one such example. In the Temple of the Holy Grail, the Op sees an amorphous and fog-like thing. It wraps him around and bears him down with its “immense suffocating weight”. It has “no solidity” but “weight that was pressing [him] down, smothering [him].” (271) His attempts to beat it back result in failure. What is worse, he bleeds from his left hand, trying to claw it. As is unusual with him, the Op becomes upset and scurries away.

Troubled emotions are often closely related to feelings for the mother. I think it makes sense to interpret this scene in the context of problems about the mother. In other words, the fog-like thing embodies the pressure Hammett unconsciously felt from his mother. Because of his unawareness, it is amorphous. It wraps him up and has “the monstrous weight on him.” Against this overwhelming force of his mother's, he tries to fight back. He claws it and bleeds because attacking his mother is attacking his beloved one. It naturally damages him. In this interpretation, we can see his enmity against his mother – and Hammett himself, who has such a feeling.

Behind his hard-boiled text lie problematic feelings for his mother. Hammett kept gazing at only the tip of the iceberg. In a way, it was inevitable that Hammett chose to write detective novels. Its “anti-feminism” makes female characters treacherous and uncanny, which was suited to his unconscious mind.

5 The Ideal Mother, the Real Father

The Maltese Falcon is not a simple story. In this novel, Hammett does not intend to make readers perceive lyricism tinged with sense of futility of Spade, who struggles for his beloved one and, though obtaining nothing, succeeds in sticking to his belief to the end. As is clear from the fact that Robert Edenbaum regards him a villain, the gap between Spade and villains does not seem very wide. The cause of this similarity could be attributed to Hammett's writing style.

As I stated earlier, his style is thoroughly objective. The narrative focuses on Spade's behavior but does not describe his mind. This unique style is very interesting and, as I have argued, may reflect his internal urging. But it is not suitable for a detective novel. Because readers can not find out what Spade has in mind, Spade's behavior can be interpreted in various ways. Therefore, we can not deny the possibility that Spade is a contemptible man, who hunts after the statue of falcon for its high-value and improves his image to the police by turning in the people no longer necessary such as Gutman and Brigid. Depending on the perspective, Gutman and he are or are not alike. Hammett does not declare that it is very honorable of Spade to try hard to fulfill the demands of clients or Effie. He leaves room for the possibility that Spade takes advantage of Brigid to obtain the statue of falcon.

This ambiguity is also likely to result from Hammett's relationship with his parents. Though Hammett detested his father and grandfather, he became a hard-drinking and womanizing man like them. He could not keep working earnestly and changed jobs frequently like his father. His frightening awareness that he ended up as a profligate man like his father in spite of his mother's expectations could not be effaced easily.

Therefore, it is more than probable that the suspicion Hammett (Spade) and his father (Gutman) were two of a kind necessitated the ambiguity of Spade's motivation. Spade had to be described not only as an honorable man but also as the man who would give readers the impression that he had one foot in the world of criminals such as Gutman though fighting for Brigid and Effie.

In a sense, Edenbaum's indication is right. Hammett was "a villain", who betrayed his mother. Moreover, he attacked and tried to eliminate her – "an innocent victim". But she was always with Hammett. "If they hang you", he would have said to her, "I'll always remember you." Of course he never forgot

her.

Notes

¹ Fiedler 499

² At the beginning of the novel, his non-humanlike visage is depicted.

Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down – from high flat temples – in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan. (391)

³ As the example of thoroughly objective description, the beginning of Chapter 2 is often referred to.

A telephone-bell rang in darkness. When it had rung three times bed-springs creaked, fingers fumbled on wood, something small and hard thudded on a carpeted floor, the springs creaked again, and a man's voice said:

“Hello....Yes, speaking....Dead?...Yes....Fifteen minutes. Thanks.”

A switch clicked and a white bowl hung on three gilded chains from the ceiling's center filled the room with light. Spade, barefooted in green and white checked pajamas, sat on the side of his bed. He scowled at the telephone on the table while his hands took from beside it a packet of brown papers and a sack of Bull Durham tobacco. (398)

Depiction is restricted to the visible and the audible like a scene of a movie.

⁴ William Marling also indicates Hammett's aversion to “inner life”.

Hammett felt uncertain about emotions; as he remarked when he incarnated them in one unpredictable character, “you don't know approximately what they will be under any given set of circumstances, and so they are sources of uneasiness and confusion. You can't count on them. They make you uncomfortable.” (*Dashiell Hammett* 25)

He finds the example in the dream of the Op in *Red Harvest*. The Op, coked up, has two dreams. In the first dream, he pursues the woman he knows well though he can not get nearer. When he finally finds her, she begins to kiss him in front of people and embarrass him. In the second, the Op chases a small brown man. At the top of the

building, he catches the man by the head and falls off the roof with him. About this episode, Marling says,

Both dreams are quests, the first after a personal emotional life that ends in embarrassment; the second after a man (reflecting the Op's occupation) that ends in death. Both have an immediately apparent sentimental value, which is one function. But, taken sequentially, the allegoric function is to imply that the admission of emotion leads to death. (*Dashiell Hammett* 54)

⁵ Fiedler 499

⁶ Significantly, his partner, Miles Archer, is killed soon after the novel begins. A detective, the lone and unfettered cowboy, must solve the problems in solitude.

⁷ Jo 20

⁸ Though there are some differences between sturdy Spade and phthisical Hammett, Spade was created with Hammett's considerable empathy.

Hammett also liked his protagonists, especially heroes, and he understood them. He identified with them, and sometimes signed his letters with their names: Spade... (Johnson 87)

Moreover, Spade's name, Sam, is the same as Hammett's name.

⁹ Hammett's love for his mother and hate for his father are shown in the fact that "he dropped the Samuel when he began to write professional fiction" (Nolan 25). Samuel is the name of his paternal grandfather while Dashiell is his mother's maiden name. Samuel Dashiell Hammett selected the name of Dashiell Hammett as a writer; that is, he dropped his father and selected his mother.

Hammett's daughter, Jo Hammett, also confirms these emotions about his parents. She says "Papa complained to my sister in the forties that he wished his father would quit bragging about his lady friends. Though Annie Hammett had been dead for many years, it still rankled Papa to be reminded how his father's affairs had hurt her" (20).

She also describes the close relationship between Hammett and his mother (21-25).

¹⁰ Not to visit his parents was typical behavior of Hammett as his daughter testified. "When [his father] was in his last days, Papa sent money and clothes, but he did not deliver them himself" (21). We must keep in mind that he was reluctant to see his parents directly.

¹¹ Referring to the tradition Hamilton says, "the self-made individualist and his idealized, humble helpmate remained central to America's dreamscape." (35)

¹² Spade says, "I don't think [Flitcraft] even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that's the part of it I always liked" (445). Therefore, it seems reasonable that Spade should esteem Flitcraft's ability to adapt. But, as William Marling says, we should perceive an ironic tone in

Spade's statement (*The American* 145-46) because "beams do not continue to fall in Flitcraft's world, but they do in Spade's" (Edenbaum 84).

¹³ About Hammett's short-lived marriage, Richard Layman says "His brief experience with family life had proven what he had clearly suspected: that it was not for him, especially when so many opportunities were available. He had a career to develop that required all his energies" (*Dashiell Hammett's* 13).

¹⁴ William Nolan calls her "a de-sexualized mother figure" (*Dashiell Hammett* 128).

¹⁵ Brigid's first request as Miss Wonderly is to bring back her sister lest her parents should not worry, which aims to keep her family. From this episode, it is clear that someone who wants to keep a family is overlapped with Brigid.

¹⁶ Effie is also a supporter of the value of a family. She lives with her family and probably hopes marriage between Spade and Brigid. Jasmine Yong Hall says, "Spade has given Brigid over to the police, and [Effie] responds to his embrace with physical aversion. She has been expecting the more traditional social romance ending of marriage, but *The Maltese Falcon* ends with the lover's incarceration" (234).

Robert Edenbaum points out Brigid's rather conventional tendency.

[Brigid] falls back on a set of conventions that she has discarded in her own life, but which she naively assumes still hold for others'. At the end of the novel, Brigid is not merely acting her shock at Spade's refusal to shield her; that shock is as genuine as Effie Perine's at Spade for that same refusal – and as sentimental. (84)

Spade, however, as Christopher Metress says, does not care about the "interests of society and family" (223). So, their attitudes to a family may be one of the reasons why Spade keeps himself at arm's length with them.

¹⁶ Johnson *The Life* 23

¹⁷ Johnson *The Life* 21

¹⁸ Fitzstephan is a writer like Hammett. William Nolan says the following description "was obvious self-description" (*Hammett* 84):

[A] long, lean, sorrel-haired man of thirty-two with sleepy gray eyes, a wide, humourous mouth, and carelessly worn clothes; a man who pretended to be lazier than he was, who would rather talk than do anything else, and had a lot of what seemed to be accurate information and original ideas on any subject that happened to come, as long as it was a little out of the ordinary.

Works Cited

- Camus, Albert. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*. New York: Vintage Book, 1991.
- Edenbaum, I. Robert. "The Poetics of the Private Eye: The Novels of Dashiell Hammett." *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*. Ed. David Madden. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968. 80-103.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997.
- Hamilton, Synthia. *Western and Hard-boiled Detective Fiction in America*. London: Macmillan Press, 1987.
- Hammett, Dashiell. *Dashiell Hammett Complete Novels*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1999.
- Hammett, Jo. *Dashiell Hammett A Daughter Remembers*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001.
- Hall, Jasmine Yong. "Jameson, Genre, and Gumshoes: The Maltese Falcon as Inverted Romance." *Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon: A Documentary Volume*. Ed. Richard Layman. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 229-237.
- Johnson, Diane. *Dashiell Hammett A Life*. New York: Randomhouse, 1983.
- . *The Life of Dashiell Hammett*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1984.
- Layman, Richard. *Shadow Man: the Life of Dashiell Hammett*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.
- , ed. *Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon: A Documentary Volume*. Detroit: Gale, 2003.
- Marling, William. *Dashiell Hammett*. New York: Twayne Publishers 1983.
- . *Hard-boiled Fiction*. Case Western Reserve University. Updated 2 August 2001. [Http://www.cwru.edu/artsci/engl/marling/hardboiled/Hammett.HTM](http://www.cwru.edu/artsci/engl/marling/hardboiled/Hammett.HTM)
- . *The American Roman Noir*. Athens, GA.: University of Georgia Press 1995.
- Meress, Christopher. "Dashiell Hammett and the Challenge of New Individualism: Rereading Red Harvest and *The Maltese Falcon*." *Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon: A Documentary Volume*. Ed. Richard Layman. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 216-229.
- Kotaka, Nobumitsu. *General Knowledge of Hard-boiled novels. (Hard-boiled no zatsugaku)* Tokyo: Graph, 1986.
- Nolan, F. William. *Hammett: A Life at the Edge*. New York: Congdon & Weed, 1983.