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Element of Darkness: The Intersecting Worlds of the *Film Noir* and the Hard-boiled Narratives of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler

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Abstract:

The paper seeks to focus on the intersection between the *film noir* and the hard-boiled detective fiction of American writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and seeks to show how the metaphor of darkness works for both the art forms.

Keywords: *Film noir*, Hard-boiled, Detective Fiction, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Phillip Marlowe, Continental Op. , Sam Spade, Metaphor, Darkness.

*Film noir*¹ enthralled the American audience from the mid-1940s to the end of the 1950s. As James Naremore observes, "...it originated in America, emerging out of a synthesis of hard-boiled fiction and German Expressionism" (12). But defining the term has always been harder than identifying the essential components of a *film noir*. According to Copjec units that are necessary to a definition of *film noir* will include "...a *femme fatale*, a morally compromised detective, an urban setting, voice-over narration, convoluted plot structure, chiaroscuro lighting, skewed framing, and so on" (qtd. In Fluck 380). Most of these "units" conjoin the *film noir* with the hard-boiled detective fictions of the likes of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler² and James M. Cain. The hard-boiled detective fiction, as we would know, differs vastly from the conventional detective fictions of writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie³. "Rather than emphasizing puzzles and ratiocination", writes Miranda Hickman, "the 'hard-boiled', as it came into view through the work of writers like Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, accented the experience of the detective: his tough, survivor's attitude, the atmosphere and values of the seamy world in which he lived, and the hard and disillusioning lessons of his quest" (288). The intersection between the literary genre of the hard-boiled fiction and its filmic offshoot, *film noir*, lies principally in an element of darkness that is obviously metaphorical. The filmic counterpart of the hard-boiled fiction translates this metaphor of darkness into a play of

various shades of light and darkness. The metaphor of darkness in the fiction of Chandler and Hammett contains—among other things—the darkness of human psyche or human nature, guilt, criminal propensities of the contemporary war-struck America and, especially, its big cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco, the depressive realities of the post-recession America and the male paranoia of a generation that was hit hard by the World War 2. All these concerns literally explode into a *film noir*, startling its audience with twists and turns in the plot, along with an array of characters that includes the *femme fatales*, the criminal, the underworld thugs and the world-weary detective. Of the last type, Chandler's Phillip Marlowe, Hammett's anonymous Continental Op. and Sam Spade are the iconic representatives. No wonder Spade and Marlowe were quickly introduced in films. John Huston's adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* brought Spade before the movie audience in the year 1941 and Howard Hawks's adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (the first among Chandler's handful of novels) presented Marlowe in 1946. In both the films the role of the central character was played by Humphrey Bogart. In between these two came, arguably the most iconic and representative *noir* film of the time, *The Double Indemnity* (1944). Billy Wilder's adaptation of James M. Cain's crime thriller of the same name was co-scripted by Raymond Chandler along with Wilder. The discussion on the hard-boiled's intersection with the *film noir* in this paper will limit itself chiefly to allusions to the fiction of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, the two most iconic writers of the genre. The meeting points of the literary genre and the filmic variety are the primary concerns of this paper and out of that the objective is to foreground the centrality of the metaphor of darkness for the literary and the filmic.

The hard-boiled detective fictions made their appearances in the 1920s. The psychological as well as the economic impact of the Great War was written large all over the genre. Hammett for instance enlisted as a soldier in the Great War and came back from it frail in health, so much so that he could not keep up his earlier job as an operative in the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, a job he joined at a very early age before going to the War. Hammett took up writing for the pulps for money. He drew from his professional experiences accumulated during his Pinkerton days. Chandler also served in the Canadian Army as a soldier in the Great War, but survived the war better than Hammett did. Sometime after coming back Chandler got into the oil industry with a good job that did not, however, survive the depression of the 30s. Chandler started writing crime fiction for the pulps, just as Hammett did, for money. Both

Hammett and Chandler earned some decent money and received recognition as authors too⁴. The writings of these two, although chronologically separated by a decade or so going by their appearances⁵, have all the ingredients required to paint a world dark and violent such as the big cities of America were after being hit with war and economic depression. Hammett's stories and novels use San Francisco as their background, whereas Chandler's stories and novels depict a crime-torn seamy Los Angeles. The writings of both present realistic descriptions of a world gone awry, with people and ties between them resting on a quick-sand of distrust: "In Hammett's dark, unstable world, the most intimate ties between people are also necessarily unstable or corrupt" (Shulman 405). In the same way in Chandler's fictional world his "characters move through a world of pervasive corruption and duplicity—sometimes blatantly brutal, sometimes coated with a slickness of refinement, sometimes lurking unobserved in shadowy nooks and crannies" (Jensen 19). In places as corrupt and dark as Hammett's San Francisco or Chandler's Los Angeles the conventional methods of logical deduction and rational thinking—something that traditional detectives banked upon—are not going to be as effective as they were for Dupin, Holmes or Poirot. In fact, As W.H. Auden in his essay, "The Guilty Vicarage", observed that unlike the traditional detective stories the hard-boiled ones do not begin in an Eden-like "Great Good Place", where a murder or a corpse is greatly out of place and thereby shocking, and rather negotiates a "Great Wrong Place", where murder doesn't shock anymore (151). In the conventional detective fiction the task of the detective lies in restoring the sanctity of the place by catching the killer. But in the hard-boiled narratives the crime-torn, dark place is irredeemable, and the detective cannot restore it to innocence, because he doesn't begin with an Eden-like abode in the first place. The hard-boiled narratives bump around the bleak alleys of "the spatially diffused post-industrial city" (Fontana 179). Spaces as dark and decentred as these do not work on the logic of the "Great Good Place" that Auden mentions, and hence, there is no wonder that "...the hard-boiled novel dramatizes the traps and false leads inherent to the so-called scientific method; ..." (Garrison 106).

The appearance of the *film noir* corresponds with the Second World War⁶. Hammett's and Chandler's hard-boiled fictions—shaped by the Great War and the Great Depression of the previous eras—find an appropriate expression in the *film noir*. The literary genre of the hard-boiled fiction and its filmic cousin in *film noir* relate to each other through the long shadow that the political and economic phenomena of the time cast on them. *Film noir's*

connection with the impacts of the War is noted by the critics. "...the appeal of *film noir*", writes Winfried Fluck, "is attributed to a post-War atmosphere of disillusion, distrust, alienation, loss of orientation and existential despair in which the quest for individual freedom is presented as a running around in circles or an existential trap" (381). The hard-boiled immerses itself in the same sordidness of existence that the War and the Depression brought along. The association between the *film noir* and the hardboiled, thus, becomes clear when on a similar note we are reminded that "[t]he assumption of endemic corruption common to the American hard-boiled novel has been attributed, in large part, to the political and social displacement of the decades following the Great War" (Rzepka 699). This blend of war-induced disillusionment, distrust, alienation, disorientation and the awareness of the existential trap translates from the highly imagistic literary style such as is seen in the writings of Chandler⁷ and others into *film noir*'s "pleasurable immersion into a night-time atmosphere of dark suggestiveness" (Fluck 380-381). This atmosphere of darkness embodies not merely the socio-political and socio-economic impact of events on the human psyche, but also leads us on to those darker parts of the human mind that pre-existed such events as war and economic depression. The darkness in *film noir* (as well as in the hard-boiled fiction) invites the audience (and the reader in case of the fiction) to explore neither the mystery regarding the identity of the killer nor the way the perpetrator of a crime is hiding behind the darkness; instead, it invites the audience/ reader to explore the motivation behind the criminal acts: how these acts are often provoked by greed, temptation or impulsivity. No wonder the *noir*, *Double Indemnity*, begins with a confession of the killer and incites the audience to find out his motivations behind the act. Hence, in *film noir*, "...the final emphasis", writes Jensen, "is not on the identity of the killer or on his method, but on what is revealed about the things people chooses to do, are driven to, or tolerate" (19). It is at points such as these where the convergence of the *film noir* and the hard-boiled fiction in dealing with the images of darkness is clearly felt: "Frederick Jameson cites the 'darkness' of local power structures as the insurmountable foe facing Marlowe" and, thereby "...the hard-boiled novelist creates a fantastically dark, corrupt, and desperate world for his hero" (Garrison 106). The hard-boiled detective fiction, thus, is not merely a whodunit, and rather is a serious study in crime: its motivation, its moral ambiguity and its appeal to the mind of the hard-boiled detective, who supposedly swears by the code of justice but is, as a matter of fact, often left baffled and undecided. This is why "there are no neat solutions in Chandler's world" (Fine 200). And this is

the reason W.H. Auden gives Chandler a singular place among other writers of crime fiction: “I think Mr. Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu, the Great Wrong Place, and his powerful but extremely depressing books should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as a work of art” (Auden 151). The name of Phillip Marlowe in this context, however, doesn’t recur to make Chandler’s writings a unique case in terms of the hard-boiled narratives, rather Marlowe is mentioned frequently in this critical context because “[h]is popularity has made his name (with Hammett’s Sam Spade) a generic term for all hard-boiled private detectives,...” (Luhr 299). The recurrence of his name is inevitable because “Chandler’s Marlowe character is probably America’s most celebrated hard-boiled detective...” (Peters 324). Coming back to the metaphor of darkness, it must be noted that the darkness and the hard-boiled detective’s quest through it doesn’t limit itself to the search for darker motivations of the criminal mind. The search is even more than that, as this “quest is not merely to identify a mysterious killer but to come to terms with (or preserve the terms of) personal identity” (Nazare 386). The darkness in *film noir* also symbolizes “the question of guilt”, as in *film noir* the crime is no longer committed by a ‘professional’ criminal, but by an ‘ordinary’ citizen who is drawn – or appears to have been drawn – into crime by accident or some strange, unforeseen combination of factors”(Fluck 383). The issue of guilt, represented in the metaphor of darkness, also associates *film noir* with the hard-boiled fiction, as often in Chandler we find a similar lingering “impression of wide-ranging guilt” (Jensen 19). Thus the stylistic play with the darkness in *film noir* is more than a mere visual presence, because its style plays out its thematic tensions and concerns that come chiefly from the hard-boiled fiction of Chandler, Hammett and others. Its style encapsulates the issues of the American society, plagued by the aftermath of the war, and so says Paul Schrader in his essay, “Notes on Film Noir”: “... film noir was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems” (13). Thus through the element of darkness the worlds of the *film noir* and the hard-boiled narratives intersect and the results are perpetual feasts for the eyes and the minds of the audience.

Notes:

1. Nino Frank, a French Critic, coined the term in 1946 (Brody n.pag.)

2. *Black Mask*, a pulp magazine, dedicated to detective stories, appeared in the year 1920; and *Dime Detective*, another commercially successful pulp magazine, appeared first in 1931.
3. Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot had a different code of honour. They would not stoop so low as to weave network of lies or use themselves as baits before the lust of a maniac lady as Hammett's Sam Spade or Chandler's Phillip Marlowe would do.
4. "For years, writers like W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, and Somerset Maugham have been invoked as the celebrated admirers of Chandler whose devotion testifies to his excellence. More recently Tom Stoppard has come forward as an avid fan; Margaret Atwood has paid eloquent tribute to him, as has the Uruguayan writer Hiber Conteris" (Hickman 286).
5. Hammett's "Arson Plus" appeared in the *Black Mask* in the year 1923, whereas Chandler's "Blackmailers Don't Shoot" appeared in the same magazine in the year 1933.
6. Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* was released in the year 1941. Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* came to the theatre in 1944; and Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* got released in the year 1946. All the three came out during or immediately after the War.
7. "The first fact to be faced is that Chandler's style, while cool and direct, is also ripely imagistic. Rather than realistic recording, we have a heightened expressiveness, usually through hyperbolic similes that reflect Marlowe's sardonic outlook" (Jensen 22).

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