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Hammett, Dashiell

DAVID W. MADDEN

Dashiell Hammett is often considered the creator of the hard-boiled detective story, which featured a distinctive style and a depiction of the detective as strict professional with a private code of ethics that is uncompromisable. He de-emphasized the intricate puzzle construction of classical detective fictions for stories built on careful character development, distinctive narration, and gritty realism.

He was born May 27, 1894 as Samuel Dashiell Hammett in St. Mary's County, Maryland to Richard and Annie Bond Hammett. The family eventually settled in Baltimore, where Hammett attended school but left at age 13. In 1915 he joined the Pinkerton Detective Agency but resigned in 1918 to join the Army. After service he returned to the Pinkertons but again retired in

1920 when diagnosed with tuberculosis. During his convalescence he began writing short stories the most important of which were published in *Black Mask* magazine, where his first four novels also appeared in serial form.

Hammett created a fictional world that emerged from his detective experiences and from the social unease of the 1920s. His America is a chaotic, amoral place, where miscreants, criminals, and gangs run rampant. Set against them are the detectives, but rather than operating as heroes dedicated to creating order or dispensing justice they are often as amoral in their methods as those they oppose. The detectives' redeeming feature is their code, a personal sense of ethics that is part professional, part personal. In these ways, Hammett reminds readers of Ernest Hemingway and is a forerunner to the existentialist writing after World War II.

After publishing over 40 stories and various articles, he published his first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929b). Here Hammett extends the development of his serial detective, the Continental Op, a fairly nondescript figure known simply by his title, an operative with the Continental detective agency. Hammett disdained the conventions of the classical detective novels that often featured suave, dashing protagonists. The Op is middle-aged, short, overweight, and utterly unprepossessing aside from his crafty street smarts and cynicism. He is called to a Montana mining town by a newspaper editor who is dead by the time of the Op's arrival and is hired by the man's father to clean up the town. The place is thoroughly corrupt, and the Op sets one criminal gang against the other, provoking a bloodbath and eventually leaving with no assurance that order will prevail. His second novel, *The Dain Curse* (1929a), also features the Continental Op and is a loosely arranged collection of four stories. The work is a decidedly slighter effort, revolving around drugs, diamonds, blackmail, and a family curse.

The Maltese Falcon (1930) is Hammett's masterpiece for its tight construction, crisp dialogue and artful character development. The plot involves a cast of dissemblers who change identities but share an avaricious interest in a supposedly priceless statue. The narration is detached and unemotional, and psychology is revealed through actions rather than the introspection of monologues. Sam Spade, the protagonist, is morally

dubious, willing to use women as sex objects and manipulate acquaintances to achieve his ends. The major female character has seduced and lied to Spade but never deceived him; he willingly sells her out to maintain his rigidly professional code. The mystery of the lost statue pales against the mystery of who Spade is and how he can survive in a world of violence and deception. Spade, who appears only in this novel and a few stories, became Hammett's best-known character thanks to a radio show and successful film.

The Glass Key (1931) marks another departure by presenting no detective; instead, Ned Beaumont, a gambler and mob adviser, enters a murder case for private reasons and finds more than he bargained for. Hammett again explores the violence of opposing gangs, sexual dishonesty, and duplicity in high places. The plot is byzantine as the protagonist seeks first to recover money he is owed and then the identity of a killer, who he fears may be his associate. Beaumont is another of Hammett's independent heroes, a person of flinty individualism who operates by private standards.

The Thin Man (1934) was Hammett's final novel and became another overwhelming Hollywood success. It features Nick and Nora Charles (fictional versions of the author and his lover, Lillian Hellman), a sophisticated couple who lead, by social standards of the time, an eccentric life. Nick has retired from detecting, lives off Nora's inheritance, and continues to chase other women. Action rotates between speakeasies and aristocratic salons, outbursts of gunplay and brittle, wry conversation. The tone is often witty and comic, and again Hammett chooses a first-person narrator to convey the story.

For the next 28 years he published no fiction, the reasons for which are mysterious. Some conjecture it was his drinking, his generous royalties, or his career in screenwriting. His association with the Communist Party and refusal to answer questions before a US District Court landed him six months in a federal prison in 1951 and troubles with the IRS. Although he died in obscurity, colleagues such as Raymond Chandler and André Gide regarded him as an incontestably important figure in modern fiction.

SEE ALSO: Chandler, Raymond (AF); Detective/Crime Fiction (WF); Hemingway, Ernest (AF);

Modern Fiction in Hollywood (AF); Noir Fiction (AF)

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The Harlem Renaissance

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The Harlem Renaissance was a 1920s flourishing of African American arts and letters centered in the Harlem section of New York City. Literature has long been considered the heart of the movement, with writers such as Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, and Jean Toomer among its major figures. The writers of the New Negro Movement, the period's more common nomenclature for the