

# **The Big Sleep Film Summary**

## **The Big Sleep by Howard Hawks**

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## Context

*The Big Sleep* is the story of Phillip Marlowe's attempts to uncover several unusual events and a blackmailing plot focused on General Sternwood, an old gentleman with two wild daughters. As Marlowe investigates the blackmail plots, he discovers that both of the General's daughters, Carmen and Vivian, are caught up in schemes with the underground mob who are blackmailing the General.

Marlowe's investigation helps save Carmen from being charged with murder. In the meantime, Marlowe and Vivian experience a love/hate relationship that quickly becomes a loving relationship. When the film finally comes to a close, Marlowe has won his girl and kept her father and family out of the negative spotlight.

Howard Hawks has created some of the greatest of the classic movies, but he was little appreciated during his own time. Having only been nominated for one Oscar and never having won, he was largely overlooked by his peers and the critics. Hawks directed such films as *The Road to Glory* (1926), *Scarface* (1932), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), and *His Girl Friday* (1940) before making *The Big Sleep*. He continued on in his career to direct *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), and *Hatari!* (1962). Hawks cast his two favorite actors, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, in *The Big Sleep*, and his decision to do so was extremely successful.

By the time *The Big Sleep* was filmed, Humphrey Bogart was already a star and had had leading roles in such films as *High Sierra* (1941), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Casablanca* (1942), and *Sahara* (1943). Two years earlier, Bogart and Bacall had starred together in *To Have and Have Not* (1944), and the crowds had loved them.

Lauren Bacall actually made her debut in *To Have and Have Not* (1944), playing the character "Slim" opposite Bogart's character "Steve." Bacall landed the role in an unusual way; at nineteen years old, she was a model and appeared on the front of *Harper's Bazaar*. Howard Hawks' wife saw her and insisted that he put her in a film. His choice to cast her in the role of Slim was a historical one, as it introduced a great film couple (Bacall and Bogart did several films together), that also became one of the most famous love stories in Hollywood when Bacall and Bogart married in 1945.

Although *The Big Sleep* is a popular classic movie, it did not win nor was it even nominated for any awards when it came out.



## Summary and Analysis

*The Big Sleep* begins with the credits rolling over a background of a couple smoking in silhouette. We then see a door with a plate on it that reads "Sternwood," and a man rings the doorbell. The butler admits Phillip Marlowe to see the General. As Marlowe waits, a beautiful woman, Carmen Rutledge, comes down and begins to flirt with him. He tells her that he is a private detective, and then she falls into his arms before the butler invites him in to see the General.

The General is paralyzed in both legs and is very ill. He invites Marlowe to take off his coat, drink, and smoke since he can no longer enjoy those things. Marlowe is 38 and had formerly worked for the District Attorney's office before being fired for insubordination.

The General asks what Marlowe knows about his family, and Marlowe replies that he knows the General has two daughters, both young and wild. The General says he is being blackmailed by a man named Joe Brody for the second time. He had paid the man off once the year before in order to get him to leave Carmen alone. Shawn Regan had taken care of that problem, but he had disappeared just a month earlier. Regan had been a strong, wild man who had served a companion for the General. Because he is no longer there, the General has decided to call Marlowe to deal with the present problem.

The General then hands Marlowe an envelope from Mr. Arthur Gwynn Geiger, of Rare Books and De Luxe Editions. On the back of a business card, Geiger has written a note about some gambling debts that Carmen has supposedly run up. The General doesn't want to ask Carmen about the problems, because he knows that she won't admit the truth. Carmen is still a wild child, but Vivian is older, wiser, and more ruthless. The General tells Marlowe that he doesn't believe the debts are for gambling, and he mentions that Brody is supposedly a gambler as well.

Leaving the General, Marlowe runs into the butler, Norris, who says that Mrs. Vivian Sternwood Rutledge wants to speak to him. When they meet, she tells Marlowe that she is skeptical of his intentions, but he responds to her barbs easily. Vivian believes that the General wants Marlowe to find Regan for him, and she demands that Marlowe not worry her father over the situation. When Marlowe tells her exactly what he thinks, she tells him that people do not speak to her in that way. Marlowe admits that he has not been called to find Regan, and he leaves.

Later, at the Hollywood Public Library, Marlowe takes notes on a book about collector's first editions. He then goes to Geiger's store, where the sales clerk seems to know very little about books and will not allow Marlowe to see Geiger. However, another man does come in and hurries to the back without stopping to speak to Marlowe or the clerk.

Marlowe heads to the book shop across the street and asks the clerk there about Geiger's appearance. She refuses to answer the question, so he begins to question her



about some books instead. She calls him on a bluff about the books, informing him that one of the ones he has mentioned doesn't exist. He tells her that the woman across the street hadn't known that and then reveals that he is a private detective. She consents to give him a very detailed description of Geiger after that. Marlowe decides to wait at the woman's shop for Geiger to come out of his own building, and the clerk closes the store for the afternoon to spend time with him while it rains.

Geiger's "shadow," Carol Lungdren, gets out of Geiger's car to help him get in, and then the two prepare to leave. Marlowe follows them to Geiger's place. As he waits at the bottom of the driveway, another car pulls up and someone else goes inside. Marlowe then goes to take a closer look at the car, which turns out to be registered to Carmen Sternwood; he goes to wait for her to come out.

As Marlowe waits, he hears a shrill scream and runs into the house while the two cars rush off. Inside, Marlowe finds Carmen Sternwood, who seems to be high, and a dead man, who turns out to be Geiger. He also finds a camera hidden in a statue. After searching the house and finding a few keys, Marlowe takes Carmen and leaves. He drops Carmen off and returns home.

Later, Marlowe's doorbell rings, and he finds his friend, Bernie Ohls, at his door. Bernie is a police detective, and he tells Marlowe that a man has been found dead in a car that went into the water; the car belongs to the Sternwoods. Marlowe asks if the man could be Regan, and they head to the scene to find out. The car had gone through the railing and is being pulled up.

The man in the car turns out to be Owen Taylor, the Sternwoods' chauffeur. He has a broken neck, but it is clear that he had received that injury before the wreck. Bernie thinks Marlowe might have done it, but Marlowe tells him to give him some time. He then goes back to see Geiger, but the clerk won't allow him in. A man in the back opens the door, though, and Marlowe sees that the office is being packed up. Marlowe then leaves to follow a departing car and reads the names on the building as he passes it; one is Joe Brody. After seeing this, he returns to his office and finds Vivian waiting for him.

Vivian hands Marlowe a package that contains incriminating pictures of Carmen. Brody and the woman who had been Geiger's clerk had brought them, threatening to show the pictures to the police if Vivian doesn't pay them a large sum. Vivian goes on to tell Marlowe that she doesn't know why Owen had been driving her car the night before. Marlowe tells Vivian that he's beginning to like her, and she tells him that she could probably get the money from a gambling partner, Eddie Mars. Mars' wife had run off with Regan, and Vivian believes that Regan isn't involved in the blackmail scheme.

Marlowe goes to Geiger's house and finds Carmen waiting outside with her head covered. Marlowe uses the key to let them both in and then asks Carmen what she remembers. She says that Joe Brody killed Geiger but that she doesn't know why. Marlowe informs her that Brody has an incriminating photograph of her and tells her that she shouldn't say anything to the police for awhile. Another man walks in to look for



Geiger as well and asks Marlowe to stay while Carmen leaves. Carmen goes out, and the man finds blood on the carpet. He claims to be the owner of the house, and then Marlowe addresses the man by name: Mars. Marlowe tells him that the back of the bookstore had been emptied earlier that morning, and Mars finally tells Marlowe to leave.

At his office, Marlowe paces and listens to sirens blaring in the street, until Vivian calls and tells him that no one has called her about the pictures. Marlowe suspects that she is lying and hurries to the building he had visited earlier. He waits outside in his car and sees Vivian pull up and enter the building. He decides to follow her inside and buzzes Brody's apartment.

Marlowe asks for Geiger, but Brody denies knowing him. Brody allows him inside, though, and then pulls a gun on him. Vivian and the sales clerk from Geiger's store come out of hiding. Marlowe tells Brody that he is there to stop Vivian from paying him off and to help keep the police off Brody's back. Marlowe demands the picture, and Brody goes to get them as the doorbell rings.

Brody answers the door, and Carmen enters with a gun, demanding that Brody give her the picture. Marlowe takes the other gun from Agnes, the sales clerk, while Brody hands over the photograph. Marlowe sends Vivian and Carmen home and then sits down to talk with Brody and Agnes, accusing Brody of killing both Geiger and Taylor. Brody says that Taylor had actually been the one to kill Geiger but then admits to having killed Taylor himself.

Marlowe begins to ask what Geiger had had on the Sternwoods, when the bell begins to ring. Brody opens the door, and two shots are fired into his chest by a man who immediately sprints out of the building. Marlowe chases him by car and catches him. The man turns out to be Carol Lundgren, whom Marlowe forces to drive to Geiger's house. Once there, Marlowe kicks him and drags him inside, where he finds Geiger's body. He calls Bernie Ohls to report this, and Bernie offers to convince the D.A.'s office to take some of the heat off of Marlowe. Both Marlowe and Bernie think something more is going on in the case, and both think that it involves Mars' wife and Regan.

When Marlowe returns to the office, Vivian is waiting for him. She gives him a check for much more than expected, since the case is now completely closed. Marlowe mentions that the mystery of Regan has not been solved, but Vivian refuses to discuss the issue. Instead, she invites Marlowe for a drink sometime. After Vivian leaves, Marlowe calls Eddie Mars and arranges to meet with him at his casino that night.

At the casino, Marlowe sees Vivian singing for the crowd. He goes on to meet with Mars in another room and asks him for information. Mars claims that he didn't kill Regan, and Marlowe says that he doesn't believe Regan was involved in the killings or the blackmail. Marlowe also expresses his surprise that Mars doesn't seem to be in a hurry to find his missing wife. Mars warns him off of this subject, and Marlowe finishes his interview by mentioning that he is being followed. He asks if Mars has anything to do with this, and Mars denies any knowledge of the situation. As Marlowe leaves the



casino, Vivian makes one last large bet and asks Marlowe for a ride home. She wins the bet and collects her money while Marlowe gets the car.

Outside, Marlowe pulls out a gun and watches as a man comes out of the building and gets into the car that has been tailing him. Vivian then comes out to meet him but is stopped when the man in the car pulls a gun on her. Marlowe stops him from stealing the money and knocks him out. Then he and Vivian leave.

On the drive home, Vivian is shaking. They stop, and Marlowe asks Vivian what Eddie Mars has on her. Then he kisses her passionately. Afterwards, he tells her that Eddie Mars had let her win a lot of money and then sent a man to steal it; the point of the whole chain of events had been to show that there was nothing between them. Marlowe demands to see the money in the bag, knowing that it isn't really there, and Vivian demands that Marlowe take her home.

Bernie calls the next afternoon and invites Marlowe to come over. He tells Marlowe to lay off the Sternwood case, since Vivian has made a call to the D.A.'s office. Later, Marlowe calls Norris and asks if he can come see the General. Norris tells him that Vivian wants to talk to him and goes to get her on the phone. She tells Marlowe that they have found Regan; he is sick in Mexico, and she is leaving immediately to get him, though she hasn't told her father yet.

After leaving the café, Marlowe recognizes the car of Harry Jones, one of the men who has been following him. As he sees the car, a group of men attacks him and tells him to lay off the case. Jones then finds Marlowe, and they go back to Marlowe's office. Jones offers to sell him something, and Marlowe figures out that Jones is working with Agnes. Jones claims that he can help Marlowe find Regan by telling him where Mars' wife has gone. He tells Marlowe to meet him in an hour, with money to buy the information.

Outside the designated place, Marlowe hears a conversation and quietly enters a room. One man asks Jones why he is tailing Marlowe. Jones says that Agnes is trying to get out of town and figures Marlowe can help her. The man pulls a gun on Jones and demands to see Agnes. Then he gives Jones a drink, and Jones falls over dead. Marlowe calls the police and tells them about Jones. He tries to give the address where Agnes is expected, but they tell him the address doesn't exist. A moment later, the phone begins to ring, and Marlowe talks to Agnes. They set up a meeting, and Marlowe leaves.

After meeting Agnes, Marlowe pays her, and she tells him where Mars' wife is living. Marlowe finds the place and goes to investigate, deflating his tire so that he can demand service at the garage in front of the house. Marlowe is immediately attacked and taken inside, where Marlowe encounters Mars' wife and Vivian.

The men go downstairs to call Mars and find out what they should do with Marlowe. The women insist that Mars would never kill anyone, but Marlowe tells them that he's a murderer and a blackmailer. Vivian offers to help him get away, but he refuses to stay uninvolved if he leaves. She kisses him and unties him anyway. They hear a car pull up,



and someone begins screaming. Marlowe runs for his gun. Then, the men lead Vivian outside at gunpoint. She distracts them, and Marlowe shoots them.

Vivian and Marlowe jump into the car and hurry to call the police, though Vivian tells Marlowe that she will try to protect her sister by saying that she killed Sean Regan herself. They get to the phone at Geiger's house, and Marlowe calls Mars, asking to see him there. Then they wait for Mars and his boys.

Mars finally arrives, and Marlowe stops him from cutting the phone line. He checks him for a gun, and Vivian comes to report the location of some other men. Marlowe tells Mars that he realizes Vivian has a deal with him but that he knows she didn't kill Regan; Carmen did. Carmen had liked Regan, but he had refused her because he liked Mars' wife. Carmen had been very high, and she had killed him.

Marlowe shoots Mars three times, and the wounded Mars runs out the door, where his boys quickly kill him (believing him to be Marlowe). Marlowe picks up the phone and calls Bernie to report that Mars' boys have killed Mars, who had earlier killed Regan. Later, alone with Vivian, Marlowe suggests sending Carmen away for help. Vivian responds by saying that there may be a place to fix Carmen but that only Marlowe can fix her.





# Characters

## Philip Marlowe, played by Humphrey Bogart

### Description

Philip Marlowe is a private detective hired by General Sternwood to investigate attempts to blackmail him. Marlowe has solved many similar cases and has a close relationship with the police. Marlowe is also friends with Shawn Regan who recently worked for the General but has disappeared without explanation.

Marlowe's strong personality attracts Vivian to him, and he is attracted to her as well. Throughout the film, they go from being enemies, to being friends, to falling in love. Marlowe does his best to protect both Vivian and her family from rumors and speculation concerning their involvement in illegal operations.

### Analysis

Marlowe is a strong, independent man who does not care what anyone thinks. He easily holds his own, both when Vivian verbally attacks him and when Mars' henchmen physically attack him. Marlowe is the all-around tough guy who also wins the ladies.

Besides being strong, Marlowe is also highly intelligent. He uses his deductive skills to discover the real perpetrators behind the many deaths, blackmailings, and scams surrounding the General's family. Marlowe's intelligence helps him solve the case and win Vivian's heart.

## Vivian Sternwood Rutledge, played by Lauren Bacall

### Description

Vivian Sternwood Rutledge is the oldest daughter of General Sternwood. She had been married previously, but the marriage had failed. She now lives at home and tries to keep tabs on her wild sister, Carmen. Vivian is the responsible daughter of the family, but as she tries to protect Carmen, Vivian also gets caught up in Eddie Mars' gambling ring.

Vivian hates Marlowe when she first meets him. She feels that he is there to take advantage of her father, but she is also scared because she is being blackmailed as well. After learning that Marlowe is truly working to protect her family, Vivian begins to give him a little slack, though she continues to keep important information from him. After all of their experiences together, Vivian finally admits to loving Marlowe in the final scene of the film.



## Analysis

Vivian is a wealthy, somewhat spoiled heiress. Like her sister, she has made her share of mistakes, including her doomed marriage to Rutledge. Vivian has retreated to her home to recover from the failure of her marriage and to help care for her ailing father and wild young sister.

Vivian's haughty attitude is a defense mechanism that she uses to ensure that no one comes too close. She is terrified that people will discover that she is neither perfect nor good. Vivian is involved in several schemes with Eddie Mars, who is trying to blackmail her over Carmen's actions. Vivian's fears begin to come true as Mars becomes increasingly demanding and violent. She finally begins to rest in the comfort and protection of Marlowe's love.

## Eddie Mars, played by John Ridgely

### Description

Eddie Mars is the leader of an underworld gambling ring. He is dangerous and difficult to please, and most of the major scams in the city lead back to him. Marlowe follows numerous leads and eventually discovers that most of the bad things going on in the city can be attributed to Mars.

As Marlowe gets closer to the truth, Mars becomes more demanding of Vivian and Carmen. He decides to put an end to Marlowe by murdering him at Geiger's old home, but Marlowe beats him to the punch by arriving at the house early. Marlowe puts an end to Mars' gambling ring and schemes against the Sternwood family by tricking Mars' own men into killing him.

### Analysis

Eddie Mars is one of the worst and most violent men in the city, but most people do not see through his debonair façade. When Marlowe visits Mars' wife, he sees that neither she nor Vivian believes that Mars would do anything illegal, much less murder people for his own gain.

As we continue to watch Mars' actions, we realize that Marlowe's accusations are completely accurate and that Mars has effectively hidden his true purposes from the women. After Vivian realizes Mars part in the blackmailing, she helps Marlowe put an end to the entire scam. Mars is finally outwitted by the brilliant Marlowe, and his dirty schemes are put to an end.



## **Carmen Sternwood, played by Martha Vickers**

### **Description**

Carmen Sternwood is the General's youngest daughter. Carmen is young, naïve, and spoiled. She is a wild child who falls into Marlowe's arms the moment he walks into the Sternwood home. She seems to have the same attitude toward the other men she encounters as well.

Carmen is heavily addicted to drugs and alcohol, and she is heavily involved in the local gambling ring. She has been photographed in some embarrassing positions, one of which is with Geiger before and after his death. Carmen's family is blackmailed because of her lack of concern for her well-being and family reputation.

### **Analysis**

At first glance, Carmen seems to simply be a young and stupid girl. As we watch her activities, though, we discover that she is also addicted to drugs and alcohol. Viewers get the feeling that she has never had an involved mother, and her father's age makes it impossible for him to control her. Carmen is the product of the neglectful and spoiling influence of her family.

Carmen does not seem to learn from her lessons, and after Marlowe learns the truth of Regan's death, he suggests that Vivian send Carmen away so that she can receive the help she needs. Carmen does not admit to a need for help, but her family has suffered for her mistakes, and sending her away may be her only hope for recovery.

## **General Sternwood, played by Charles Waldron**

### **Description**

General Sternwood is a wealthy old gentleman who realizes that his days are quickly coming to an end. For several years, General Sternwood has relied on Shawn Regan to conduct investigations into blackmail plots on his family, but one day, Regan simply disappears. After the General realizes that Regan will not be returning, he calls Phillip Marlowe for help.

The General explains that his daughters are wild and rebellious but that he feels little ability to control them. He asks Marlowe for help in yet another blackmail scheme. Marlowe agrees to help, although he is opposed by Marlowe's oldest daughter, Vivian. The General appreciates Marlowe's help and happily pays him a large sum of money after the investigations end.



## **Analysis**

The General seems to have been a strong, domineering man at one point in his life, but he is now old and feeble. He has no control over his young daughters who are constantly getting into trouble with the local gambling rings. The General had been frazzled by his first experience with blackmail, and he is terribly frustrated to find the situation repeating itself.

Without his health, the General no longer commands armies or even his own children. We watch as he tries to enjoy his life vicariously through Regan, Marlowe, and others. He is a sad picture of a formerly great man. Despite his rough exterior and inability to control his children, viewers feel a touch of sympathy for the old General.

## **Chief Insp. Bernie Ohls, played by Regis Toomey**

### **Description**

Chief Inspector Bernie Ohls is a close friend of Phillip Marlowe. Bernie works for the Hollywood police and appreciates all of the help that Marlowe provides concerning the riffraff around town. Bernie agrees to stand up for Marlowe in the District Attorney's office so that neither Marlowe nor the Sternwoods will be in trouble.

Bernie proves himself to be a trustworthy friend by covering for Marlowe. At the same time, he gets many good leads from Marlowe's investigations. He is also able to arrest several of the worst criminals in the city after Marlowe has already succeeded in capturing or killing them.

### **Analysis**

Bernie at first seems like a dirty cop, since he accepts leads and bribes from Marlowe. Bernie, however, is simply using all of his resources to catch the bad guys. He is smart enough to realize that Marlowe is a better investigator than most of his men, so he takes a chance on Marlowe's leads.

Bernie returns the favor by giving Marlowe a call when new leads are found concerning Marlowe's clients, calling him first when Regan's body is discovered. He also helps get Marlowe out of a mess with the District Attorney.

## **Norris, played by Charles D. Brown**

### **Description**

Norris is General Sternwood's butler. He has been with the family for many years and knows many of their secrets. Norris tries to protect his employer's family, but he shows obvious displeasure over the actions and attitudes of Carmen and Vivian.



## **Analysis**

Norris is the stereotypical overprotective butler who has been with the family so long that he now considers himself to be part of the family. Norris tries to protect the General and his daughters by refusing to answer Marlowe's seemingly nosy questions.

## **Joe Brody, played by Louis Jean Heydt**

### **Description**

Joe Brody is blackmailing General Sternwood. Brody has some pictures of Carmen that were taken at Geiger's place before Geiger's death.

### **Analysis**

## **Mona Mars, played by Peggy Knudsen**

### **Description**

Mona Mars is Eddie Mars' wife. She disappears at the same time Shawn Regan disappears. Marlowe finally finds her out in the country where Vivian is visiting her.

### **Analysis**

Mona is completely convinced that her husband would never do wrong. Although Marlowe tries to convince her that Eddie is a thief and murderer, she refuses to believe him.

## **Arthur Geiger, played by Theodore von Eltz**

### **Description**

Arthur Geiger runs a bookshop that serves as a front for an illegal gambling ring. After Marlowe finds out about the scheme, Geiger quickly closes up shop.

### **Analysis**

Carmen is involved with Geiger, and she is blackmailed for his murder.



# Themes

## Choosing Those You Trust

Trust cannot be given to just anyone, as we quickly discover in *The Big Sleep*. Each character has his or her own motivations. Many of the characters do not seem concerned about how their actions affect others, and they are first and foremost interested in taking care of themselves.

Of all the characters in the film, Carmen seems to be the worst at choosing the right people to trust. Because she becomes involved with Eddie Mars, Geiger, and the other men of the underworld, she puts herself and her entire family in danger. Her actions cause both her father and sister to be blackmailed so that they can try to protect her from going to jail.

Marlowe also must be careful about whom he trusts. Vivian is openly hostile to him, but she does seem to cooperate with his investigation at times. On the other hand, she also lies to him about her own motives and goes to visit Joe Brody while Marlowe is keeping watch outside the building. Although Mars tries to put forth a positive image, Marlowe realizes that Mars is a murderous thief who would like nothing better than to kill Marlowe and stop his ongoing investigation.

Viewers discover that not everyone can be trusted, and they are warned to be careful whom they trust. Most viewers feel that the film uses situations that are extreme, but the theme of cautiousness in trusting people comes through loud and clear.

## Can't Buy Your Way Out of Trouble

Many people, especially the wealthy, have the tendency to believe that they can buy their way out of trouble. In this film, we learn that this is a misconception. The General has tried to buy his way out of his family's trouble in the past, but the results have been dismal. After hiring Shawn Regan to investigate previous blackmailing attempts, the General had hoped to be done with the whole issue. After the blackmail problem comes up again and Regan disappears, the General calls Phillip Marlowe to investigate.

Carmen believes that her family's money will protect her from scrutiny and trouble. Thus, she spends her time high and drunk in the underworld. She seems to have no idea of the effect she is having on her family.

Vivian realizes that she cannot buy her family's way out of Carmen's trouble, but she decides to try anyway. She bargains with Joe Brody to convince him to give up the pictures of Carmen, and she also makes bargains with Eddie Mars so that he will not share information about her or Carmen with the police. She eventually realizes, though, that her attempts to buy the family's way out of trouble are only making the situation worse.



## Intensity of Love

Love is an intense and powerful emotion, and when the film begins, none of the characters seem to know much about it. The General is more worried about his reputation than about his children. At the same time, Marlowe moves from woman to woman, seeking only pleasure. Vivian has closed herself to love after her previous marriage, and Carmen tries to find pleasure in men, drugs, and alcohol.

As Vivian and Marlowe become closer, they share an intense love-hate relationship. Vivian at first hates Marlowe and believes that he is taking advantage of her father. She tries to ignore her attraction to him, just as he tries to ignore his feelings for her. Throughout their various experiences together, though, the two finally comes to a point where they can no longer disguise their feelings. Marlowe reveals his love for Vivian as he tries to protect her, while Vivian finally admits in the final scene that the only thing that can cure her is Marlowe's love.

## Style and Cinematography

Howard Hawks creates an intriguing backdrop for his plot. As the city falls into the control of the underworld, even wealthy aristocrats like the Sternwoods are directly affected. Although the police are trying to put an end to the crime, they seem to have little success in controlling the mobsters. We see this dirty side of the city through Marlowe's eyes as he discovers Geiger's bookstore, a front for the gambling ring, and many other unsavory people and situations.

The sets for the film are excellent. From Marlowe's stereotypically shady office, to the Sternwood mansion, to Eddie's gambling house, we never fail to believe that the situations portrayed could really occur in these locations. Even Geiger's house is appropriately excluded from a more populated area so that the shots being fired are not heard by neighbors.

The actors in the film help create characters that are truly believable. No one can doubt that Phillip Marlowe could truly exist in a dirty city like Hollywood. Bogart's portrayal of Marlowe's pompous attitude and unflagging intensity creates a character that any woman would want and any man would envy. Ingrid Bergman likewise brings the haughty, stubborn Vivian to life. Her skills are put to good use as both Marlowe and the viewers fall for the this frustrating woman.



# Motifs

## The "MacGuffin"

The "MacGuffin" is a type of plot device that Alfred Hitchcock made famous by his extensive use of it. The term refers to a small detail or character that the director and writer use to form the plot. For instance, in the famous film *Vertigo*, the "MacGuffin" is a woman who dies, and her death starts off a series of events. Although the original detail becomes less important than the subsequent events in the plot, the action is instigated and pushed by this "MacGuffin."

In *The Big Sleep*, Howard Hawks uses a similar technique when he creates the character of Shawn Regan. Regan has suddenly disappeared after spending a long time working for General Sternwood. Although the General is concerned about Regan, he is more concerned about stopping the renewed blackmail threats. Thus, he contacts Marlowe to investigate the threats and put an end to them.

Although we never see Regan, the mystery surrounding his disappearance and death keeps all of the characters searching for the truth. However, this "MacGuffin," is eventually less important than the other plots and the relationship between Vivian and Marlowe. As they try to stop the blackmailing and protect Carmen, the two fall in love and the film's focus shifts to their relationship.

## Underworld

The underworld of large cities is a topic of interest for studio audiences, and many people have been fascinated by the stereotypical underworld portrayed in *The Big Sleep*. The shady side of life appears clearly as we watch Carmen and Vivian get caught up in schemes much bigger than they are. Neither woman seems to realize that other members of her family are being blackmailed and punished for her actions. The women in the story are also naïve in their perceptions of the people they surround themselves with. For example, neither Vivian nor Mona Mars is willing to believe that Eddie would actually murder anyone. They know that he steals and runs a gambling ring, but they refuse to admit that he could actually be behind their bad experiences.

## Trips

Marlowe, Vivian, and Carmen all takes several trips during the course of the film. The first trip is Marlowe's visit to the Sternwood mansion, during which the General hires him to investigate the most recent blackmail attempts on his family. Although the General can no longer travel, he wants Marlowe to be his eyes and ears concerning his family's wellbeing.



Carmen also makes many trips, one of the most important being her late night visit to Geiger's house. Marlowe is sitting outside the building while she is inside, and he hears gunshots. Cars leave quickly, but Carmen is left inside, high, with Geiger lying dead at her feet. Someone had even taken incriminating pictures at the scene.

Vivian's trips are also important to the story, for through them, we learn that Joe Brody is blackmailing her over the photographs of Carmen. Vivian also visits Eddie Mars' gambling establishment, and we discover that he is blackmailing her as well. He is also allowing her win in his "casino" and then stealing the money back as part of a good show. Finally, Vivian's last trip shows us that she actually knows where Mona Mars is hiding.

The final trip that Marlowe and Vivian take is on their way back from visiting Mona Mars. They now know most of the story, and they go to Geiger's building to set a trap for Eddie Mars. Their plan works, and the entire series of events comes to an end after Eddie is accidentally killed by his own men.



# Symbols

## Photographs

When Geiger is murdered, Joe Brody and the others take photographs of Carmen with the dead body. Carmen is so drunk and high that she has no clue what is going on, but these pictures are used against her and her family. Rather than contacting the General, the blackmailers now focus on Vivian, who is willing to do anything to keep her sister out of jail.

The photographs start another series of events and blackmailings that make Marlowe's work even more confusing and difficult. As he searches to get to the truth, he finds that the truth can change quickly when these underworld thugs are involved.

The photographs are symbolic of Carmen's lack of concern for anyone but herself. Carmen seems to have no idea that the photographs were taken or of the problems that she is putting her family through. Her selfishness and lack of perception are profoundly revealed as the photographs are used against Vivian.

## Gambling House

The gambling house run by Eddie Mars is symbolic of everything evil in Hollywood. Mars is the leader of a huge gambling ring that takes advantage of everyone in the city, regardless of age or social status. Geiger's bookshop is used as a front for this shady business.

At the gambling house, we see a dark side of wealth as people spend their money frivolously, drink, and try to forget the problems in their lives. Vivian is one among the many, and she is being used by Mars. When Mars allows Vivian to win a large amount of money, he quickly sends a man outside to rob her. Although Marlowe prevents the robbery, he realizes that Vivian is also being blackmailed by Mars.

The experiences at the gambling house help Marlowe to begin putting everything together. In his mind, he sees most of what is wrong for the Sternwoods and the rest of the city as emanating from that one house. Numerous deaths and terrible schemes have been hatched in those rooms to keep Mars's gambling ring alive.

## Desk

Marlowe's office is the stereotypical office of a private detective. He has a large desk, bookcases filled with books, all crammed in a very small space. He even has a bench outside the office where his beautiful women customers, such as Vivian, can wait for his return.



Marlowe's desk is symbolic of the barriers between him and Vivian. When they first meet, she hates him. Although their original meetings occur in her parlor at the Sternwood mansion, she quickly begins to seek out Marlowe in his office. In the first scenes there, Vivian stays on the opposite side of the desk from Marlowe, as if she wants to keep as much distance - physically, emotionally, and socially - between them as possible.

Later in the film, as Marlowe and Vivian share several experiences, the barriers between them begin to drop. As they continue to become closer, the desk is no longer a barrier. Instead, Vivian begins to come closer to Marlowe's side of the desk. In the final scene, all barriers have been removed, and Vivian comes and sits on the top of his side of the desk; she moves close to him and professes her need for him in her life.



## Essay Questions

Why does General Sternwood contact Phillip Marlowe?

What type of reception does Marlowe receive from the General's daughters?

How does Marlowe discover Carmen's relationship with Geiger?

What leads Marlowe to assume that Geiger's bookstore is a front?

How is Vivian involved in Carmen's problems?

Who are the two people who are missing before Marlowe begins his new job?

What is the relationship between Eddie Mars and the General's daughters?

Describe the changing relationship between Vivian and Marlowe.

What has actually happened to Shawn Regan?

How are Eddie's evil plots finally put to a stop?