# The Postman Always Rings Twice Short Guide

## The Postman Always Rings Twice by James M. Cain

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

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# Characters

Cain's novels are not densely populated. He usually focuses attention on the protagonist/narrator, and creates four or five supporting players to act out the dramatic incident. Frank is a drifter; he has a restless need for mobility which places him at cross-purposes with his lover, Cora, who is basically sedentary. Having had the door to movie stardom shut in her face, she settles for a lesser goal — bourgeois respectability, which she hopes to attain by renovating the inn and, with Frank's help, making it a profitable business. After they are cleared of the murder, Cora attempts this but Frank's characteristic aimlessness makes him resist putting down roots. The two lovers learn that their respective natures repel. As Cain shows at the end of the novel, any effort to merge two opposite philosophies of life will end in destruction. Cora dies in a car accident — ironically, for that is how they murdered her husband — and Frank is last seen lying prostrate on the open road, the avenue that first carried him toward his wish-come-true.

# Social Concerns

By his own admission, Cain did not use literature as a vehicle for philosophizing or moralizing, but two concepts which appear in his fiction — he called them "the wish that comes true" and "the love-rack" — are indirect criticisms of two tendencies Cain saw in his society. In The Postman Always Rings Twice Frank Chambers and Cora Papadakis plot to murder Cora's husband, a swarthy, somewhat repellent Greek whom Cora cannot bear to live with any longer. They plan to make his death appear to be an accident, and if their scheme works they will be free to marry and leave the dusty roadside inn, a symbol of the vacuousness of their lives, with the money his insurance policy will provide: Their wish will have come true.

Cain complicates their plan, however, by having these characters, representative of the jaded men and women of Depression-era California, realize that a relationship between two people who will both do anything to escape their present circumstances can be torturous: This is Cain's love-rack, a paradoxical vision of love as a romantic quest that can also become an instrument of pain.

After a lengthy hearing and some slick maneuverings by their lawyer, Frank and Cora are absolved of the crime and receive the insurance money, but Cora, now pregnant, is accidentally killed and Frank is wrongly convicted of murdering her in order to get all the money for himself. Neither character's wish is fulfilled; all that is left for Frank in the hours before his execution is the memory of the agony of the love-rack.

# Techniques

Cain is best remembered for his prose style, and this was his most effective technique. A master of the wellpaced story, Cain eschews dramatic exposition, ignores the past histories of his characters, and places the reader into the action of the story in the very first paragraph. The Postman Always Rings Twice is a brilliant example of this technique. From its tantalizing first sentence, "They threw me off the hay truck about noon," the story line never sags. By the end of the second chapter, Cora and Frank have slept together and therefore willingly chained themselves to the love-rack, and they have made their plans to kill Nick in order to capture their wish-come-true. What remains is for Cain to tell the story of how the love-rack triumphs and the wish-come-true vanishes in defeat — and in the telling the pace of the novel never slows. Tom Wolfe has memorably called this skill the "acceleration...

in which everything gets swept along for the ride." One of the elements that makes the "ride" through the novel so swift is Cain's terse diction and simple, unadorned sentences, powerful in their raw force. Cain has a remarkable ear for language, reproducing the idiosyncrasies and rhythms of ordinary speech in a way that is painstakingly accurate.

This technique fuels the pace of the novel because dialogue is rendered in short segments, unpunctuated by asides, pauses, or lengthy disquisitions. It is straight talk, like the rapid bursts of machine gun fire.

The other technique that Cain uses with great effectiveness is reader complicity. Cain ranks with Poe and Nabokov as one of the great manipulators of reader response. The first-person narration is Cain's most effective tool in involving his audience in the story, for the reader is directly addressed by the narrator. Frank tells exactly how he felt after his failed first attempt to murder Nick. The audience is instructed in the art of using other people, and is thereby drawn into the plot. The reader feels almost like an accomplice to the crime. Cain also manipulates the reader by frequently providing him with what seem to be triumphs or resolutions to problems the narrator encounters, then under-cutting them a paragraph or even a sentence later with a new wrinkle in the plot. The reader is constantly on the alert, experiencing the same frustrations and having to do the same guesswork as the characters.

# Themes

Deception, cheating, and fraud in its many literal and metaphorical representations are all themes of The Postman Always Rings Twice. Each of the characters is in some way a con artist with an ulterior motive — Frank cons Nick into giving him a free breakfast when he wanders into the diner, Nick then in turn cons Frank into working for him as a mechanic in his garage, next, Frank cons Nick into accepting him as a friend, only to murder him later, and so on, through nearly every chapter in the novel. In Cain's duplicitous world, one cannot accept appear ance as reality. Cain's point is that to survive, modern man's only chance is to try to swindle his way into a better life, to cheat his destiny. Accident, fortuity, and chance are also at work in the cosmology of the novel, presaging a view of life as a vast gambling enterprise that Cain would use later in Double Indemnity (1936). In The Postman Always Rings Twice, Nick and Cora continually gamble for a better life, and each time the ante is increased.

Frank first runs away with Cora while Nick is out of town but loses their bus fare in a crap game; the next game of chance is played with Nick's life. And it is chance that brings Frank to Nick's diner and involves him in a murder.

Fortuitous events interfere with Frank and Cora's unsuccessful first attempt to murder Nick, and — fittingly — Nick's murder is camouflaged as an accident.

Finally, The Postman Always Rings Twice is in some respects a commentary on the failed promise of the American Dream as it tries to come to fruition in twentieth-century California, the modern frontier. The setting of the novel, a roadside inn on some nearly untraveled back road, evokes an atmosphere of an arid and sterile land. This landscape is similar to T. S. Eliot's "waste land" and Fitzgerald's "valley of ashes," a place where men and women can try to nurture their dreams but realize that they will never grow. Cora and Frank both dream of something better but are never able to attain it.

# Adaptations

Before The Postman Always Rings Twice was filmed, it was adapted for the stage. Cain was hired to write the script (although he initially did not want to) and the play opened on Broadway on February 25, 1936. It was a lavish production, with sets designed by Jo Mielzner, who later worked on the award-winning productions of Death of a Salesman and A Streetcar Named Desire, but ran for only seventy-two performances. A revival in the 1950s starred Tom Neal and Barbara Payton, but it too had only a limited run.

Soon after the novel was published and became known as a "taboo" book, critics predicted that it could not be successfully translated into film.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer bought the movie rights to the novel, but the Hays Office blocked the first attempt to produce it. The Postman Always Rings Twice was finally made into a movie in 1946 starring Lana Turner and John Garfield, and was at once a box-office hit — a great irony, Cain thought, when he recalled his failure in Hollywood. In 1981, the film was remade, this time starring Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange. Reviews were all favorable, but the remake somewhat vulgarized the subtle steaminess of the original, making the encounters between the two lovers more openly sexual.

# Literary Precedents

Partly because of the widespread currency of Wilson's essay (it is still frequently quoted today), partly because of the time when Cain published his first novels, Cain is usually grouped with Hammett and Chandler.

But Cain's hard-boiled fiction departs from the tradition established by his contemporaries, for in Cain's works no detection process is involved. Cain tells astonishingly early in his novels, often before the close of the first chapter, who committed the crime and why.

Cain employs the tough-guy mode, then, not for the purpose of executing a who-dun-it, but to give an impersonal view of the American scene of the 1920s and 1930s. The crime becomes the occasion for an almost clinical observation of the men and women of his time. Cain's novels can also be thought of as long dramatic monologues (Frank's story is told in the form of a death-row confession to a Catholic priest), very similar to those of Robert Browning, in whose poems the reader learns from the start that the character is in some way a deviant, and through his own words the reader comes to know him, as he reveals more about himself than he thinks he is telling.

Yet another literary tradition from which Cain's novels derive is the school of naturalism, or social realism, as it was practiced in America by such writers as Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell, and in France by Flaubert and Balzac. The naturalistic writer depicts his characters as ordinary people who are world-weary or dissatisfied with their present circumstances and invite change, thus bringing on personal tragedy. These characters live in a world they do not understand, and so they reject it by defying traditional social mores. Although these earlier writers were probably not Cain's mod els, they were at least in some respects his mentors. But one cannot really claim anything like an identifiable "influence" on Cain, for he created a unique type of fiction by himself, works that dealt with realistic characters in everyday circumstances who turn out to be, as one contemporary reviewer put it, "thoroughly repellent."

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