Red Harvest Short Guide

Red Harvest by Dashiell Hammett

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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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Contents

Characters

Raymond Chandler claims that the protagonist of the hard-boiled detective story is "the hero. He is everything." This view of the figure of the detective as being of central, almost exclusive importance is equally valid in the case of Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op stories and novels. The Continental Op appears in thirty-six short stories, some of which were then used to make up Red Harvest and The Dain Course (1929). In marked contrast to the master sleuth of the classic detective story, the Op is an employee of a detective agency that sends him on different assignments. He is short, heavy-set, overweight, not physically attractive. The Op is never given a first name, partially because Hammett wanted to depart consciously from the personality cult of the classic detective, and partially to represent the Op as the prototype of the proletarian hero, who labors without much recognition for his wealthy employers, does his work anonymously, but still gains personal pride and satisfaction from it and is fiercely loyal to his agency. The Op is in many ways Hammett's alter ego; in a corrupt world, he has arrived at a sort of existentialist moral code which dictates his behavior more than the social or the legal code. In the tradition of the American Western, he is attracted to but wary of women; he is a loner, unmarried and without any mention of family or social connections. Much of his moral code is informed by the demands of his profession and he is a less complex predecessor of Sam Spade of The Maltese Falcon (1930). His talents, like those of most hard-boiled detectives, are physical and practical, in contrast to the cerebral abstract thinkers of the classic detective story.

The other major character in Red Harvest is Personville, the social setting of the novel. The residents of the town are completely defined by the moral climate which pervades it. They all exhibit more or less advanced symptoms of moral degeneracy, and, except for Elihu Wilsson, they are two-dimensional. Donald Wilsson, whose death provides the inciting element in the plot, represents the only relatively honest man in town; the rest, from Max "Whisper" Thaler to Police Chief Noonan and Dinah Brand, are puppets aspiring to be puppeteers, themselves mercilessly manipulated by Elihu Wils son's forces and by the Op.

The large number of characters in the novel is an indication of the widespread corruption in America, short glimpses of corrupt people totally insignificant in the plot of the novel indicate that greed and immorality are not limited to the important dramatis personae. In subsequent novels, Hammett uses fewer characters without relenting in his fierce attack on American society and human nature.

Social Concerns

Hammett's first novel clearly shows the writer's deep-seated proletarian biases and his disenchantment both with the social structure of the United States and with his own former role as an enforcement tool for the exploiters.

The Pinkerton Detective Agency, in the years after its founding in 1850, served an important law enforcement function in the U.S.; in the years when there was virtually no national law enforcement agency dealing with interstate crime, Pinkerton's was frequently hired to deal with cases which went beyond the jurisdiction and capacity of local police forces. The attempts by the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.)

to organize industrial labor on a nationwide basis and the resulting, often violent strikes were a boon to Pinkerton's agency, which was frequently hired to break strikes and disrupt union activities. Hammett himself was given several assignments of this nature and made many bitter comments about his complicity in these cases.

Both his disenchantment with detective work and his growing inclination toward Marxist social philosophy can be attributed to his disgust with the antiunion assignments he had to perform.

Beyond these themes which can be linked to Hammett's personal experiences, Red Harvest exhibits the same social concerns which inform the novels of writers like Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who harshly pointed out social injustices in the U.S. and deplored the disintegration of the American Dream. Red Harvest thus becomes a novel of social criticism, pointing out the long-standing corruption of the American pastoral ideal, exposing the violent, greedy world of the Prohibition era, and posing a number of existential dilemmas for the person opposed to this corruption and greed.

Personville, the location of most of the action, becomes a microcosm of the United States; it is, as its sarcastic pronunciation, Poisonville, indicates, a poisoned place, what the critic George Grella has termed "The Great Bad Place." The town is not merely infested and threatened by crime but criminal activity is the norm. Significantly, Personville is located in the West — it may be an amalgam of Boulder, Colorado and the mining towns of Butte and Anaconda, Montana. In this way the town is a symbol of the disappearance of the frontier spirit of the West, which has given way to an industrial urban scene and perverted the often justified use of violence in the West into the criminal violence of gangsters and tycoons in single-minded pursuit of money and power. Hammett sees Personville, "sick from the diseases of violence, greed, and capitalist extortion," as representative of a whole society. The violence which Elihu Wilsson has imported, presumably on a temporary contract, to quash the labor unrest among the coal miners, has become endemic and leads to the death of his own son. In the end, a dubious order is restored, but Hammett clearly indicates that the depravity of

Personville is beyond redemption: sooner or later, someone will step into the power vacuum created by the inevitable leaving of the National Guard which Elihu Wilsson had called in on the Continental Op's request.

Techniques

Red Harvest is an excellent example of the differences in technique between the classic and the hard-boiled detective novel. Whereas the former uses murder and detection as the ingredients for a game, playfully set against the background of a basically healthy, perfectly ordered society, the hardboiled detective novel treats crime as symptomatic of a troubled American society. The work of the Op, then, is not the pretense for an intellectual contest between the detective and the reader, but it is an heroic attempt to preserve a measure of dignity and morals in an otherwise corrupt world.

In Red Harvest, the answer to the question of who killed Donald Wilsson is quite secondary to the portrayal of a decayed moral landscape, in which the last somewhat decent human being must make his stand and choose his defense.

The first-person narrative of a nameless narrator emphasizes this approach.

The violent capitalist conspiracy is related to the reader through the eyes of the Op, who appears to give a dispassionate account of the events, but who betrays his anxieties in his account of two drug-induced dreams, both involving unsuccessful and humiliating chases. In the particularly significant second dream, the Op hunts down his prey, but then they both fall from the top of a high building. This demonstrates the more serious literary intent of the novel — classic detective stories explicitly reject any form of literary "detraction," such as allegory, from the puzzle; secondly it expresses the obsession of the detective with his work, as well as his subconscious realization that an unqualified victory is not possible in his struggle to rid his society of evil. These allegorical dreams in Red Harvest find a parallel in the Flitcraft episode of The Maltese Falcon.

Like The Dain Curse, Hammett's other Op novel, Red Harvest is a conglomerate of four Op stories, which had been published in Black Mask between 1927 and 1928: "The Cleansing of Poisonville," "Crime Wanted-Male or Female," "Dynamite," and "The 19th Murder."

Themes

Red Harvest presents a literary image of the United States as a violent, greedy, power-hungry society. The main villains are not the gangsters but wealthy influential people who use thugs to defend their often ill-gotten wealth and the power derived from it.

This lust for money and power is stronger than even family ties, as witnessed by the death of Donald Wilsson caused indirectly by his own father.

The question Hammett presents to the reader focuses on what, if anything, can be done to correct this situation; furthermore, Hammett writes about the consequences which face a man who has made it his task to steer clear both of pervasive corruption and of the attempts to fight against it.

The end of the novel indicates that any victory against the forces of materialism and greed will be short-lived, since the core of the corruption is not located in the hired gunmen, but in the hearts of their employers, the pillars of Personville's and American society.

Thus, respectability is merely a facade, created to make it possible for the wealthy to engage in dishonorable conduct at a reduced risk. The enormous amount of bloodshed and cruelty generated in the novel is borne essentially by minor villains who have become pawns in a power struggle which they are incapable of understanding or surviving.

The Op, while initially sent to Personville by his boss on a routine assignment, soon makes the cleaning up of the city his own personal quest. He discovers to his dismay that the standard operating procedures of his profession are inadequate for this task. In order to safeguard his success and his survival he must go against the instructions of his superiors; he must lie, cheat, and kill; finally, he comes to the realization that the success of his task depends on his ability to pretend to be just as corrupt and venal as the rest of the inhabitants of the city. Indeed, at the end of the novel, he realizes that it is time for him to leave Personville, because he is very close to actually enjoying all the bloodshed and deceit.

Even a basically honest though ruthless man like the Op is in danger of being corrupted by the pervasive moral decay, and his most damning comment occurs in the final segments of the book, when he says, "You can't go straight here."

This negative, anticapitalist, proMarxist attitude is a hallmark of Hammett's work, particularly his early stories and novels. It has had profound influence on many of Hammett's followers in American detective fiction, especially on Raymond Chandler, whose detective Phillip Marlowe is a more compassionate, less violent descendant of the Op. In Red Harvest, Hammett expresses the belief that this corrupt, materialistic society, which will use any amount of violence necessary to protect its sinful behavior, can be combatted only by using equal or greater amounts of violence, by matching

deceit with even more deceitful behavior. Legal remedies are ineffective — the police are worse than the criminals — and idealistic public defi ance and exposure of the criminal behavior is self-destructive, as Donald Wilsson, publisher of the town's two newspapers, discovers.

Even so, the Op's victory is temporary and won at great personal cost. He knows that the dead racketeers will soon be replaced and that while gaining his victory he has incurred the wrath of his boss, lost the respect of his colleagues, and, most alarmingly, he has discovered the "darkness of his own soul" and how close he himself lives to the abyss which has already swallowed up the inhabitants of Personville.

Literary Precedents

The American hard-boiled detective novel does not develop, as one might think, out of the classic detective story in the mold of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, but has its roots in the medieval romance and in the American Western novel. Whereas the classic detective story depicts an overwhelmingly positive, rural-pastoral society, the hard-boiled detective novel follows in the footsteps of the Grail-quest romances, in which the hero wanders through a barren countryside with an incapacitated king and finally manages to redeem this wasteland after great personal suffering.

Another model is the Western novel, in which the protagonist engages himself on the side of civilization against destructive, lawless forces, despite the fact that he himself views the advance of civilization with some hostility, as he has chosen to escape that civilization and to live in the untamed environment of the frontier on which this civilization encroaches.

The hard-boiled detective, represented here by the Continental Op, is thus on one side a descendant of the medieval knight; however, since his moral values have become outmoded, he has turned into a sort of Don Quixote, albeit one fighting his windmills with greater brutality and efficacy.

Still, in his world there are also no longer fair maidens to be defended and adored; Dinah Brand resembles Dulcinea more than she does Guinevere.

Yet, despite the hopelessness of the battle and the physical and mental dangers inherent in the attempt, the Continental Op persists in his quest.

His rewards are injury, loss of friends, rebuke from his boss: a Pyrrhic victory at best.

On the other side, the Op is a kinsman of Natty Bumppo, the hero of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, and of gunfighter heroes like Owen Wister's Virginian. Essentially lonely, disappointed with urban civilization, they have chosen the life of the frontier, on the borderline between law and anarchy. Often against their will, they find themselves defending helpless people who are unable or unwilling to resist violence with violence and who need the special combative talents of the protagonist to survive. In the end, the same people who have hired the hero are not appreciative of the very physical skills which have saved them, and the hero retreats back into the freedom and loneliness of the West.

The Continental Op is the first and most important hard-boiled detective in the modern American detective story who exemplifies this heritage. While he represents one of the more violent models of this tradition, he is also conscious of his precarious moral position and is horrified when he discovers that he begins to enjoy his violent behavior. He therefore is somewhat of a compromise between the nearly saintly Lew Archer, the detective hero in the novels of Ross Macdonald, and Mike Hammer, the sadistic private eye created by Mickey Spillane.

Related Titles

Red Harvest belongs to Dashiell Hammett's Black Mask period, his first creative period, when most of the stories and novels he published appeared in this pulp magazine. The figure of the unnamed Continental Op is central to this early period, which begins with the publication of "Arson Plus" in October 1923 and ends with "The Farewell Murder" (1930). All of the stories and the two Op novels, Red Harvest and The Dain Curse, are connected by the figure of the detective and by the uniformly negative view of American society. Contrary to some critics' opinions, the character of the Op remains fairly constant throughout the series, without much shift in either his violent methods or his moral stance. Several commentators have pointed out the excess of violence in the Op stories, yet this flood of violence is not used to titillate the reader but rather to persuade him of the correctness of the author's dim outlook on American society.

The Dain Curse, Hammett's next and last Op novel, is remarkable for being the first American novel to deal with the world of California religious cults.

Parts of the work incorporates the literar technique, stream-of-consciousness, which at the time Hammett had hoped to use in some nondetective works. In this novel Hammett also begins to show his interest in the modern theme of illusion versus reality, which becomes a dominant thematic element in The Maltese Falcon.

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