Review of The Maltese Falcon

The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett

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In 1929, Dashiell Hammett changed the face of detective fiction with his novel, *The Maltese Falcon*. First published as a serial in the pulp magazine, *Black Mask*, *The Maltese Falcon* features Sam Spade, a private investigator who is cynical, streetwise, womanizing and follows his own code of ethics. He is a man of honor in his own way but not averse to breaking laws to get results. He differs from earlier brilliant, but eccentric, detectives such as C. Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, in that he seems true to life. This is primarily because Hammett, a former Pinkerton detective, knew the actual ways and means of crime and detection. In his books, he uses identifiable settings and the kind of crime found in police reports. His sharp and cynical dialogue has the ring of truth because this was how criminals actually talked and how a real detective did his job.



The Maltese Falcon is a story of greed and deception. Set in the sleazy underworld of San Francisco in the late 1920s, private eye Sam Spade is hired by a Miss Wonderly to rescue her sister from a hoodlum named Floyd Thursby. Spade's partner, Miles Archer, volunteers to do the job but is later found shot to death with Thursby murdered shortly thereafter. Spade then learns the Miss Wonderly is really Brigid O'Shaughnessy who fabricated the story about a sister, but actually needs Spade for protection while she tries to recover a priceless falcon statue. Brigid is not alone in her search for the falcon. Joel Cairo, Caspar Gutman and his gun-toting sidekick, Wilmer Cook, are also anxious to locate the statue.

The Maltese Falcon is not a predictable mystery. Alliances between characters change and the actions of Sam Spade are often puzzling. Using objective third-person narration, Hammett reveals his characters through detailed descriptions of physical appearance and dialogue. Their thoughts and emotions must be intuited by the reader. The focus of the novel lies in the ambiguity of Spade's motives rather than the whereabouts of the Maltese falcon and the identity of his partner's killer.

Sam Spade became Dashiell Hammett's most famous creation, largely because of the 1940 film version directed by John Huston and starring Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade, Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Peter Lorre as Joel Cairo and Sydney Greenstreet as Caspar Gutman.

Hammett's work is an example of the hard-boiled school of crime writing which originated in America during the 1920s. The term hard-boiled means tough, as in hard-boiled egg. Until the last quarter of the 20th century, hard-boiled fiction was almost exclusively the domain of male authors and their male private eyes. The settings were urban and greed, corruption and alienation were rampant. The hard-boiled school arose, in part, out of the disillusionment that accompanied the end of World War I, as well as the grimness of the Great Depression that followed. Carroll John Daly's private eye, Race Williams, is considered to be the original hard-boiled detective and served as a prototype for Hammett's Sam Spade. Other examples of hard-boiled detectives are Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer. Female hard-boiled private eyes such as Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone and Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski ar more recent additions to the genre.