Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 118

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 118

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

Criticism of Various Topics in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys of National Literatures

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

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Hard-Boiled Fiction

INTRODUCTION

Although the genre of crime fiction has existed in continental and American literature since at least the nineteenth century, the particular form of it known as "hard-boiled" fiction reached its greatest popularity during the period of the 1920s through the 1960s. Critics point out that authors who shaped the genre during this era—especially Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross McDonald—reinvented the crime fiction style popularized by such predecessors as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Dorothy L. Sayers in several key ways. They placed their crime stories not in a rural setting, as was typical of earlier crime fiction, but in a sinister and forbidding urban environment. Perhaps most importantly, they introduced the figure of the tough-talking, brave, but also disillusioned and alienated private eye, who contrasted markedly with the intellectual type of detective exemplified by Sherlock Holmes. On the thematic level, hard-boiled fiction focused on the secrets, mental depravity, and human weakness that lead to crime, rather than on the swift restoration of law and order. Neither high literature nor pulp fiction, hard-boiled fiction was crafted to be accessible to the common reader, yet it also incorporated modernist themes and techniques. While some critics have denigrated hard-boiled fiction as nothing more than a lengthy puzzle, others have written about the genre as a tool for social commentary and as a vehicle for discussing changing notions about justice, morality, and personal and civic virtues.

In novels such as Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), James M. Cain's *The Postman always Rings Twice* (1934), Mickey Spillane's *I, the Jury* (1947) and *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1952), the hard-boiled detective emerged as the major point of interest in the work. The individual detectives—Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, Lew Archer, Spenser, and Travis McGee, respectively—became as famous as the authors themselves, and their personal journeys toward solving the crime in question took on more importance than the resolution of the plot. The hard-boiled detective's main traits were cynicism, toughness in difficult situations, and a wise-cracking sense of humor, but also a strong sense of morality, the desire to see justice done, and the willingness to be physically or emotionally wounded. Scholars have traced the evolution of this character type in later hard-boiled novels, such as those of Jules Feiffer, Richard Brautigan, and Thomas Berger. These later authors present a more complex view of evil, with lines sometimes blurred between victim and criminal, and with a private eye who is less certain of the justice of his or her mission or of the system he or she serves. Still, many common elements remain in later hard-boiled fiction: violent crime, an intricate and exciting plot, and a brave but vulnerable private eye in the center of the action.

There has been much critical interest in the hard-boiled novel since its beginnings, but especially from the 1970s onward. Critics John G. Cawelti, Larry E. Grimes, and Gary Levisi have examined the characteristics, development, and central role of the hero in hard-boiled fiction. The theme of evil in hard-boiled fiction is the subject of studies by James F. Maxfield and Frederick Isaac. Studies of the hard-boiled novel's stylistic elements have also been popular, including Isaac's examination of humor, Scott R. Christianson's study of the influence of modernism, and Michael Pettengell's discussion of naturalistic elements. Many critics of the 1980s and 1990s have focused on women in hard-boiled fiction, both as authors and as protagonists. Studies by Robert Sandels, Timothy Shuker-Haines, Martha M. Umphrey, Priscilla L. Walton, and Manina Jones have probed the ways in which hard-boiled fiction has been influenced by the emergence of such private eyes as Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone and Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Dwight V. Babcock
The Gorgeous Ghoul (novel) 1941
A Homicide for Hannah (novel) 1941
Hannah Says Foul Play (novel) 1946

Thomas Berger
Who Is Teddy Villanova? (novel) 1977

Andrew Bergman
The Big Kiss-Off of 1944 (novel) 1974

Richard Brautigan
Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel (novel) 1942

James M. Cain
The Postman always Rings Twice (novel) 1934

Raymond Chandler
The Big Sleep (novel) 1939
Farewell, My Lovely (novel) 1940
The High Window (novel) 1943
The Lady in the Lake (novel) 1944
The Little Sister (novel) 1949

The Long Goodbye (novel) 1954
Playback (novel) 1958

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
The Valley of Fear (novel) 1915

Harlan Ellison
Web of the City (novel) 1958
Spider Kiss (novel) 1961
Mefisto in Onyx (novel) 1993

Jules Feiffer
Ackroyd (novel) 1977

Sue Grafton
F Is for Fugitive (novel) 1989
H Is for Homicide (novel) 1991

Dashiell Hammett
Red Harvest (novel) 1929
The Maltese Falcon (novel) 1930
The Glass Key (novel) 1931
The Thin Man (novel) 1934

Stuart Kaminsky
Murder on the Yellow Brick Road (novel) 1977
You Bet Your Life (novel) 1979
Catch a Falling Clown (novel) 1982

Jonathan Latimer
The Lady in the Morgue (novel) 1936

Ross McDonald
The Wycherley Woman (novel) 1963

Sara Paretsky
Indemnity Only (novel) 1982
Deadlock (novel) 1984
Killing Orders (novel) 1985
Bitter Medicine (novel) 1987
Blood Shot (novel) 1988; also published as *Toxic Shock,* 1988

Robert Parker
God Save the Child (novel) 1974
The Godwulf Manuscript (novel) 1974
Mortal Stakes (novel) 1975
Early Autumn (novel) 1981

Bill Pronzini
The Snatch (novel) 1975
Scattershot (novel) 1982

Roger Simon
The Big Fix (novel) 1973
Wild Turkey (novel) 1975

Mickey Spillane
I, the Jury (novel) 1947
Kiss Me, Deadly (novel) 1952

Rex Stout
The Black Mountain (novel) 1954
Champagne for One (novel) 1958

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

John G. Cawelti (essay date fall 1975)

SOURCE: Cawelti, John G. "The Gunfighter and the Hard-Boiled Dick." *American Studies* 16, no. 2 (fall 1975): 49-64.

[*In the following essay, Cawelti compares the image of the hero inherent in hard-boiled detective fiction with that found in Western fiction and films. He notes that the hard-boiled hero embodies a darker, more violent, and more anarchic view of the world than his Western counterpart.*]

The thriving little frontier settlement is suddenly beset with outlaws. Coming out of nowhere they viciously attack, beating the citizens and killing the old sheriff. Desperately the citizens gather in the church. After prayer for divine guidance, a debate breaks out between those who would leave the town to the outlaws, and those who think they should tough it out. The braver element prevails and the townspeople determine to stay. They petition the governor for a new sheriff. In the nick of time, a heroic figure, beautifully dressed in fringed buckskin and riding a magnificent stallion rides out of the desert. With his help the townspeople successfully defend themselves against the outlaw bands until, in a final confrontation, the hero exposes, tracks down and outshoots the corrupt politician who has tried to drive the people out and take over their land. With law and order restored, the hero leaves a grateful townsfolk behind and rides off into the desert (and the sunset) with his faithful partner.

Sound familiar? It should, since with minor changes this could be a plot description of any of a hundred Western films ranging from an episode of the Lone Ranger, through John Ford's *My Darling Clementine,* George Steven's *Shane* and Fred Zinneman's *High Noon* to Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter.* Actually the film I was more or less following in this summary is Mel Brooks' total send-up of the Western, *Blazing Saddles.* The hilarious effectiveness of *Blazing Saddles* depends to a considerable extent on the way in which it follows through the Hollywood archetype of the Western hero, with certain incongruous details that enable Brooks to keep his audience in

stitches while he reduces the great myth of the Western gunfighter to a shambles.

The fact that the new sheriff in *Blazing Saddles* is black constitutes the most pervasive burlesque of the mythic tradition. Though there have been a few black heroes in Western films, particularly of more recent vintage, the heroic lawman of the Hollywood myth has traditionally been white in more than his hat. However, Brooks did not create the satire of *Blazing Saddles* simply by setting a black man in a traditionally white heroic role. It is not just his blackness, but his style that makes Cleavon Little's portrayal of the new sheriff so incongruous with the tradition. The external characteristic of blackness and Little's more subtle qualities of manner, attitude and gesture expose to our sense of the ridiculous certain basic assumptions that have always dominated the portrayal of the Western lawman-hero in American films.

First of all, there is the fact that the Western lawman is almost never presented to us as a man of law. Though the vast majority of Western films work toward that climactic moment in which a heroic figure redeems the law by destroying the outlaws who would deny it, this character is rarely a man *of* the law by profession on career. In *Blazing Saddles* this convention is burlesqued by making the new sheriff a black railroad worker who is dragooned into serving as sheriff in order to save his skin. Even in *High Noon,* one of the few films in which a professional sheriff plays the role of hero, the action takes place after the sheriff has determined to retire from office. In most Westerns, the heroic lawbringer is not a sheriff or marshal at all, but a cowboy, a reformed outlaw or a mysterious gunfighter. In the list of 106 representative Western films from 1903-1966 which I assembled for the appendix of *The Six-Gun Mystique,*[1] only eleven clearly and unmistakably have professional sheriffs or marshals as heroic protagonists, and in several of these the hero is not a sheriff at the beginning or ending of the film. Most Westerns do have a sheriff or marshal present as a minor character, but he is likely to be old and helpless, confused or corrupt; often enough he has been suborned by the outlaws or by the evil tycoon.

The hero's ambiguous relationship to law embodies, among other things, a traditional American notion of individualism. The Western hero acts out the myth that society and its organized processes of law, however necessary, are incapable of bringing about true justice. Society and law exist, not as a fountainhead of what is just, but as a set of rules controlling the action of individuals who are the true source of morality and justice as well as of injustice. Because the law is only a set of shifting rules it can readily be bent by those who are strong or unscrupulous enough to do so. Thus, for Americans, the individual who can mold society and the law to his own ends is as much admired as condemned. There seems a slight edge of contempt in our attitude toward the conscientious and law-abiding citizen as if there were some weakness or impotence that prevented him from acting aggressively for himself.[2] On the other hand, Americans are clearly not prepared to extend this view of individualism to its logical conclusion of a war of all against all, for there are other, different values which are also important to us, in particular the ideals of equality and community. These, too, must somehow come into play if justice is to be accomplished. The grasping tycoon, the egocentric rancher, or the lawless outlaw—favorite Western villains—may be partly justified in their ignoring of the law, but when their aggressions threaten the community or harm the innocent farmers, something must be done. The community must be redeemed and the unjust individualist purged. In the Western, society's law cannot do this, since it has not yet been established, or has broken down. At this point, the hero must appear, and he must have the same aggressive force and skill in violence that the villain commands. To carry out his mission, he must be a lawman, not a man of society's law which is useless in such situations, but obedient to an inner code of his own—"a man's got to do what a man's got to do"[3]—which happens to coincide with the need of the community. Thus his act of aggressive violence is legitimated, the excessive individualist threat to the community is purged and the ultimate harmony between individualism and justice is mythically reaffirmed.

These considerations indicate why the sheriff-hero of *Blazing Saddles* comically exposes the Hollywood myth of the lawman not only through his blackness but through his style. The black sheriff of *Blazing Saddles* is a supercool dude; he is elegant and urbane, a connoissuer of fine wines and good food; he is sensuous and erotic and something of a dandy; he prefers trickery to an open fight; most shocking of all he is even—perhaps—just a wee bit gay in his inclinations. These characteristics of style, so antithetical to the tight-lipped austere dignity and puritanical rigor of Gary Cooper or John Wayne, provide a mocking commentary on the traditional myth of the lawman. But why does the supercool style undercut the myth so effectively? I think because it exposes the degree to which the role of heroic lawbringer as portrayed in the Western is a construction of fantasy, and thereby self-contradictory and even absurd. Because of his function as a superior man of violence, capable of purging whole bands of outlaws, the mythical lawman has to be a heroic outsider like the Lone Ranger; after all, if we felt it appropriate for the community to do the job through its duly constituted legal agencies, there would be no need for the myth in the first place. However, having invented this potently aggressive hero to symbolize the ideal individualist, we also need to be assured that he is using his force in a just and moral fashion for the benefit of we, the people. Consequently, though he is trained and dedicated to killing, the heroic lawman must also be a man of great restraint and morality, even gentleness. He must be an outsider, but also in a very deep sense one of us. This, I think, is why the blackness of the sheriff in *Blazing Saddles* constitutes such a comic shock. The hero must be wonderfully potent, but also ascetic and pure in his habits; he must avoid erotic entanglements in order to put his whole force into his moment of violent redemption. In comic contrast to this image of Western heroism, Mel Brooks' sheriff is richly sensuous and obviously inter-

ested in sex. Finally, though the Hollywood lawman is characterized by his austerity toward the opposite sex, there must never be the slightest question of his total and unquestioned masculinity. Even if he prefers the company of men and horses, and is something of a dandy, we must never see a hint of effeminacy or homoeroticism. This, too, becomes an object of mockery in the running commentary of gay gestures and jokes in *Blazing Saddles.*

That the heroic Western marshal was so ripe and hilarious an object of parody in *Blazing Saddles* suggests how important he has been as a figure in the American imagination.[4] In fact, we can probably go so far as to say that, at least in the period of his peak popularity—the late fifties and early sixties—the Western hero was considered by many to be the archetypal American. Unfortunately, the more archetypal a heroic figure becomes, the more he is likely to mean a great variety of things. In a complex, pluralistic society, popular heroes and their myths probably perform an important integrative role by providing common objects of vicarious identification and admiration for people with very diverse attitudes and backgrounds. However, for the mythical hero to function in this way, he must be susceptible to many different kinds of interpretation; he must be, in effect, a container into which various meanings can be poured without breaking or changing the basic shape of the container. The Western hero is clearly a figure of this sort, since he has been the inspiration not only of a great variety of interpretations, but of a number of different versions.[5] For example, in his recent book on the subject, Philip French suggests that the Westerns of the last two decades can be classified into fairly distinctive "Kennedy," "Johnson," "Goldwater" and "Buckley" versions of the basic Western story.[6] Whether or not one agrees with this particular anatomy, the Western obviously encompasses a considerable ideological range and, depending on the perspective of the viewer, can be seen as expressive of either conservative or liberal attitudes, sometimes simultaneously. Indeed, the doughty John Wayne, survivor of so many imaginary gunfights, has managed in recent years to become something of a cult figure among young radical movie fans without changing in any significant degree the reactionary stance he has taken on most public issues. This is presumably because in his various roles as Western hero he transcends political controversy and embodies something that is at once vaguer and more archetypal.

Because of this archetypal or mythical dimension, the Western is extremely difficult to interpret in specific ideological terms. One reads the various critics who have attempted such interpretations and tends to agree with all or none of them. Each interpreter makes a more or less persuasive account of what the Western is all about, but it seems very difficult to demonstrate that one interpretation is more correct than another except in the case of individual works. We can more or less arrive at a consensus about which lines of interpretation are relevant to Owen Wister's *The Virginian,* Jack Schaefer's *Shane* or Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man,* but when it comes to the Western myth as a whole, which somehow includes these three very different works along with several thousand others, it is increasingly difficult to be specific about just what it means. The more versions of the Western myth our inquiry includes the more difficult it is to state what political or social attitudes if any are implied by its popularity. One solution to this problem is to take a broad structural approach to the analysis of the myth, seeking to define those basic elements and relations that are invariably present in all versions of the Western. This is the method I attempted in *The Six-Gun Mystique* where I tried to describe the basic opposition of pioneers and outlaw-savages mediated in some fashion by the hero which permeates all instances of the Western I am familiar with. However, while this did provide a useful framework for viewing the Western as a popular artistic genre, and also suggested some interesting speculations about the cultural meaning of the Western myth, the treatment remained at a high level of generality, and I was never fully satisfied that I had clearly established the cultural significance of the basic structural elements. In particular, I found it difficult to separate the cultural and artistic imperatives involved in the creation of Westerns, to be sure which themes were present because they embodied important cultural meanings and which were simply part of the conventional artistic structure.

In this paper, I propose to approach the inquiry into the cultural significance of the Western in a slightly different way by attempting to sort out the most important cultural themes of the Western as they relate to another genre of contemporaneous popularity. My basic assumption is that those elements or patterns which we find in two or more related but different popular genres reflect basic cultural themes. In other words, when a certain kind of character, or situation or pattern of action appears in more than one mythical structure, we have grounds for believing that this pattern is of basic cultural importance and not simply the reflection of the attitudes of a particular creator. I have chosen for this purpose the popular genre commonly known as the hard-boiled detective or private eye story.[7]

Many previous scholars and critics have noted the relationship between the hard-boiled detective and the Western hero. Lewis Jacobs, in his *Rise of the American Film,* comments on the gangster cycle of the 1930s—which is one type of the hard-boiled story—as an urban version of the Western. Robert Warshow, in his two brilliant essays "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," and "The Westerner," draws similar comparisons. But neither of these writers, nor anyone else so far as I am aware, has attempted to make a systematic comparison between these two genres as a basis for discovering the cultural themes which they may embody. That is the purpose of the following discussion. The results, as the reader will doubtless note, cannot be considered definitive. Even when one has established common patterns between two popular genres, it is difficult to be sure of their relationship to popular attitudes. Moreover, when two literary genres have much in common, it seems likely that the artistic imperatives of a certain kind of story are as influential in shaping similarities

in character and theme as the expression of cultural attitudes. Thus, the results of our comparison remain in the area of the speculative and the possible. Nonetheless, I would argue that there are enough differences between the hard-boiled detective story and the Western to suggest that the similarities are at least in part the result of a cultural need to represent the same fantasy in different garb. In addition, there is much to be said for the point that when a culture creates and consumes so much literary material of the same fundamental sort, it is expressing something about itself. Tentative as they are, the results of this comparison suggest the existence of a tradition in American popular culture which is worth further investigation.

At first glance, there are a number of striking differences between the hard-boiled detective story and the Western. For example, the setting of the two genres is almost antithetical. The Western takes place on the edge of the wilderness or in a frontier settlement and with the exception of a distinctive subgenre in the present time—such films as *Lonely Are the Brave, The Misfits* and *Bad Day at Black Rock*—represents a historic moment in the past. The private-eye genre is almost always set in the city and takes place in the present. In line with this difference in setting, the cast of characters in the two story types seems at first to bear little relationship to one another. The Western centers upon the sort of people likely to be found in the rural West: ranchers, small-town merchants and farmers, a banker, possibly a doctor and a newspaper editor, the sheriff, the schoolmarm, the dancehall girl, the boys down at the saloon and, of course, a complement of outlaws or Indians to generate the excitement and danger of the plot. The hard-boiled detective, on the other hand, typically has to thread his way through the manifold social levels and complexities of a modern city: rich businessmen, mobsters and their gangs, the district attorney and the police, the middle-class and, sometimes, bejewelled glamour girls and women of the night. For example, within the first few chapters of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* private investigator Philip Marlowe encounters the millionaire General Sternwood and his two wild and beautiful daughters, a pornographer named Arthur Gwynn Geiger, a cheap hoodlum and his moll, a seductive bookstore salesgirl, an old friend from the district attorney's office and a miscellaneous cast of policemen and grifters. Such a variety of types is impossible in the simpler environment of the Western. The pattern of action also differs from genre to genre. The hard-boiled detective is, above all, involved in the investigation of a crime, and the climactic point in his story usually revolves around the unmasking of a criminal or a conspiracy, while the Western is generally a tale of conflict—between townspeople and outlaws, ranchers and rustlers, cattlemen and farmers, or pioneers and Indians—leading to a shootout between the hero and the antagonist which resolves the conflict, usually through the destruction of the antagonist. Beyond these contrasts in setting, character and action, the Western and hard-boiled detective genres have innumerable differences in symbolic detail: horses vs. cars; six-shooters and winchesters vs. .45 automatics and tommy guns; boots, spurs and chaps vs. business suits; smoke signals vs. telephones, etc. Finally, there is frequently a contrast in narrative structure between these two genres. The hard-boiled story is usually a first-person narrative, told to us by the detective-hero, while the Western almost never adopts this form of story-telling.

Underneath these many differences, however, there are certain fundamental patterns which the Western and hard-boiled detective stories have in common, which, if our initial assumption is correct, embody important American cultural themes. First of all, the two heroes have very similar characteristics. Each is a skilled professional man of violence, and, while the hard-boiled detective story ends less often in a shoot-out than the Western, the hero is always prepared for this eventuality. However reluctant he may be to use them, he is skilled with guns and fists. This connection between hard-boiled detective and Western heroes becomes even more obvious when we compare the American detective with his English counterparts like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Lord Peter Wimsey or Mr. Campion, who possess great powers of inference and deduction, but are almost never called upon to engage in violent confrontations with guns. In America, even the relatively pacifistic Lew Archer knows how and when to handle a gun, while the more vehement and vengeful Mike Hammer usually climaxes his investigations by shooting the criminal. This readiness for violence is one important common characteristic of hard-boiled detective and Western heroes, but they also share another aspect of their persona: reluctance to use their skills in violence, which is often related to a sense of ambiguity about their involvement in the situation in which they find themselves. These are typically heroes who do not initiate their heroic actions. Instead, they are forced into them.[8]

The hero's reluctance seemingly results from two aspects of his situation. First, as a skillful man of violence his actions are likely to bring about someone's death. Consequently, his involvements cannot be entered into lightly. Secondly, the hero has a penchant for becoming committed to other persons in such a deep emotional and moral fashion that his actions not only affect the lives of others, but have a deep impact on himself. The model of these circumstances is the situation of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon.* Sam is initially drawn into the case when a woman asks him to investigate the disappearance of her supposedly missing, but actually fictitious sister. This has become a favorite opening for the hard-boiled detective story. For example, the recent film *Chinatown* begins when a woman impersonating the wife of an important Los Angeles official asks the detective to secure evidence of the official's supposed liaison with a younger woman. As in the case of Sam Spade, this initial mission is purely a matter of business for the detective. He has no personal interest or concern in the outcome of the case, except as a matter of doing his job. However, this apparently insignificant initial mission is soon revealed to be a cover for much more serious and dangerous complications which gradually draw the detective into a web of emotional and moral commitments. Sam Spade finds himself falling in love