



Vicarious Dysfunction and the Redeemability of Ego-Libidinal Extinction

Freud and The Maltese Falcon

WENDELL HIXSON

Applying a Freudian lens to Dashiell Hammett's landmark detective novel *The Maltese Falcon*, Wendell Hixson contrasts the fetishization of the titular treasure with the ironically hopeful, moral motives of Hammett's otherwise brash private eye Sam Spade, revealing how the hardboiled detective novel offers ambivalent yet satisfying order amid the chaos of the Modernist era. This essay was written for *The American Detective Novel* with Dr. Brenda Brown.

IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, American perception was reeling from the horrors of WWI, Prohibition, and the Great Depression. The American people later witnessed the rise of fascism and technological violence, as nations further developed their deadly machinery and sciences for the purposes of widespread death and genocide. The creation of tanks, bombs, warplanes, machine guns, mines, explosive artillery, trenches, and poisonous gas led the American people through a tumultuous and emotionally chaotic time. The artistic and theoretical minds of the age began questioning the preconceptions surrounding human kindness, innate goodness,

reality and illusion, and questions of human nature. An intellectually revolutionary period replete with violence and uproar led to the intense desire for something stable. American detective novelists responded to this need by creating the epitome of modern discontent in the clever but cynical private eye. Authors such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett crafted dark “hardboiled” detective stories that incorporated the uncomfortable elements of murder, sex, homosexuality, pornography, greed, and substance abuse, subjects apparent in the collective societal psyche. The American people knew of these vices, but they remained unaddressed for the sake of censorship.

Alongside addressing these taboos, early hardboiled authors characterize the private eye as an unphased and tough individual who desires nothing more than achieving a form of justice — no matter how simplistic — in a broken world. The audience starts to identify with the protagonist and thus vicariously achieves a resolution that translates to a relaxation of their anxieties. The vicariously experienced narrative and hero are exemplified in the pioneering novel of the American detective genre: Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*, first published in 1930. Through his prototypical detective novel’s prime character, Hammett crafts a complex investigator equipped with cynicism, skepticism, and wit, who exhibits the very dysfunction present at the age.

Simultaneously, Hammett’s intellectual contemporaries were publishing explanations of violent and harmful human behavior, and, in the very same year of Hammett’s groundbreaking novel, a profound theoretical treatise was published that elucidated the reason for our lack of contentment, as well as the loss of autonomy and individuality. It posited the negative impact of repression, while describing the resulting neuroses that create guilt and self-destruction. It even attempted to define the innate drives from which our destructive behavior begins and theorized the realities of love and attraction. The book was known as *Civilization and Its Discontents*

and was a defining work by the original psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, marking a prolific era in Freud's thought.

Freud had previously written insightful works on human behavior, and — no matter how incorrect his origin of those behaviors may be — the literary application of his studies on behavior provides a penetrating window into human nature. The detective novel is an intensely phallic genre, one that is autoerotic, invasive. And through this autoeroticism, the detective novel is also focused on personal “wish-fulfilment.” Charles Rzepka, a scholar of detective fiction, even mentions, “Most analysts of detective fiction see the genre as a form of wish-fulfilment. The wishes to be fulfilled may be psychological and common to all readers, or socially determined, or both, but their fulfilment is nearly always conceived as vicarious” (21). Again, vicariousness is central to those invasive and autoerotic elements of the novel. However, the Freudian concepts of the repressed pleasure principle, self-destruction, sexual deviation, and escapism operate to highlight the dysfunctional nature of a realistic protagonist in a realistically dysfunctional world.

While Hammett's classic private eye is not a character to be idolized, he is a character the reader can relate to. Hammett's intended audience was plagued with discontentment and came to commend the protagonist's clever discoveries, unwavering willpower, apathy towards horrors, and desire for order in the face of chaos. Hammett's stories illustrate multilayered manifestations of neuroses, which can be defined as behavioral reactions to repressed emotions. The detective story portrays a chaotic influx of disorder that stands in contrast to the usually calm, collected rock that the reader finds in the private eye. The private eye, much like the genre itself, exists within the phallic stage, the third stage of Freud's psychosexual development, and remains in the oedipal stage that precedes latency. On this subject, a psychoanalyst critic of film noir posits, “The detective is always in the position of the oedipal child, fevered with curiosity and projecting his own excitement and guilt onto the subject of his quest” (Bauer et al. 277). Rather than a sexual desire for the

mother, this “oedipal” stage emphasizes a time of autoerotism and a lack of commitment, which importantly intersects with Erik Erikson’s third stage in his psychosocial development, the battle between Initiative and Guilt. The private eye depicts our desire for initiative, while he and all other people, both characters and audience members, still experience the destructive forces of guilt provided by the incessant pressures of civilization.

Consequently, the private eye emerged from the need for a vicarious hero that both reflected Modernist notions of human nature and challenged total instability. Hammett’s Samuel Spade exemplifies this complex character. Spade’s dysfunctional balance can be analyzed through the psychoanalytic lens of Freudian discontent, innate destructive drives, and psychosexual development to reveal an almost comforting balance provided by an inherently problematic, but redeemable, detective in a seemingly unredeemable world.

First, as said before, Freud was incredibly apt in describing behavior, as are fiction authors through symbolic mannerisms. It follows that the entirety of *The Maltese Falcon* never once describes an internal process or emotional response. The descriptions from the narrator only illustrate the actions and expressions of the characters, even in the face of violence or trauma. Freud effectively frames this avoidance from Hammett’s narrator in revelatory fashion: “In the theory of psycho-analysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle” (Freud 594). There is no need for emotional insight when behavior can be utilized to extrapolate repressive emotions. In his theory of the psyche, Freud discerns the three realms of the mind: the id or “pleasure principle,” which dominates the unconscious mind; the ego or “reality principle,” which filters the id into a socially acceptable manner; and the superego or “morality principle,” which is driven by shame and guilt of the id. From here, we can assume that all actions and reactions stem from the pleasure principle or the repressed, neurotic expressions of said pleasure principle through the ego or superego. The moralistic pressure that

creates neurosis systemically permeates civilization. Freud clarifies, “Repression demands a persistent expenditure of force” (572). The question then becomes why civilization has become so domineering and why it perverts the human experience to the point of self-destructive neurosis. Freud argues that civilization does not create these issues, but that destructive tendencies and the death drive are innate to the tribalist human psyche, mostly exerted towards others, while civilization redirects these drives inward to protect the whole. As Freud claims, “In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration” (750), and so it must be restricted and, ideally, sublimated. This destructive tendency of human beings, which created the death drive (756), culturally aligned with the pervasive thought of the time, which was concerned with human violence, deviant sexuality, and, as Freud puts it, “intoxicating substances” (728). The horrors and foolish exploits of human nature seen in wartime and in Prohibition were depicted in the cityscapes that many Americans called home, with Freud arguing that these settings were symptoms of a people in need of coping. However, beyond the Freudian theories surrounding the general societal pulse are the actual insightful descriptions and explicit characterizations found within the novel. And many common tropes in the detective novel prove to be orbiting murder, homosexuality, and alcohol.

Within *The Maltese Falcon*, the narrator’s characterizations create contradictory images of criminals who primarily show the highest level of dysfunction, though the trope of the wrathful and ineffective police should be noted as a reflection of a failing system that creates the criminal. The kingpin Gutman, for example, always comes across as a positive and intelligent individual who, like Spade, is resistant to the world around him and remains jolly, regardless of Spade’s insults or threats (Hammett 127-28). But his Falstaffian appearance is easily understood to be a performance. After seemingly entrusting Spade with valuable knowledge, Gutman drugs him, and

a young lackey assaults the disabled Spade. Also, Gutman's intelligent analysis of ancient sources in multiple languages gives the illusion of rigorous education, but his mental ability is assumed flawed as the Maltese Falcon is never proven to be real, revealing his entire chase for naught. Thus, Gutman's true attitude towards Spade is a manipulative illusion driven by blind greed. Gutman's boy is an uncaring, corrupted youth plagued by violent and vulgar tendencies, with an inability to engage with others, seen through his inability to look anyone in the eye. He also may be a homosexual. The deceitful conman Cairo, a near confirmed homosexual, is fond of acting like he holds influence but proves to be consistently weak and effeminate. And Brigid is a murderous femme fatale who manipulates Spade throughout the novel for the sake of acquiring the Maltese Falcon. All of these characters are experiencing effects of repression, as the young boy is treated as expendable and worthless and is also a homosexual, Gutman is an obese and repulsive man of wealth, Cairo is a disarmed and emotionally castrated homosexual, and Brigid consistently lies and ultimately loses any and all love from Spade.

Within every character exists a sexual repression and an absence of, or inability to attain, a sexual object. Freud defines the sexual object as the aim of a human's sexual desire, and, though it is usually a masculine concept, the sexual drive in this case can be unisexual. Considering a neurotic sexuality and perverted sexual object, Freud presents an important point in the context of fetishization: "What is substituted for the sexual object is some . . . inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces" (249). However, the Falcon — their true pursuit — does not resemble a person, but a totemic figure, and to Freud totems ultimately derived from a lack of understanding of sexual intercourse by primitive peoples (487). If anything, the Falcon becomes a physical representation of characters' extreme libidinal repression wherein sexuality is adversely sublimated in favor of the fetishized object-libido.

In contrast to the usual object-libido, “fetishized object-libido” should be understood to be an unhealthy neurotic drive for an inanimate object resulting from the restrained pleasure principle. It is no coincidence that this desire becomes self-destructive and concludes with an unsatisfying realization that the Falcon consists not of gold and jewels but worthless lead surrounded by a façade of dark enamel. Hammett even composes the reveal in an unceremonious sequence of basic events plopped in the middle of a paragraph: “Gutman’s knife-blade bit into the metal, turning back a thin curved shaving. The inside of the shaving, and the narrow plane its removal had left, had the soft grey sheen of lead” (213). Gutman then unsatisfyingly feels no anger or indignation. He simply decides that he must move on to continue his search. It is a largely meaningless, unsatisfying revelation. Additionally, in relation to the previous note of exclusively physical descriptions, the Falcon symbolizes the futility of describing their internal processes. In the pursuit of discovering the criminals’ intentions and potential redeemability, the reader only encounters worthlessness beneath their figurative dark enamel. In response to the horrible values and unaesthetic appearances of people, Freud defeatedly wrote, “We soon observe that this useless thing which we expect civilization to value is beauty” (738). In the presence of the ugly and worthless can be found a libidinal frustration. There is a lack of a figurative orgasm in not finding the bejeweled, golden bird, which was initially perceived to be beautiful and worth intense effort. However, there is no satisfaction in their fetishization of materialized greed, violence, and betrayal, and, in the end, they are all caught and arrested, with Gutman being killed. Through the futile search for the eponymous falcon, the Modernist belief of human corruption and absent morality is both indulged and subverted. While civilization can lead humanity into the fetishization of violence, material gain, and betrayal, the drives leading one in this direction are unfulfilling and leave something more to be de-

sired: the need for libidinal extinction. Discontentment and repression can lead the mind to these realities, but the human drives are not fulfilled through evil material gain.

Alternatively, the arc of the complex and narcissistic Samuel Spade manufactures a vicarious relationship with the Modern cynical audience to create a dysfunctional and redeemable character who not only uses a seemingly negative neurosis for an intangible good, but also provides the audience — with oedipal and phallic curiosity — the opportunity to reach a figurative orgasm. Specifically, by solving the mysteries, Spade and the audience resolve convoluted mental processes and reach the ego-libidinal extinction. While still a sublimated and self-destructive response to a sexual repression that wants nothing to do with the physical world, the product leads to a curiosity that develops altruistically. Freud even argues that the pursuit of libidinal extinction is inherently altruistic (279), as it usually provides a reproductive purpose. In Hammett’s case, however, it provides a preservative purpose. It preserves the value of humanity, rather than just creating new life.

Before further elaboration, it is essential to first define the Freudian concepts of ego-libido and narcissism and their relation to the “oedipal” or “phallic” individual. When the libidino, or sexual drive, is sublimated, it can be driven inward, and this desire for pleasure redirects into the ego (548). It becomes a mechanism of autoerotism that must be filtered into a socially acceptable manner, and, among narcissistic individuals like the classic private eye, it takes form by emphasizing mental ability. Freud posits, “[T]he narcissistic man, who inclines to be self-sufficient, will seek his main satisfactions in his internal mental processes” (734). The classic detective consistently relies solely on his own wit and personal ability to solve cases with a rare need for aid or direction. This iteration of ego-libido can achieve a figurative extinction in the orgasmic revelation of the murderer, and their subsequent capture is at least a central element in *The Maltese Falcon*. Lastly, the “oedipal” and “phallic” characteristics define the drives of the main protagonist.

As said earlier, the “oedipal child” is composed of a feverish curiosity that projects an excitement and guilt onto the investigation and search for justice, and it is no coincidence that such characters are zealously single and avoidant of relationships. “Phallic” relates to the private eye’s invasive and autoerotic nature wherein his selfishness, solitude, and forceful desire for answers to his own questions find refuge. It also finds context in the developmental conflict between Initiative and Guilt. Ultimately, the oedipal child has initiative for a metaphysical goal, and though they still embrace their guilt and self-destruction, their goal stands in stark contrast to the highly material golden Falcon. The detective’s drives result in genuine satisfaction, as opposed to the failed search for the fetishized bird. The audience extrapolates a pseudo-morality in the detective’s actions, and his destructive actions to acquire answers depict a Modern pessimism alongside a desire for much needed stability. In simpler terms, he oddly brings a semblance of hope.

The ironic nature of Sam Spade cannot be understated. The narrator inundates the reader with small phrases and key passages that seem to vilify Spade by making him seem manipulative, cruel, apathetic, and grotesque. Hammett introduces Spade as “a blond Satan” (1) and on multiple occasions paints him as yellow, noting his burning yellow eyes (93) and “deeply-lined” yellow face (226). In color theory, yellow commonly denotes sickness or hideousness. Moreover, “Satan” is rarely used in a positive manner. Spade has slept with another man’s wife (106). He bruises the dearly innocent Effie Perine (121-22). After being struck by Dundy, he soon loses all control of himself and descends into a disabling rage (83-85). And when his partner is killed, he barely seems to care and instead favors a cigarette before he leaves his home (11). He is clearly self-destructive, indulgent, and akin to the average man. In a repressive civilization, most people fall into these same categories, making the detective relatable and lending to his vicariousness and the original audience’s relation to him. In line with his self-destruction and need for escape, Spade heavily drinks and smokes and nonchalantly addresses being

held at gunpoint by Cairo by casually putting his hands behind his head and seemingly getting comfortable (17, 46). In response to self-destructive behavior, Freud writes on aggressive sublimation, “[Men’s] aggressiveness is introjected. . . . [I]t is directed towards his own ego” (756). Rather than self-preservation, Spade’s destructive tendencies largely result in his lack of caution and his addictions. Harkening back to the rage he felt after Dundy punched him, Spade is seen to enter into an unhealthy and uncontrollable anger that only negatively affects himself; he cannot exert violence upon another, so he redirects it inward. Spade even occasionally seems slightly demented: “Blood streaked Spade’s eyeballs now and his long-held smile had become a frightful grimace” (Hammett 225). However, on top of all of this, Spade is the protagonist — in a looser sense, the hero — and ironically brings the audience something stabilizing in a shattered world, especially wielding the irony of doing good through dysfunction.

Determinately, no one in the entirety of the novel can see the true Falcon, while the audience can genuinely engage with the intangible concepts of deliberation, justice, and internal turmoil that leads to revelation. These intangible concepts are metaphysical objects, but Freud clarifies, “The ego-libido is, however, only conveniently accessible to analytic study when . . . it has become object-libido” (286). These objects serve the ego in some regard, and, as stated previously, the narcissist serves their own ego through mental deliberation. The detective takes this dysfunctional neurosis and creates from it a positive effect that the audience engages and appreciates.

The Modernist approach to the world and much art at this point was quite negative and offered no answers, while detective novels offered solution and resolution. This is not to say that they were tacky, unrealistic, or unaware of the *Zeitgeist*. Rather, they offered answers in a manner that matched the cultural milieu by relying on dysfunctional and sublimated character traits from a complexly self-destructive individual who grittily achieves a bittersweet revelation.

But the sheer presence of a revelation and the resolution cannot be overstated when in a Modernist world. The imperfect Spade brings us here in a patently imperfect fashion. Previously, we noted how densely neurotic Samuel Spade continuously proves to be, yet the reader cannot help but engage with him and may enjoy competing with his search for their own intellectual satisfaction. While autoerotic and self-serving, the solving of the crime is the exertion of mentally masturbatory desires into positive forms that not only lead to an extinction, which we can henceforth view as a figurative orgasm that causes a cessation of sexual or pseudo-sexual drive, but to a specific extinction that delivers moral satisfaction and a short end to mental anguish and confusion. The resolution of the crime delivers some form of solace to the Modern reader. Spade slowly and methodically meanders through the story collecting information, escaping death, embracing his reckless abandon, and moving towards a greater goal than the Falcon. There is no promise that he wouldn't have taken the money in other scenarios if it were found, but what's important is that he does not. We see something beyond greed and materiality when he turns in the criminals and proclaims to the murderous Brigid, "He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it. Then it happens we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed it's bad business to let the killer get away with it" (226). Miles Archer, his late partner, was murdered, and, though Spade still frames the crime as business (227), he is driven to succeed by a deeper drive to use his oedipal, self-erotic narcissism to avenge his partner. He has not been corrupted by the post-oedipal stage of self-defeating latency. More so, there is something human, hopeful, and almost heart-warming in this statement of true intentions. While abundant flaws may be seen to undermine this humanity, his imperfections reinforce the connection to the audience and create an even more self-satisfying extinction that alleviates the dissonance of reality.

On the other hand, Freud describes how certain men reside in a space devoid of sympathy. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he

responds to the perceived foolishness of unconditional love that the religious and optimistic apply to all people: “[N]ot all men are worthy of love” (744). And for all intents and purposes, Spade is one of these unworthy men. Spade himself projects this sense of insecurity upon Brigid: “All we’ve got is the fact that maybe you love me and maybe I love you” (227). His insecurity can be applied outside of the narrative as well, as the audience only has the “fact” that they “maybe” like Spade and have to answer that for themselves. Audiences choose to relate to him not because he is worthy of love, but because he is not unlike them. He is a broken individual within a broken society, and he can do something essential to their sense of hope and stability. His oedipal narcissism allows him to dissociate from the material world and to find comfort outside of reality, much like the comfort found in literature. He never allows the outside world to harm him. His libido is entirely mental and emotional, rather than physical and genital. And so, his ego-libido becomes something to be envied and later enjoyed when the audience embraces the countless interwoven layers of a detective novel and through literature escape from reality, like Spade, and use their mental processes to pursue an ego-libidinal extinction of their own. The detective novel’s audience becomes an active force that is meaningfully engaging with the text, while simultaneously searching for their own ego-libidinal extinction. Their mental processes are not exactly narcissistic, but the audience is unconsciously using their own intellect to satisfy themselves, encounter morality in solving a murder, merge themselves with the protagonist, and reach an escape from the world by reaching some form of stability and comfort. The vicariousness reaches its peak in this manifestation. The audience is living in a dysfunctional world, relating to a dysfunctional character, and internalizing the attributes of a problematic and narcissistic man, which brings a sense of realism to the crimes and their role within them. Thus, through the resolution of the story, the audience and protagonist find an ego-libidinal extinction that both situates

itself within the context of a Modernist reality and concurrently separates itself from reality via a retreat into the mind. They use the dysfunctional aspects of repression by civilization to approach a moral conclusion. The harmful sublimation seen through self-destructive investigation, shameless oedipal and phallic curiosity, and narcissistic contemplation creates an intriguing reversal wherein these actions lead to something — even if imperfectly — good. It creates hope and provides stability, and in this pseudo-sexual orgasm, extinction does exactly what the name implies. It not only fills the protagonist and, by extension, the audience with satisfaction, but erases a further need for stimulation. It provides a comforting escape from the Modernist need to explain the unexplainable. The novel's path to extinction is imperfect, masturbatory, and fleeting but constructs a realistic avenue for the confused audience to grasp some hope, to feel that human nature can use any method to create some good, even if it did require escapist relief from a need for answers. In the end, Spade remains dissatisfied. He remains oedipal yet retains his initiative, seen in his implied lack of desire to create a relationship with a woman (Hammett 229), and the audience assumes that he will continue to seek the satisfaction of a minor glimpse of order in an unending chaos. And that does ultimately provide one final moment of comfort in the resolution.

Freudian psychoanalysis, however, has not reached a resolution. In the psychological and therapeutic worlds, psychoanalysis has long been discredited, alongside the abandonment of psychoanalytic reasoning for neurosis and dysfunction in the human mind, but the realms of biochemistry and psychiatry reside outside of the realm of literature. Literature notices the behavior of the people and attempts to symbolically and figuratively explain it, while war lends itself to death drives and self-destructive desires. Sexual repression can be symbolically represented through impotence or sexual deviation. The widespread discontent in the world can be microcosmically seen in problematic characters. Psychoanalysis lends itself to the symbolic and the creative, and Freud was known to use literature

to craft his works, such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. And so it is no coincidence that the detective story morphs well into the subconscious and dysfunctional realm of Modernism, the period that Freud analyzed so heavily. It is impossible to deny Freud's indelible mark on the perception of the world:

The cultural history of the past fifty years is inseparably bound up with the name of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. . . . The Freudian outlook has affected practically every sphere of our contemporary thinking, except that of the exact sciences. Wherever the human psyche plays a decisive role, this outlook has left its mark. (Jung)

His dissenting contemporary Carl Gustav Jung admits Freud's mark upon the human mind, but he and Freud himself understand the limited scope as well:

Psycho-analysis, in my opinion, is incapable of creating a *Weltanschauung* of its own. It does not need one; it is a part of science and can adhere to the scientific *Weltanschauung*. This, however, scarcely deserves such a grandiloquent title, for it is not all-comprehensive, it is too incomplete and makes no claim to being self-contained and to the construction of systems. (Freud 796)

A *Weltanschauung* is a comprehensive worldview, and Freud admits that psychoanalysis cannot create one, and, while unable to ever accept the real-world pseudo-scientific elements of psychoanalysis in psychiatry, Freud himself knew how limited his method was. Much like the protagonist of the detective novel, Freud is not a solution, but he does bestow a small insight into truth and order. He provides another window into our complex human psyche. He can provide comfort, as his works can demonstrate human redeemability and goodness. He can bring us one step closer to the truth in the greater understanding of humanity. Freud is no hero and neither, realistically, is Spade, but they used their wits and drives to try and

benefit the greater good, even if it was in their own dysfunctional way. ▶▶

▶▶ WORKS CITED

BAUER, STEPHEN F., LEON BALTER, and WINSLOW HUNT. "The Detective Film as Myth: The Maltese Falcon and Sam Spade." *American Imago*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1978, pp. 275-96.

FREUD, SIGMUND. *The Freud Reader*. Edited by Peter Gay, Norton, 1989.

HAMMETT, DASHIELL. *The Maltese Falcon*. 1930. Vintage, 1972.

JUNG, CARL GUSTAV. "In Memory of Sigmund Freud." Edited by Gregor Kowal, *CHMC*, 25 Sept. 2021, chmc-dubai.com/in-memory-of-sigmund-freud/. Accessed 8 Dec. 2021.

RZEPKA, CHARLES J. *Detective Fiction*. Polity, 2005.