

The Maltese Falcon



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DASHIELL HAMMETT

Raised in Philadelphia and Baltimore, Dashiell Hammett left school at the age of fourteen and held several jobs before becoming an operative for the Pinkerton National Detective Agency in 1915. After serving as a sergeant in WWI and returning to the Pinkerton's for a while after that, he began his career as a writer. His first story was published in 1922, and in the twelve years that followed he wrote numerous novels, screenplays, and short stories, and in many ways his writing, with its hard-boiled authenticity, established the genre of the noir detective novel. He ceased writing after 1934 and focused instead on political activism. A determined anti-fascist, he was a member of the Communist Party USA and, after pulling strings to serve again in WWII (despite the injuries he incurred fighting in the first World War), he refused to provide the U.S. courts information about other Communist party members that could have led to their arrest or harassment. For refusing, he was sentenced to five months in a federal prison. Unpopular with the American public because of his controversial political views, Hammett spent the last ten years of his life as a recluse living in his country house. In 1961 he died of lung cancer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hammett began writing *The Maltese Falcon* after serving in World War I. After the war, many Americans felt that the government and traditional authorities failed the American people by engaging in an unnecessary war. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Hammett critiques all levels of authority by revealing their incompetency and possible corruption. Also significant for the novel is the period of economic prosperity known as The Roaring Twenties. Taking place in 1929, this novel occurs at the end of the period so the novel's critique of greed perhaps reveals Hammett's suspicion of the opulence and excessive wealth that marked the decade.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Along with *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett's *The Glass Key* marked the beginning of a literary golden age of crime fiction. These works helped establish the form, style, and character types that would endure through decades of detective novels. One of the most famous detective novels to come out of this period was Raymond Chandler's [The Big Sleep](#), a novel directly influenced by Hammett's fiction. Building off of Hammett's novels, Chandler would cement the conventions of the genre, including the cynical detective battling police incompetency, corruption, and mob activity as well as the femme fatale leading the

protagonist to his demise (or at least close to it).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Maltese Falcon*
- **When Written:** Late 1920s
- **Where Written:** U.S.
- **When Published:** 1929
- **Genre:** Crime fiction
- **Setting:** San Francisco during the late nineteen-twenties
- **Climax:** Spade's showdown with the criminals in his apartment
- **Antagonist:** Joel Cairo, Casper Gutman, and Wilmer Cook
- **Point of View:** Third-person objective

EXTRA CREDIT

Blockbuster. The novel was turned into an extremely popular 1941 film of the same name with Humphrey Bogart playing the role of Samuel Spade.

Noir influence. The character of Samuel Spade has influenced countless depictions of the "hard-boiled detective" including Jack Nicholson's character in *Chinatown*. Brigid O'Shaughnessy's character has also become a model of the "femme fatale," the mysterious female character who uses deceit and seduction to lead men to their ruin.



PLOT SUMMARY

In San Francisco during the late 1920s, the beautiful Miss Wonderly arrives at Samuel Spade and Miles Archer's detective agency. She asks the detectives to follow a man named Floyd Thursby, who she claims has run off with her younger sister Corinne. Eager to get closer with Wonderly, Archer agrees to do the job while Spade, suspicious of the woman, mocks his partner's rashness.

That evening, Spade awakes to a phone call telling him that his partner has been killed. When he arrives at the crime scene, Spade talks with the police officer Tom Polhaus about the possibility that Thursby killed Archer. An hour after Spade returns to his apartment, Polhaus and Lieutenant Dundy, an arrogant and brash cop, show up at his door with questions about the murder. The cops reveal that Thursby has also been killed, thirty minutes after Spade left the site of Archer's murder, and it's clear they think it is possible that Spade killed Thursby in revenge.

At his office the following day, Spade and Archer's wife, Iva Archer, discuss the secret affair they've been having behind Archer's back. After she leaves, Spade goes to meet Wonderly at her hotel, where he discovers her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy, she has no sister, and that Thursby was a dangerous man she met in Hong Kong. Although she provides no further details, Spade agrees to continue working for her.

Back at his office, Spade meets Joel Cairo who offers him \$5,000 if he can retrieve a statue of a **falcon**. Later, Spade and Brigid meet again, and Spade mentions his run in with Cairo and his acceptance of the offer. Brigid, who appears to know Cairo, asks if Spade could arrange a meeting so she can talk with Cairo. At the meeting, Cairo offers to pay Brigid for the bird, but she claims she doesn't have it in her possession yet. They also refer to Mr. G as the man who had Thursby killed. After the meeting, Spade asks Brigid about her relationship to Cairo and the falcon, but she sidetracks the conversation by seducing him. That night they sleep together.

The next day, Spade arrives at Cairo's hotel and has a verbal confrontation with a young man named Wilmer Cook who works for Mr. G. When Spade returns to his office, Mr. G, now identified as Casper Gutman, calls to set up a meeting. At the meeting, Gutman reveals the bird's long history and its priceless value. Gutman tells Spade that he employed Brigid to steal it from a Russian general Kemidov in Constantinople. Gutman says she betrayed him and is hiding the bird somewhere in San Francisco. At this point, Spade realizes the drink that Gutman gave him is drugged and he falls to the floor unconscious.

Twelve hours later, Spade wakes and searches Cairo's hotel room for more clues, discovering that the statue of the bird was on a ship called *La Paloma* that had arrived in San Francisco while he was unconscious. A few minutes after Spade returns to his office, Captain Jacobi of *La Paloma* bursts through the door, hands Spade a package, and then collapses and dies. Wrapped inside the package is the black bird. After hiding the bird, Spade returns home, where Brigid is waiting for him at his doorstep. They enter the apartment together and find Cairo, Wilmer, and Gutman waiting for them.

After Gutman pays Spade \$10,000 for the bird, Spade calls his secretary, Effie Perine, to have her drop the bird off at his apartment. As they wait, Spade convinces Gutman to betray Wilmer and make him the "fall-guy" for all the murders so that the police will stop investigating. Effie arrives with the bird and Gutman quickly realizes that it's a fake and that Kemidov is in possession of the real statue. In the confusion, Wilmer flees the apartment. After Gutman pulls out a **gun** and demands that Spade return the \$10,000, Spade gives him the money but first takes one thousand dollar bill as a bribe for not calling the police. Determined to steal the bird from Kemidov, Gutman and Cairo leave the apartment with plans to return to Constantinople.

Spade calls Polhaus and tells him that Wilmer killed Jacobi and Thursby at Gutman's orders. With the police arriving soon, Spade convinces Brigid to tell him the whole truth. She admits to killing Archer in order to frame Thursby for the murder so that she could keep the profits from selling the bird for herself. Although she pleads for mercy and tells Spade she loves him, Spade turns her over to the police when they arrive because he wants justice for his dead partner. Spade gives the police the thousand dollars as evidence of Gutman trying to bribe him, but the police inform Spade that Wilmer has already killed Gutman in revenge for agreeing to betray him.

The next morning at the office, Effie cannot face Spade after he let the police arrest the woman who loved him. As he settles in at his desk, Iva Archer arrives and Spade reluctantly lets her in.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sam Spade – The novel's protagonist, Sam Spade is a handsome private detective. Although he sleeps with his partner's wife, Iva Archer, and struggles with an almost greedy desire for wealth, the novel reveals his unshakable ethical integrity when he turns over his lover, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, to the police for murdering his partner Miles Archer. A heavy drinker and always smoking or about to be smoking, Spade is cunning, unbeatable in a fistfight, and mistrustful of almost everyone. He has little respect for the authorities and is willing to bend the law to get to the truth, but his desire for justice and his commitment to his personal code of ethics outweighs any other concern, including love or money.

Brigid O'Shaughnessy – First introducing herself under a false backstory as Miss Wonderly, Brigid O'Shaughnessy employs Sam Spade for protection against the criminal Casper Gutman. She is the novel's master liar, tricking men and women alike into thinking that she is on their side. In the past, she used her attractiveness to convince Floyd Thursby to help her steal the **Maltese falcon**. Throughout the novel, she pretends to be helpless, but Spade is never truly convinced by her deceitful performance. Consumed by greed, Brigid kills Miles Archer in order to frame Thursby so that she would not have to share with him the profits from selling the falcon. By the end of the novel, she claims to love Sam Spade, though it is not entirely clear how true this is and how much she just wants to avoid going to jail. Most likely the answer is some of both. Ultimately, greed and deceit lead to her imprisonment.

Casper Gutman – Also known as Mr. G, Casper Gutman is the novel's arch-villain, using his wealth and complete lack of loyalty or scruples to attain the statue of the **Maltese falcon**. He employed Joel Cairo and Wilmer Cook to find the statue for him. Described as the fat man, Gutman's physical size is an outward expression of his excessive lifestyle of gluttony and

greed.

Joel “Joe” Cairo – Casper Gutman’s employee, Cairo uses intimidation and deceit in his pursuit of the **Maltese falcon**. He, Floyd Thursby, and Brigid O’Shaughnessy worked together to steal the falcon from the Russian general Kemidov. Wearing perfume and jewelry, Cairo is described as very effeminate, and Sam Spade often insinuates that he is gay.

Flitcraft – The man that Sam Spade tells Brigid O’Shaughnessy about who suddenly disappears from his family after nearly being killed by a falling steel beam. After wandering aimlessly for a few months, Flitcraft settles down with in a new town where he marries a woman who resembles the wife he left.

Rhea Gutman – Casper Gutman’s daughter. Drugged by her father, she uses a metal pin to make scratches in her stomach in order to stay awake long enough to tell Spade that Brigid O’Shaughnessy has been kidnapped. It is unclear whether Rhea was tricked by her father or if she was in on the scheme.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Wilmer Cook – Another of Casper Gutman’s employees, Wilmer is the unnamed figure in the shadows who follows Sam Spade around San Francisco. Hot-tempered and quick to violence, Wilmer attempts to compensate for his young age and physical slightness with insults, big talk, and two large pistol.

Effie Perine – Sam Spade’s office assistant, Effie is compassionate, trustful, and boyish-looking. She’s perhaps the only character Spade trusts and their compassion for each other seems almost familial.

Iva Archer – Miles Archer’s wife and Samuel Spade’s lover. Often swayed by her passions, she often acts rashly. The novel ends with Spade having to decide if he will continue their relationship despite his lack of deep affection for her.

Miles Archer – Samuel Spade’s partner who ends up dead after following Floyd Thursby. Archer is a forty-year-old subpar detective who is easily seduced by women.

Floyd Thursby – Brigid O’Shaughnessy and Joel Cairo’s partner in stealing the **Maltese falcon** from Kemidov’s home in Constantinople. Although he never appears in the novel, we are told Thursby was in love with Brigid and had a reputation for loyalty to women.

Tom Polhaus – A good-natured police officer who provides Sam Spade with information about the murder cases.

Lieutenant Dundy – An arrogant and incompetent police officer who keeps trying to peg different murders on Sam Spade.

Captain Jacobi – Loyal to Brigid O’Shaughnessy, he is the captain of the *La Paloma* and brought the **Maltese falcon** from Hong Kong to San Francisco on his boat. He successfully brings the falcon to Sam Spade despite being shot, and dies on Sam’s

office floor.

District Attorney Bryan – An incompetent authority figure who threatens Sam Spade with legal action unless he gives up information about his clients.

Luke – The in-house detective at Joel Cairo’s hotel.

General Kemidov – The Russian general living in Constantinople who has possession of the **Maltese falcon**.

Sid Wise – Sam Spade’s lawyer.

Corrine Wonderly – Brigid O’Shaughnessy’s fictional sister who she claims is Floyd Thursby’s pregnant lover.

Phil Archer – Miles Archer’s brother who comes to San Francisco looking for justice for his brother.

Mr. Freed – The in-house detective at one of the hotels where Brigid O’Shaughnessy stays.

Dixie Monahan – A mobster with gambling debts who formerly employed Floyd Thursby as a body guard.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LIES AND DECEPTIONS

The Maltese Falcon's plot develops through a series of deceptions. Most notably, Brigid O’Shaughnessy masks her involvement in the murders by appearing powerless and in love with Samuel Spade. Unlike Brigid, who hides her criminal behavior, the arch-villain Casper Gutman openly discusses his desire for the statue of the **Maltese falcon**. Although Gutman does not mask his law-breaking, he *does* hide behind his supposed respect for plain speaking in order to perform other deceptions, like drugging Spade and using his daughter, Rhea Gutman, as bait. Even Spade, the novel’s protagonist, only succeeds in apprehending the criminals by deceiving them into thinking that he is a corrupt detective. While Spade uses deceptions and lies, however, he ultimately does so for justice rather than for wealth or personal gain. Spade is also the only character to see past other people’s deceptions, possibly because he mistrusts almost everyone.

Characters in *The Maltese Falcon* also lie to themselves. Brigid, who never admits to the lies, often tells Spade that she herself can’t tell the difference between when she’s telling the truth and when she isn’t. Likewise, in the story Spade tells Brigid, Flitcraft lies to himself about the inevitability of death. Spade, on the other hand, remains largely honest with himself, never

hiding his dislike for his dead partner or deceiving himself into believing that Brigid's love is real.

In terms of the overall narrative, Spade's pursuit of the truth becomes entwined with finding the statue of the Maltese falcon. The falcon itself represents the final truths for which Spade searches. Yet, as we learn at the novel's conclusion, even the falcon is a lie, suggesting that no ultimate truths exist. Likewise, although the novel appears to end with Spade revealing the truth behind all the major deceptions, a final uncertainty remains about the unknowable inner feelings of the characters. For example, Spade does not know if Brigid loves him or, even, if he truly loves her.

Finally, the novel is written in the third-person objective, which means Hammet presents most information through scene descriptions and dialogue instead of through the inner thoughts of the characters. Without access to the characters' thoughts or feelings, the reader becomes like a detective, judging each character's motives, truthfulness, and integrity. Until the last chapter where Hammet reveals Spade's unerring sense of justice, the reader must guess whether or not Spade is just as crooked as the villains.



AUTHORITY, JUSTICE, AND A CODE OF ETHICS

The Maltese Falcon explores the importance of a personal code of ethics in a world of incompetent authorities and an imperfect criminal justice system.

Throughout the novel, Samuel Spade calls into question the police's ability to apprehend the right criminals. Without any substantial evidence, Lieutenant Dundy changes from thinking that Spade killed Floyd Thursby to thinking that he killed Miles Archer. Spade even mocks District Attorney Bryan for concocting an unsupported mob-war motive for Thursby's murder.

In contrast with the police, Spade works outside the limits of the law, getting justice by deceptive means. Although Spade will sleep with his partner's wife and lie to catch the criminals, he maintains a strict code of ethics. Spade's decision to hand Brigid O'Shaughnessy over to the police shows that his desire for justice outweighs, for him, even the possibility of finding love. Spade also risks provoking the police when he refuses to divulge his client's personal information because doing so would be against his personal code (though it's also possible to argue that Spade withholds this information for other reasons, such as wanting to prevent the police from mishandling the case).

While Spade feels he has done the right thing by turning in Brigid, the novel ends with Effie Perine, Spade's assistant, feeling disgust at him for betraying the woman he loves. Effie's reaction illustrates the limitations of justice, specifically how justice cannot always exist alongside loyalty to loved ones.



GREED

In *The Maltese Falcon*, greed is the driving force that motivates most of the characters. In the most obvious example, Brigid O'Shaughnessy kills Miles Archer so she can frame Floyd Thursby and keep the profits from selling the statue for herself. Casper Gutman, meanwhile, represents the embodiment of greed. The other characters refer to him as "Mr. G" in reference to his large "gut" as well as his greed, linking his excess desire for money with gluttony. Even Gutman's pistol is covered with jewels, suggesting that violence and greed are counterparts of one another. Greed so corrupts Gutman that he is willing to betray Wilmer Cook, who he says is like a son to him, in order to continue his pursuit of the **Maltese falcon**. While Spade betrays Brigid for justice, Gutman turns on Wilmer for money.

In contrast, Spade struggles to and eventually does control his greed. Throughout the novel, Spade never misses an opportunity to make some quick cash. However, Spade ultimately hands over to the police the bribe he pretended to take from Gutman. The only major character who seems beyond the grasp of greed is Effie Perine who warns Spade that if he takes advantage of Brigid by taking her money without offering help, then she will lose all respect for him.

In addition to being a symbol of the illusory nature of truth, the Maltese falcon also symbolizes greed. The statue drives people to murder and betrayal, but, in the end, the statue is worthless. As a result, the statue also reveals the hollowness of greed itself, how it drives people to actions that lead only to isolation or self-destruction.



MASCULINITY, FEMININITY, AND SEXUALITY

Most of the characters in *The Maltese Falcon* represent a different perspective on what it means to be a man or woman. For example, Samuel Spade represents the epitome of manliness. Multiple women desire him, no man is a challenge for him in a fight, and his tough exterior and unwavering sense of honor exemplify a certain type of masculinity. The novel idealizes his masculinity, essentially without criticism, even appearing to value his emotional detachment from the people around him.

Hammet's construction of masculinity within the novel contrasts with how he represents gay characters. The various descriptions of Joel Cairo as effeminate imply that feminine characteristics in men are somehow both unnatural and inherently immoral. When Spade wants to insult Cairo and Wilmer Cook, he alludes to their sexual orientation in an attempt to emasculate them. While Spade has a rough and frank manner of speaking, Casper Gutman speaks in a refined way, making him seem more effeminate.

Whereas Spade is a clear and singular representative of

manliness, the novel's three women represent different perspectives on femininity. Brigid O'Shaughnessy appears to be Spade's feminine counterpart since she is his equal match in cunning and sexual allure, but she differs from Spade in her lack of morals and honor. She is the stereotypical "femme fatale," a sexist depiction of a woman who seduces men with deceit and causes their downfall. Although men like Gutman and Cairo are also disloyal, they lack Spade's manly traits, making disloyalty seem like only a feminine trait. Like Brigid, Iva Archer appears disloyal by cheating on her husband and lying to Spade about her actions. However, unlike Brigid, she lacks cunning or resourcefulness and makes her decisions based on emotions like love and jealousy rather than honor or greed. Finally, Effie Perine's physical appearance makes her appear masculine. Since the novel links femininity with deceit, it is unsurprising that a woman portrayed as masculine is the most trustworthy woman in the book. Effie's femininity is complicated by the supportive role she takes on with Spade, whom she nurtures as a mother would. Interacting with her as if she were family, Spade does not see her as a possible romantic partner even though she is the most trustworthy and ethically-minded woman in the novel.



FATE AND DEATH

While most characters don't respond with much emotion to the deaths that occur around them, Samuel Spade's story about Flitcraft reveals the importance of how people cope with mortality. Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy about a former case of his in which a man named Flitcraft realizes how death can strike at any moment. After having this realization, Flitcraft leaves his family and wanders aimlessly around the United States before settling down with a new wife who resembles the one he left. Spade says that Flitcraft abandoned his realization about the random inevitability of death so that he could go back to living a life like his old one. For Spade, this story reveals how most people try to forget about death in order to go on living their ordinary lives.

Spade, however, copes with mortality by trying to stay in control of every facet of his life rather than by simply ignoring the reality of death. Yet, death is something that no one can ultimately predict, avoid, or control. Thus, his desire to stay in control can be understood as a way of coping with his lack of control over death. Likewise, Spade's last name refers to both the instrument used to dig graves as well as a suit of cards, which connects the theme of death with that of the randomness suggested by the cards.

Although Flitcraft had a brief moment of realization about death, the fact that his new life resembles his old in all the significant ways illustrates how a person cannot escape their natural inclinations or "fate." Spade tells Brigid this story in order to indirectly explain that he knows she will not be able to change her deceitful ways, because deception is in her nature.

Spade also comes to a similar realization about himself when he tells Brigid it would be against his nature to let her go free once he's finally obtained the evidence that proves her guilt.



LOVE AND SEX

In *The Maltese Falcon*, love fails to overcome the grim realities of deception and greed. For example, Casper Gutman's greed makes him betray Wilmer

Cook despite Gutman's supposed paternal love and possible sexual attraction towards him. While it's unclear what Gutman's true feelings were for Wilmer, Brigid O'Shaughnessy uses sex and affection as a kind of currency to get men to do what she wants. Although by the end of the novel Brigid may have truly fallen in love with Samuel Spade, he realizes that he cannot trust her love because her emotions are wrapped in lies and deceptions. The novel also provides no model for a good marriage, since Iva Archer cheats on her husband, Miles Archer, and Flitcraft leaves his family with no warning.

For Spade, romantic love appears to be an unattainable ideal since his mistrustfulness prevents him from ever fully believing the inner and unknowable feelings of another person. As a result, Spade is not willing to risk breaking his code of ethics for something as insubstantial as love. Likewise, Spade tells Effie Perine he only knows how to interact with women through sex. Spade's inability to trust makes sex the only option for expressing affection or desire for a woman. Spade even implies that sex, rather than deep affection or trust, is the only thing that sustains his relationship with Iva. The last scene of the novel, therefore, ends with Spade having to decide if he will continue his loveless relationship with Iva by marrying her as she desires. Yet what Spade does not realize is that he already has a profound emotional attachment with Effie, which reveals that Spade can, at the very least, know a kind of familial and nonsexual love for others.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE MALTESE FALCON

Although the novel doesn't contain that many symbols, the jewel-encrusted statue of the **Maltese falcon** provides rich and complex layers of symbolism. According to Casper Gutman, the 16th century rulers of Malta, an island nation near Italy, gave the statue to King Charles V of Spain as a sign of their loyalty. As such, the statue was initially designed as a symbol of loyalty and generosity.

However, obsessive greed drives Gutman, Joel Cairo, Wilmer Cook, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy to pursue the falcon at any

cost, including betraying loved ones and committing murder. Ultimately, their obsessive pursuit leads to their demise. Thus, the falcon comes to symbolize the corrupting and destructive power of greed. Since the statue they pursue turns out to be a fake, the novel further suggests that in the end greed is a worthless endeavor. Thus, while the falcon was originally meant as a symbol of loyalty, it transforms into a symbol of a corrupting, futile, and self-destructive greed that makes people betray their loyalties.

In addition to representing greed, the falcon symbolizes Sam Spade's quest for the truth. For Spade, getting his hands on the falcon gives him the bargaining power to make the villains reveal the true nature of their crimes. However, despite using the falcon to get to the bottom of all the deceptions, Spade is ultimately unable to discover if Brigid truly loves him, which shows how some truths, perhaps even the most important ones, remain beyond Spade's grasp. In terms of the statue's symbolism, the fact that this statue, a symbol for truth, is a fake reveals that people cannot ever fully possess or attain the truth.



GUNS

In a lot of symbolism, the size of a man's **gun** is proportional with his masculinity. The bigger the gun, the more masculine the man. However, this novel uses guns as a symbol for a lack of masculinity. For example, Wilmer Cook, who is described as young, fair-skinned, and possibly gay, carries two large pistols. In the novel, Wilmer's guns represent his attempt to compensate for his physical slightness, youth, and sexual orientation. It is important to note that this novel describes homosexuality as an unnatural and effeminate perversion, rightly leading many critics to criticize the novel for homophobic and discriminatory depictions of gay men. In contrast to Wilmer, Sam Spade does not carry a gun, suggesting that his masculinity is so apparent that he requires no outward symbol to confirm, display, or defend it.

In an extension of this theme, Casper Gutman's gold and jewel-encrusted pistol is a symbol of his effeminacy as well as the fusion of greed and violence. In the novel, jewelry is linked with effeminacy and homosexuality. For example, Joel Cairo's ruby-studded tie and diamond rings are meant to display his effeminacy and his identity as a gay man. Therefore, Gutman's jeweled gun is a symbol of his effeminacy and possible sexual orientation. Since Gutman's gun, an instrument of violence, is a marker of excessive wealth, the novel suggests that greed and violence are counterparts to one another, each leading to the other.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the

Vintage edition of *The Maltese Falcon* published in 1992.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ He looked rather pleasantly like a blonde satan.

Related Characters: Sam Spade

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Right away, Hammett introduces us to his antihero, Sam Spade. Spade is the "hero" of the novel, in the sense that he's its main character, and has a definite moral code (the code that leads him to avenge his partner's death at the end of the book). And yet Spade is anything but a conventional pillar of justice. On the contrary, he's an adulterer, and seems to have little compunction about hurting women and, at times, framing people for murder. He is, in short, half hero and half villain--a description that mirrors his appearance ("blonde satan"). Spade's personality was an important influence on the antihero archetype in noir and crime fiction: Spade isn't exactly a good guy, but he's a little better than the bad guys, and he's at least smart, intriguing, and attractive enough that we can't help rooting for him.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Her thin fingers finished shaping the cigarette. She licked it, smoothed it, twisted its ends, and placed it between Spade's lips. He said, "Thanks, honey," put an arm around her slim waist, and rested his cheek wearily against her hip, shutting his eyes.

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Effie Perine

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Sam enjoys an close relationship with his secretary and assistant, Effie. There's clearly some sexual tension between them--in this scene, for example, Effie licks a cigarette and then places it in Spade's mouth--and yet Effie and Spade's relationship seems deeper and more trusting than a mere sexual fling. Spade seems to turn to Effie for comfort and emotional support--here, for example, he rests his body against hers. Spade also trusts Effie's judgment and detective instincts, as we'll come to see. The passage is important, then, because it shows us Spade's strengths and

weaknesses with regards to women: he sees women as objects for his sexual gratification, yet he's also capable of respecting women for their intelligence and abilities. (This passage is also a good example of the casual sexism that has become an integral part of the noir genre--Spade naturally feels comfortable calling his employee "honey" and putting his arm around her "slim" waist.)

Chapter 4 Quotes

“Diamonds twinkled on the second and fourth fingers of his left hand, a ruby that matched the one in his tie even to the surrounding diamonds on the third finger of his right hand. His hands were soft and well cared for. Though they were not large their flaccid bluntness made them seem clumsy.”

Related Characters: Joel “Joe” Cairo

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to one of the primary villains of the novel, Joe Cairo. Notice the way the passage emphasizes the tiny details of Cairo's appearance, almost as if we're seeing Cairo from Spade's point of view--i.e., the point of view of an experienced detective adept at picking up on tiny details. Cairo is described as being very effeminate, with his soft hands and pretty jewelry. His appearance contrasts markedly with Spade--Cairo is overtly womanish while Spade is aggressively masculine. Also note that the passage describes Cairo as an overtly foreign character--his rings and exotic name suggest Egypt, or the vague East.

It's been suggested that Cairo is supposed to be a queer character (though in Hammett's lifetime, it was more or less impossible to write about overt homosexuality). More generally, one could say that Cairo's effeminacy emphasizes the basic masculinity of Spade's worldview. Spade is a manly man--he drinks, has sex with beautiful women, smokes, etc. Many of the evil characters in the novel are either women or effeminate men--showing Hammett's rather sexist, homophobic (and in the case of Cairo, racist) worldview. He clearly prefers people with Spade's rugged, manly, all-American code of right and wrong.

Chapter 7 Quotes

“His second wife didn't look like the first, but they were more alike than they were different. You know, the kind of women that play fair games of golf and bridge and like new salad-recipes...I don't think he even knew he settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Flitcraft

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, Spade tells Brigid, soon to be his lover, a story about a case he investigated a few years ago. Spade tracked down a man named Flitcraft who, after a brush with death, suddenly left his wife and family and moved far away, hoping to change his life and savor it more. Spade discovered, however, that Flitcraft had soon taken up a new job, wife, and family--and moreover, his new wife looked a little like his first. The irony of the story is that Flitcraft ran away from his old life, only to start up another life that was almost exactly the same.

Spade's story emphasizes the idea of fate or a person's inherent "nature." Flitcraft forcefully tried to change himself, but he soon returned to his old ways. Similarly, Spade will later suggest that Brigid will always be deceitful, no matter how hard she tries to be honest, and no matter how much she may love Spade. The story of Flitcraft also shows how most people deal with their own mortality--they try to ignore it. Flitcraft decided to savor life after nearly being struck by a steel beam. But after only a few months, Flitcraft stopped thinking about death and "settled down" once again.

“He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Flitcraft

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Spade continues telling Brigid the story of Flitcraft, the

strange man whom he tracked down a few years ago. Flitcraft chose to run away from his wife for one simple reason: he nearly died. While walking by a construction site, Flitcraft was nearly killed by a falling steel beam: the experience scarred him, reminding him that his life was short and fragile.

The story tells us a lot about Spade's code of right and wrong--a code that, we sense, is rooted in an acknowledgment of death. Spade is surrounded by death and danger at all times--yet, like Flitcraft, he finds a way to "adjust" himself to the danger and survive. Spade accepts the presence of death in his life, and proceeds normally. Flitcraft couldn't handle this acceptance for long, however, and so he soon slipped back into his old complacency, assuming that death was far away and unreal.

“And when you're slapped you'll take it and like it.” He released Cairo's wrist and with a thick open hand struck the side of his face three times, savagely.

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Joel “Joe” Cairo

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Spade punishes Joe Cairo for slapping Brigid. Joe is angry with Brigid for bringing up a relationship between herself and a man in Constantinople. Spade is so angry that he slaps Joe, suggesting that Joe is a weak fool for hitting a woman. Spade's anger also suggests that he can't stand the knowledge that Brigid has been with another man recently--by this point in the novel, he's romantically interested in her.

The scene could be interpreted as politically incorrect, or even downright homophobic by modern standards. Seen one way, Spade is doling out a just punishment to the villainous Cairo; in a different sense, Spade is just bullying the effeminate Cairo for his own satisfaction (and, we sense, Hammett's). Perhaps Spade's behavior in the passage is meant to illustrate his blunt yet principled version of justice: if somebody hits a woman, he gets hit in return. Hammett acknowledges that Spade is "savage," but also seems to respect Spade for protecting Brigid and asserting his masculinity.

Chapter 9 Quotes

“Oh, I'm so tired,” she said tremulously, “so tired of it all, of myself, of lying and thinking up lies, and not knowing what is a lie and what is the truth.”

Related Characters: Brigid O'Shaughnessy (speaker), Sam Spade

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Sam Spade is starting to figure out the truth about Brigid. Brigid has been involved in tracking down a mysterious falcon statue that's worth a lot of money, and she's traveled to Constantinople to do so. Spade asks Brigid probing questions. In the middle of the questioning, Brigid feigns weariness and tries to seduce Spade--with great success.

We can't take anything Brigid says in the passage seriously. While it's true that she's been telling lies, she's perfectly in control of what she says (at this point at least). Brigid is only pretending to be tired and confused in order to distract Spade from figuring out the truth--in other words, she uses her sexuality to distract Spade, acting like a classic *femme fatale*.

Chapter 11 Quotes

“Well, sir, here's to plain speaking and clear understanding.”

Related Characters: Casper Gutman (speaker), Sam Spade

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Spade meets "the fat man" Casper Gutman. Along with Joe Cairo, whom we're already met, Gutman is one of the main villains in the novel--a greedy arch-criminal whose desire for the Maltese Falcon is suggested by his enormous weight. Ironically, Gutman greets Spade by making a toast to plain speaking (and in a typically masculine, friendly way designed to appeal to Spade). In reality, of course, Gutman favors anything *but* plain speaking--he's trying to deceive Spade and win the Falcon at all costs. Whenever a character in this novel starts to sound honest (Gutman, Cairo, Brigid), look out: it's a sure sign that

they're about to tell a lie.

“Keep that grunsel away from me while you’re making up your mind. I’ll kill him. I don’t like him. He makes me nervous. I’ll kill him the first time he gets in my way. I won’t give him an even break. I won’t give him a chance. I’ll kill him.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Wilmer Cook, Casper Gutman

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sam Spade, who's been talking to Casper Gutman, notices Gutman's henchmen, a young man named Wilmer. Spade calls Wilmer a "grunsel," a slang term that means both "homosexual" and "gunman."

First, notice that Spade threatens to kill Wilmer. It's possible that Spade is threatening to kill the man in order to intimidate Gutman into being honest--Spade doesn't want Gutman to double-cross him, and the best way to avoid a double-cross is to let everyone know that he (Spade) is dangerous.

Second, the passage reinforces the homophobia and aggressive masculinity of Spade's universe. Spade is, indeed, "uncomfortable" around Wilmer, for much the same reasons that he was uncomfortable around Joe Cairo (another villainous character whom the novel portrays as effeminate). Spade's status as the antihero of the novel--dangerous, but also the protector of right and wrong--is closely linked to his status as the most masculine character in the novel.

Chapter 14 Quotes

“My clients are entitled to a decent amount of secrecy. Maybe I can be made to talk to a Grand Jury or even a Coroner’s Jury, but I haven’t been called before either yet, and it’s a cinch I’m not going to advertise my clients’ business until I have to.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), District Attorney Bryan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel goes on, Spade has to fight off calls and meetings from lawyers and police officers who think that Spade had something to do with the death of his partner. In this passage, Spade tells the District Attorney, Bryan, that he can't disclose everything he deals with in the course of a day: his clients have the right to a certain amount of privacy, and Spade is reluctant to violate that right.

Should we take Spade seriously? Spade doesn't want to disclose his current case, but not because of his respect for people's rights, but rather because he thinks the case could lead to the Maltese Falcon. Spade has been shown to have some moral code, so it's certainly possible that he genuinely believes his clients have rights--but Spade is also greedy, and doesn't exactly express any strict "rules" here. The passage is also important because it shows that Spade is "caught halfway between law and crime: as a private investigator, he's not a cop or a criminal--the very definition of an antihero.

“And my only chance of ever catching them and tying them up and bringing them in is by keeping away from you and the police, because neither of you show any signs of knowing what in hell it’s all about.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), District Attorney Bryan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

District Attorney Bryant suspects Spade of the murder of Spade's partner, Archer. Spade angrily tells Bryant that his only way of clearing his name is to "take the law into his own hands" by tracking down the real killers, and avoiding the police, who would only bungle things.

Spade makes an interesting point. Unlike the DA, Spade doesn't have to play by other people's rules--as a result, he's a much more capable crime-solver than any government detective could be (at least in the world of the book). Spade also proves that he knows how to deal with bureaucrats like Bryant: at times, he's blunt and to the point, stating that he intends to clear his name by doing what he does best--solve

crimes. This whole conversation also reinforces Spade as the archetype of the "lone wolf" detective--going against authority and acting rude and rebellious, but turning out to be right in the end. The fact that this trope has been done and re-done countless times since Hammett's work shouldn't diminish the original's intrigue.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ “Sam Spade,” she said, “you’re the most contemptible man God ever made when you want to be. Because she did something without confiding in you you’d sit here and do nothing when you know she’s in danger.”

Related Characters: Effie Perine (speaker), Sam Spade, Brigid O’Shaughnessy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we see Effie acting as Sam Spade's conscience (and flirtatious mother/sister figure). Effie knows that Sam Spade has just had a meal with Polhaus and also met with the District Attorney. Spade, back in his office, tells Effie that Brigid may have been on the ship *La Poloma* when it caught on fire the previous night. Spade is calm and laid-back as he gives Effie this information: Effie is disgusted that Spade can seem so indifferent. Spade shows no signs of wanting to look for Brigid to make sure she's okay.

Why is Spade so indifferent to Brigid's dangerous situation? Effie suggests that Spade doesn't like the fact that Brigid went off and did something on her own--in other words, Spade doesn't like it when women keep him out of the loop. Effie is an interesting character--it's possible to interpret her as the only positive female character in the novel, a reminder that Hammett doesn't always conflate evil and effeminacy (although she's also presented as the most *masculine* female character). Of course, it's also possible to interpret Effie's statements as wrong and distracting: Effie wants Sam to give Brigid "some space," when--we later learn--Brigid is actually the villain, and has been plotting against Spade for some time.

☞ The tall man stood in the doorway and there was nothing to show that he saw Spade. He said, “You know --” and then the liquid bubbling came up in his throat and submerged whatever else he said.

Related Characters: Captain Jacobi (speaker), Sam Spade

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this bizarre scene, Spade is sitting in his office when a strange man barges in, carrying a mysterious package. The man, Captain Jacobi (whom we've never seen before in the narrative), has been shot many times. He falls dead on the ground, but not before saying the words, "You know."

It's strangely appropriate that the man's dying words should be about knowledge--and that he should die before he gets to complete his sentence. Captain Jacobi proves that in the novel, knowledge is always just beyond the character's reach--up to the end of the book, we're always *this* close to finding out what's going on, only to be interrupted by death, violence, or more mysteries.

☞ He stepped back holding it up in front of him and blew dust off it, regarding it triumphantly. Effie Perine made a horrified face and screamed, pointing at his feet. He looked down at his feet. His last backward step had brought his left heel into contact with the dead man's hand, pinching a quarter-inch of flesh at a side of the palm between the heel and the floor. Spade jerked his foot away from the hand.

Related Characters: Captain Jacobi, Effie Perine, Sam Spade

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Spade allows himself to be overcome with greed. Captain Jacobi has just stumbled into his office, dying, with a package containing what appears to be the legendary Maltese Falcon. Spade is so elated by the discovery of the Falcon that he holds it above his head, stepping on Jacob's dead body in the process.

The passage is notable for a couple reasons. First, notice that it's Effie who alerts Spade to the fact that he's disrespecting a dead body--as usual, Effie is the voice of right and wrong. Second, notice that Spade has finally given in to greed and desire--he's heard so much about the Falcon

that he's willing to compromise his own moral code (disrespecting the dead) to celebrate. Also, notice that Spade holds the Falcon over his head (an act that would be nearly impossible, one would think, if the bird were actually gold, as it's rumored to be). Perhaps Hammett is foreshadowing the novel's final "twist," that the Falcon is a fake.

- He took his hand from his chin and rubbed her cheek. "You're a damned good man, sister," he said and went out.

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Effie Perine

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Spade leaves his office, just after having found the famous Maltese Falcon. Spade thanks Effie for all her help--he admits that he couldn't do his job if it wasn't for Effie working as his assistant. Oddly, Spade refers to Effie as both a "man" and a "sister."

Spade's behavior suggests that he can't get along with a woman *and* be sexually attracted to her at the same time. Effie thus isn't really a woman at all, from his perspective--she's more like family, or a close male friend. Hammett associates masculinity, goodness, and competence so strongly that the one positive female character in his novel--Effie--is actually depicted as masculine.

Chapter 18 Quotes

- "At one time or another I've had to tell everybody from the Supreme Court down to go to hell, and I've got away with it. I got away with it because I never let myself forget that a day of reckoning was coming. I never forget that when the day of reckoning comes I want to be all set to march into headquarters pushing a victim in front of me, saying: 'Here, you chumps, is your criminal!' As long as I can do that I can put my thumb to my nose and wriggle my fingers at all the laws in the book."

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Casper Gutman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Here Spade begins to craft a story to tell the police. Spade knows the ironclad rule of law enforcement: somebody has to go to jail. Indeed, Spade has always been able to coexist with the police and the crime world *because* he respects such a rule: he can get away with disrespecting authorities because he gets results, and sends people to prison at the right time. Now (partly because there's a lot of suspicion directed at Spade himself), Spade knows he has to send someone to jail for the murder of Thursby and Jacobi.

The passage shows Spade at his most villainous, and his most anti-heroic. Spade doesn't bother to talk about whether the people he sends to jail are or guilty or innocent--on the contrary, he just talks about "getting results." Spade obeys a set of rules, and yet his "code" seems immoral by any standard: Spade is even willing to send innocent people to prison for crimes they didn't commit, as long as it maintains his independence and the general sense that "justice" has been served.

- "Bryan is like most district attorneys. He's more interested in how his record will look on paper than anything else. He'd rather drop a doubtful case than try it and have it go against him. I don't know that he ever deliberately framed anybody he believed innocent if he could scrape up, or twist into shape, proof of their guilt."

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Casper Gutman, District Attorney Bryan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Spade continues to try to convince Casper Gutman to frame Wilmer Cook for the murders of Jacobi and Thursby. Spade knows that somebody needs to go to jail for the murders--furthermore, he knows that the District Attorney, Bryant, will want to "get results" by sending someone to prison. Spade admits that Bryant doesn't exactly "frame" innocent people, but he suggests that Bryant *does* twist the truth to ensure a conviction.

In short, Spade shows that he knows all about the world of law enforcement. In the hard-boiled world of Hammett's novel, officials don't really care about right and wrong at all--they just care about how their reputations seem on paper. Bryant, a powerful man, is easy to control, because he's so deeply invested in his career and his public appearance. Therefore, Spade can send Wilmer to prison,

knowing that Wilmer's (relative) innocence of some crimes won't seriously bother Bryant at all.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☞ “Well, Wilmer, I’m sorry indeed to lose you, and I want you to know that I couldn’t be any fonder of you if you were my own son; but – well, by Gad! – if you lose a son it’s possible to get another – and there’s only one Maltese falcon.”

Related Characters: Casper Gutman (speaker), Wilmer Cook

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Casper Gutman's deviousness couldn't be clearer. Spade knows that somebody needs to go to jail: he suggests that he and Casper frame Casper's henchman, Wilmer Cook, for the murders of Thursby and Jacobi. Gutman is at first reluctant to give up Wilmer, whom he describes as being "like a son to me." But within just a couple minutes, Gutman gives up his "son," reasoning that the Maltese Falcon is more valuable to him. Gutman thinks that he'll be able to get the Falcon with Spade's help, get off scot-free for the murders, and live happily ever after--sending Wilmer to jail is a small price to pay.

The irony, of course, is that there are, in fact, multiple falcons--indeed, the "Maltese Falcon" in Gutman's possession is actually a fake. Gutman sacrifices his loyalties and his friendships for the sake of material possessions--possessions that turn out to be worthless.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ He was pale. He said tenderly, “I hope to Christ they don’t hang you, precious, by that sweet neck.” He slid his hands up to caress her throat... “You’ll be out again in twenty years. You’re an angel. I’ll wait for you.” He cleared his throat. “If they hang you I’ll always remember you.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Brigid O’Shaughnessy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Spade discovers the truth: he knows that Brigid was the one who murdered his partner, Miles Archer. The passage is important because it shows Spade in the midst of a genuine moral crisis. On one hand, Spade doesn't want to send Brigid to jail for the murder--he seems to care about her deeply. And yet Spade also acknowledges the truth: she's guilty, and there's a possibility that the jury will sentence her to be hanged.

The passage shows Spade at his most callous. He's capable of feelings for Brigid, but he also recognizes that she's a murderous, devious woman. As a result, he decides to punish her for killing his partner--upholding his own moral code, but also acting especially callous and sexist, caressing Brigid like a beautiful object even as he cynically contemplates her potential death.

☞ “When a man’s partner is killed he’s supposed to do something about it. It doesn’t make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you’re supposed to do something about it”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Brigid O’Shaughnessy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hammett gives us a clear sense of Spade's moral code. Spade knows that Brigid was the one who murdered his partner, Miles Archer. Although Spade didn't particularly like his partner at all, he knows that the "right thing" is to avenge his partner's death. There's a strong code of cooperation and mutual respect in Spade's work, and Spade obeys this code at all times, even if it leads him to work with people like Archer, whom he doesn't like at all (and whose wife is sleeping with him).

The passage is fascinating because it shows that, in the end, Spade is more loyal to a man he hates than a woman he cares about. The code of right and wrong that Spade obeys is, at the most basic level, a masculine code: Spade gives men a form of respect and trust that he would never give to women. The passage could be interpreted as the clearest expression of the novel's sexism: real men are rugged and

honorable, while women are devious and emotional.

“I’m a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go. It can be done, all right, and sometimes it is done, but it’s not the natural thing.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade (speaker), Brigid O’Shaughnessy

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

Here Spade continues to give his reasons for turning Brigid in to the police. Spade’s explanation is curious because it makes him look weak and powerless--just a pawn in a vast "natural order of things." Spade explains that it’s the natural order for a detective to turn someone in to the police: when there’s a crime, somebody has to go to jail. Spade’s reliance on such an order leads him to send Brigid to prison--in spite of his feelings for Brigid, somebody has to be punished for murder.

Spade exemplifies an independent, macho way of looking at the world: he "is what he is," and refuses to change for anyone or anything. Spade could conceivably let Brigid go free and start a new life somewhere with her, but he’s too loyal to his own sense of law and order.

“Would you have done this to me if the falcon had been real and you had been paid your money?”
“What difference does that make now? Don’t be too sure I’m as crooked as I’m supposed to be. That kind of reputation might be good business – bringing in high-priced jobs and making it easier to deal with the enemy.”

Related Characters: Sam Spade, Brigid O’Shaughnessy (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Brigid angrily asks Spade to tell her the truth: would he have turned her in to the police if the Maltese Falcon had been real? Brigid is implying that Spade wouldn’t have been so focused on "doing the right thing" if he’d suddenly been made rich.

It’s hard to deny that Brigid has a point. We’ve already seen that Spade is willing to sacrifice his values when he gets his hands on something valuable--remember the scene in which he stands on Jacobi’s dead body because he thinks he has the falcon (a great metaphor for the way money corrupts).

And yet Spade insists that he *is* a just man: he just pretends to be devious and corrupt in order to attract the right clients and make friends with the right people (as he sarcastically and rather cruelly says here). In his mind, Spade is a good man: he just pretends to be corrupt because it’s useful to his business, but in reality he’s always thinking about doing the moral thing. Again, Hammett doesn’t tell us whether we’re supposed to believe Spade or not. Spade claims he knows how to keep good and evil separate--but perhaps in the course of his work, he’s begun to confuse the two.

“She escaped from his arm as if it had hurt her. “Don’t, please, don’t touch me,” she said brokenly. “I know – I know you’re right. You’re right. But don’t touch me now – not now.” Spade’s face became pale as his collar.

Related Characters: Effie Perine (speaker), Sam Spade

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

At the finale of the novel, Spade returns to his office, having ratted out Brigid, the woman he loved. Spade tells Effie what he did, and Effie is horrified. She admits that Spade did the "right thing" (avenged his partner’s death, turned in a criminal, etc.), but also suggests that Spade acted for the wrong reasons--and that thus he is now repulsive to her. (Note also that the thing that’s so shocking is that Effie doesn’t allow Spade to touch her--emphasizing how "natural" it was for the hyper-masculine Spade to always feel comfortable touching his female employee.)

The passage is very complicated and can be interpreted in any number of ways. Effie, who’s been a voice of reason and morality throughout the novel, seems to be criticizing Spade for his unjust behavior--perhaps Effie senses (as Brigid did) that Spade wouldn’t have been so eager for justice had he

gotten his hands on the real Maltese Falcon. But perhaps Hammett's point is just the opposite: perhaps Spade is ultimately a noble, if not admirable character because he does the right thing, even when the "right thing" is terrible-- sending a woman to hang.

Spade seems to sense that he's done something horribly

wrong, and to suddenly doubt his decision--hence his pale face. And yet Spade has already acted decisively, seemingly totally confident in the morality of his actions. As a private investigator--halfway between the cops and the criminals-- Spade's burden is to make difficult, morally ambiguous decisions, and live with the guilt and the consequences.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: SPADE & ARCHER

With his v-shaped facial features and yellow-grey eyes, Samuel Spade is a private detective who resembles a good-looking version of Satan. Effie Perine, his lanky and boyish-looking female assistant, enters Spade's private office and announces the arrival of a new, beautiful client named Miss Wonderly. As Spade rolls a cigarette, Effie leaves the room and Wonderly enters. Spade casually asks Wonderly what he can do for her.

In emotional distress, Wonderly describes in disjointed phrases how her teenaged sister, Corinne, has run away to San Francisco with a man named Floyd Thursby. With no one to turn to, Wonderly says she has come to San Francisco to employ Spade to find her sister before their parents return from Europe in two weeks. Wonderly claims she's already contacted Thursby, who said he will meet with her this evening to discuss Corinne.

In the middle of her story, Miles Archer barges into the office, startling Wonderly. Spade introduces Archer as his partner and fills him in on the details. Not meeting Archer's gaze, Wonderly looks aside as he looks her up and down. Archer makes a suggestive gesture to Spade, who quickly and quietly chides him.

Spade tells Wonderly that they'll have someone follow Thursby after he leaves the meeting with her. He explains that once Thursby unknowingly leads the detective to Corrine's whereabouts, the detective will either convince her to leave Thursby or use other means to make Thursby let her leave. Wonderly gasps at the suggestion of violence and tells Spade that Thursby would be willing to kill Corrine to escape the detective. After Wonderly explains that she told Thursby that her father would "punish" him for what he's done, Spade infers that Corrine is pregnant and asks if Wonderly's family could cover it up with a marriage between Thursby and Corinne. Wonderly blushes as she reveals the full extent of the scandal: Thursby cannot marry Corrine because he has a family back in England. Thursby would rather kill Corinne than have to face a scandal where his family finds out about his affair.

This description appears to cast Spade as a villain or at least as having less than perfect morals. In the Christian tradition, Satan is the great deceiver, so the description foreshadows Spade's many deceptions. The scene also contrasts Wonderly's beauty with Effie's masculine-looking plainness.



Wonderly seems helpless, taking on the "damsel-in-distress" role in order to play on Spade's sympathies. Yet even in her story, Wonderly is not totally innocent because she wants to deceive her parents by having Corinne come home before they arrive so that they don't find out about her running away.



In stereotypical gender roles, Wonderly acts shy and modest while Archer overtly ogles her. Although Spade scolds Archer, he may be doing so in order to avoid losing a client rather than to protect her honor.



For the first time, Spade implies that his detective agency will use less-than-legal means to help his clients. Wonderly has been hiding the fact that her sister is pregnant, a taboo for unmarried women in the 1920s, but Spade is sharp enough to see past this deception. Once again, Wonderly plays the role of the demure woman by blushing at the scandal of her sister's relationship with a married man.



Spade says they'll put one of their detectives on the job, but she asks if either he or Archer could take care of it personally. She agrees to pay extra, producing two hundred-dollar bills. Archer immediately agrees to do the job himself.

After accompanying Wonderly out, Spade returns to his office where Archer mentions that he saw more hundreds in her purse. Spade pockets one of the hundreds and asks Archer what he thinks of her. Misunderstanding Spade's intent, Archer says he has dibs on her. Grinning wolfishly, Spade mocks Archer's foolish recklessness by suggesting that she's a suspicious, possibly even dangerous woman.

In the novel's first illustration of the power of greed, Archer jumps at the chance to make money even though Wonderly warns him that Thursby is willing to use violence.



Archer's greed leads him to transgress Wonderly's personal boundaries by looking into her purse. Spade, too, is quick to snatch up the bill, showing he is not immune to the power of money. While Archer is under the spell of Wonderly's beauty, thus his claim of dibs, Spade's question was not about her beauty but his suspicion that she's hiding something.



CHAPTER 2: DEATH IN THE FOG

That evening, Samuel Spade wakes in the middle of the night to a phone call and the news that someone has died. Rolling a cigarette then dressing, he leaves his apartment to meet the person who called.

The fog in the night blurs the streets as Spade makes his way to an alley where a group of men are huddled. Spade asks a police officer about Tom Polhaus, the police sergeant who phoned him. The officer directs him up the alley where he sees Polhaus examining the dead body of Miles Archer.

Polhaus shows Spade the English revolver that was used to kill Archer. Spade tells Polhaus about how Archer was on the job following Thursby. Spade appears emotionally detached at the sight of his dead partner and he refuses to inspect the body at Polhaus' suggestion. He leaves Polhaus, claiming to need to tell Archer's wife, Iva, about the murder. Instead, Spade goes to an all-night pharmacy and calls Effie, asking her to let Iva know about Archer's death.

Spade returns home, drinks three glasses of Bacardi, and starts rolling his fifth cigarette when Polhaus and Lieutenant Dundy knock at his door. When the officers ask if Spade told Iva about the death, he lies and says he did. Spade offers them a drink, but only Polhaus accepts. When they ask about Spade's **gun**, he tells them he doesn't carry one. Dundy expresses doubt and Spade, getting angry at their apparent suspicion, demands that Dundy tell him what's going on.

Not revealing who died, the narration withholds info from the reader for dramatic effect. Spade takes his time to act, showing both his general cool and his emotional aloofness.



Like the many deceptions in the novel, the fog makes Spade's surroundings seem disorientating. Archer's death should occur as a surprise for the reader since the first chapter, "Spade & Archer," sets him up as a main character.



Spade tells Polhaus about Thursby, but he conceals the info about Wonderly and lies to him about calling Iva, illustrating how Spade is willing to lie to the police. In an example of his emotional detachment, Spade's decision not to look at the body reveals an outward lack of concern for his dead partner.



Spade lies again to the police and shows little respect for authority figures. Spade's decision not to carry a gun reveals the confidence he has in his ability to defend himself without a firearm.



Dundy openly accuses Spade of slipping up and demands more info on Thursby and the client who wanted him followed. Spade says he doesn't know anything else about Thursby and that he doesn't disclose his clients' identities until he has their permission. Dundy threatens Spade with legal action, telling him he's withholding information in a murder case, but Spade coolly responds with outward indifference and mockery. Trying to provoke Spade, Dundy reveals that thirty minutes after Spade left the crime scene, Thursby was shot outside of the hotel where he was staying.

Dundy states that Spade had ample time, a motive, and enough information about Thursby to hunt him down. Spade continues to drink, mocking Dundy while Polhaus tries to calm everyone's tempers. After the officers provide Spade with the details of the murder, Spade candidly repeats that he knows nothing about the crime. The officers appear satisfied, but before leaving Dundy says that although he would find little fault in a man who seeks revenge for his partner, he would also have no problem putting that man in jail. Spade agrees and Dundy finally accepts his offer for a drink.

Dundy implies that Spade has a history of barely staying within the bounds of the law. Despite Dundy's accusation, Spade shows his integrity by keeping to his professional code of ethics in his refusal to break Wonderly's confidentiality. Though it is also possible that Spade may be refusing to give them her info because he doesn't want the police, who he believes are incompetent, mishandling the murder case.



Although Dundy would not personally condemn a man for revenging his partner, he would still abide by the law and arrest that man for murder. Thus, although Dundy's personal belief system conflicts with the law, Dundy implies that one must still follow the law even if one disagrees with it. Dundy's strict adherence to the law contrasts with Spade's bending/breaking of the law by lying to the police. At the same time, Spade seems to respect Dundy's ethical adherence to the law, and it is this respect that finally gets Dundy to accept the drink.



CHAPTER 3: THREE WOMEN

When Spade arrives at his office the next morning, Effie informs him that Iva Archer is waiting for him in his private office. Behind his closed door, Iva and Spade kiss and embrace. Since she has been cheating on her husband with Spade, Iva asks if Spade killed Miles out of jealousy for her. Shocked she would think that, he laughs and pulls away from her instead of answering her question. When she starts to cry, he embraces her again and tells her he will visit her at her home on an upcoming night.

After Iva leaves, Effie enters his office and asks about what Iva wanted. Spade tells her that Iva thinks he killed Archer. Effie wonders aloud if Iva believes that because Archer's death would free her to marry Spade, since Archer was refusing to give her a divorce. Spade responds by telling her the police think he, Spade, killed Thursby, not Archer. Feeling bad for Spade for being accused of these crimes, Effie rolls a cigarette for him and places it in his mouth while he leans his head against her hip.

Spade's affair with his partner's wife makes him appear more like an "antihero" – a novel's protagonist who lacks conventional ethical or heroic attributes. To Iva, Spade appears so morally dubious that he seems like the type of person to kill his partner in an act of jealousy or love for her (though it also seems possible that Iva wants to be the kind of woman for whom a man would kill his partner).



Although Spade is romantically involved with Iva, he seems to get his emotional support from Effie, who takes on a sort of familial role in how she nurtures him. Their relationship is nonsexual but highly intimate. Effie senses that Iva actually seemed to want Spade to kill Archer.



Effie asks if it were possible that Iva killed Archer. Effie explains that when she visited Iva last night to tell her about Archer's death, she noticed that Iva had only arrived home minutes before Effie knocked at the door. Believing that Iva doesn't have an inclination towards violence or murder, Spade reassures her that Iva didn't kill Archer. As Spade heads out the door, he tells Effie to change the name on their office door from *Spade & Archer* to *Samuel Spade*.

Since Iva may be somehow involved in Archer's death, she no longer becomes a credible source of information or a person the reader can trust. Changing the name of his agency the day after his partner dies, Spade reveals his utmost practicality as well as his lack of sentimentality for his partner.



Spade arrives at Wonderly's hotel and discovers that she checked out that morning. When Spade returns to the office, Effie tells him that Wonderly called to say that she's moved to a different hotel in San Francisco. Spade takes the note on which Effie wrote down this information and sets it on fire with his lighter. Effie looks at him disapprovingly, but Spade simply says that's the way it has to be.

Although burning the note isn't illegal, it does suggest that Spade wants to protect Wonderly's info even from the police who might come and search his office. Effie's response to Spade setting it on fire reveals that she believes it wrong to hide information from the police.



CHAPTER 4: THE BLACK BIRD

When Spade arrives at Miss Wonderly's hotel room, she soon reveals she has no sister and that her entire story was a lie. Spade responds that he took the case because she paid him, not because he believed her story. After she confesses that her real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Spade tells her he will help protect her identity from the police as long as she provides him with information about the murders.

Brigid is a fantastic actor. Remember back when she blushed even at the mention of her sister's scandalous pregnancy in Chapter 1? That sister didn't even exist. Although Wonderly tells Spade her "real" name is Brigid, Spade has no reason to trust anything she says. As of now, it appears as if Spade will only continue helping her so that he can get paid and/or find Archer's murderer.



Instead of telling him the info, Brigid gets on her knees and pleads for help. Spade comments she's trying to deceive him with a prepared speech that makes her look helpless. She responds by apologizing for the lies she told about her fake sister, which she acknowledges have made him unable to trust anything she says.

Getting on her knees, Brigid takes the pose of someone asking for mercy as well as someone trying to be seductive. Spade realizes that she's a good liar and knows that the best way to seduce men is with sexual allure and by making them feel like the only ones powerful enough to help her.



Trying to win his trust, she claims to tell him the truth about her relationship to Thursby. In purposely vague language, she says that she met Thursby in Hong Kong where he promised to help her, but that he only took advantage of her desperation. She tells Spade that Thursby must have been the one who killed Archer but she claims not to know who killed Thursby. When he presses her on why she hired Thursby, she refuses to answer and Spade threatens to give the police her identity. Forlorn, she thanks Spade and tells him she'll take her chances with the police. Either believing her desperation or realizing she called his bluff about going to the police, he asks for another payment of four hundred-dollars and tells her he will do his best to help her.

Here a master liar, Brigid, and a master skeptic who trusts no one, Spade, face off. She lies, he sees through her lies, she covers with different lies. Whatever his reasons are for not turning her in (either he doesn't want the police involved because he believes they are incompetent or he actually trusts that she needs his help), Spade hides his more ambiguous motives behind his very actual desire to make some money.



When Spade returns to the office, Effie warns him that if he takes advantage of Brigid, she will lose all respect for him. Their conversation is interrupted by a stranger at the door who introduces himself as Joel Cairo. The narration describes Cairo as slender, dark skinned, wearing a lot of jewelry, and heavily perfumed.

Cairo says he's working for a man who is willing to pay Spade \$5,000 if he locates and retrieves a statue of a **black bird**. Effie briefly interrupts their conversation to tell Spade she is leaving for the night. After she locks the office door behind her on her way out, Cairo produces a small black **gun** and tells Spade to clasp his hands behind his neck.

CHAPTER 5: THE LEVANTINE

Calm and steady, Spade puts his hands behind his head. As Cairo searches Spade for a weapon, Spade elbows Cairo in the cheek, tripping him and taking his **gun**. When Cairo is on the floor, Spade strikes him again in the face, knocking him unconscious. Spade transfers Cairo to the chair then goes to work searching the man's possessions, which include a ticket for an opera scheduled for that evening.

When Cairo slowly wakes up, he tells Spade he only intended to search the office for the statue and is still willing to pay the \$5,000. Cairo refuses to tell Spade to whom the **bird** belongs or why Cairo's employer thought Spade had it. After Cairo agrees to pay Spade \$200 dollars upfront, Spade agrees to look for the bird. Spade returns Cairo's possessions along with his **gun**. Immediately, Cairo points the gun at Spade and, to Spade's surprise, politely carries out his search of the office.

CHAPTER 6: THE UNDERSIZED SHADOW

After Cairo leaves, Spade contemplates the offer and commits himself to searching for the statue. When Spades leaves the office, he notices a young man watching him. As Spade makes his way to the opera to find Cairo, the young man follows him. Outside the opera house, Spade find Cairo and asks him about the young man, but Cairo responds that he has no knowledge of the boy's identity or his intentions. Cairo returns to the opera as Spade and his shadow board the same trolley. To lose the young man, Spade enters an apartment building, goes out the back entrance, and walks another few blocks to Brigid's hotel.

Effie plays the role Spade's conscience by telling Spade that he must help Brigid. Although Effie cares for Spade, she does not trust him to make the right ethical decision. In contrast to Spade's overt masculinity, Cairo, with his perfume and jewelry, is described as effeminate.



The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, heightening the suspense and the mystery surrounding Cairo. This is also the first mention of what will become known as the Maltese Falcon.



Here, the novel portrays Spade as the epitome of masculinity. He is levelheaded despite the gun pointed at him and easily disarms Cairo in a feat of strength and athleticism. Now we know why Spade doesn't carry a gun: he can just take one from the person sticking him up. He's so masculine he doesn't need a gun.



Although Spade is suspicious of Cairo, he is willing to risk involving himself with the man. At this point in the narrative, it's unclear if Spade agrees to work for Cairo in order to make the \$5,000 or because he senses that Cairo has something to do with Archer's murder. Yet when Cairo tricks Spade and does end up searching the room it establishes the fact that Spade is not all-knowing. He can be tricked and bested, which only increases the tension of the novel.



The shadowed figure remains nameless for a large part of the novel. This lack of identity makes him embody the unknown secrets and deceptions that fill this novel.



In Brigid's room, Spade tells her that he's decided to protect her identity from the police. With the suspicion that she is somehow connected to Cairo's mysterious appearance, Spade nonchalantly mentions Cairo and his offer about the statue. Frightened and upset, she accuses him of failing to protect her, but Spade responds that she had given him no indication that Cairo even existed. After Spade says he'll only reject Cairo's offer if she pays him more than \$5,000, she offers to instead pay him with her body. Spade disdainfully refuses her offer and tells her if she wants him to continue working for her, then he needs more information about the nature of her problem. Brigid says that before she can tell him anything else, she first must speak to Cairo. She and Spade agree that they should call Cairo from Spade's apartment.

When they arrive at his apartment building, Spade notices Iva Archer waiting in a car out front. He ushers Brigid into the lobby before returning to talk to Iva at her car. On the verge of tears, she says they need to talk, but Spade tells her he is too busy. As she drives off in anger, Spade notices the young man watching him from the shadows.

CHAPTER 7: G IN THE AIR

At Spade's home, he and Brigid call the front desk at Cairo's hotel, but the manager informs them that Cairo hasn't yet returned to the hotel. As they wait for Cairo, Spade tells Brigid a story about a past case of his. A man in San Francisco named Flitcraft had disappeared, leaving behind his job, family, and home. He was worth a substantial amount of money, but took none of it before disappearing. Interrupting the story, Cairo telephones with the information that he'll be at the apartment soon.

Spade continues the story. Two years after Flitcraft's disappearance, Mrs. Flitcraft employed Spade to follow up on a tip about a man who looked like her husband living in Spokane, Washington. Spade tracked down the man, who turned out to be Flitcraft living under an assumed name with a successful automobile-business, a wife, and a newborn baby. Spade explains that Flitcraft ended up living this other life after nearly being killed by a falling steel beam while he was walking past a construction site. Realizing death could strike at any moment, Flitcraft left his family, wandered the United States, and then eventually settled down with a new wife. Spade says that once Flitcraft learned to ignore his realization about mortality, he started for himself a life that resembled almost exactly the one he left.

Claiming to work for the person who'll pay him the most money, Spade makes Brigid think that money is the only thing that determines his loyalties. Because she can't pay with money, Brigid tries to use sex as a currency to pay Spade. Brigid's attitude towards sex disturbs Spade, showing that although he is willing to sleep with his partner's wife, he is not willing to exchange his services for sexual favors as if sex were like money. In the end, Spade's desire for more information appears to outweigh his desire for the highest paycheck.



Spade has found himself in the middle of a love-triangle between the emotionally unstable Iva and the deceitful Brigid. Neither women seem like feasible romantic partners for Spade because he doesn't trust either of them fully.



Spade's decision to tell Brigid a story from his past seems out of place in this novel. Up to this point, Spade's past has been a mystery so his telling of this story is as abrupt and surprising for us as it is for Brigid. Since it's so out of the norm, the novel seems to place extra weight on the meaning of the story and Spade's motive for telling it to Brigid.



This story illustrates how death is out of people's control and can strike at any moment, and that in the face of such knowledge that the rest of life is essentially meaningless. No matter what you do, you will die. Yet the story also implies that while people can get a glimpse of this truth, it's not something they can hold on to, that people have certain inclinations that cannot be escaped. No matter what, Flitcraft will always be the same and want the same things, therefore he replicates his old life.



Perhaps feeling that Spade is confiding in her, Brigid responds to the story by claiming she has complete trust in how he will handle her case. At that moment, Cairo knocks at the door and Spade lets him in. As Brigid and Cairo talk, Spade quietly observes their interaction. Brigid offers Cairo the statue of the **black bird** for the \$5,000. She tells him she can get the statue in a week when she's finally able to retrieve it from Thursby's hiding spot. When Cairo asks about what happened to Thursby, Brigid traces the outline of a G in the air.

Cairo then offends Brigid by making reference to a relationship between her and a young man in Constantinople. In response, she slaps him and he slaps her back. Spade intervenes, choking Cairo and slapping him three times across the face.

A knock at the door surprises the group. Spade tells them to stay quiet before opening the door to find Dundy and Polhaus at his threshold. They ask to come inside but Spade refuses, making Dundy even more suspicious. Dundy provokes Spade by telling him about a rumor concerning Spade having an affair with Iva. Spade ridicules Dundy for insinuating that he was involved in Archer's murder. As the cops prepare to leave, Cairo calls out in distress for the police. The chapter ends with Spade casually letting them into the apartment.

CHAPTER 8: HORSE FEATHERS

Cairo, a gash over his eye, stands with a **gun** over Brigid as she huddles, terrified, in the chair. Brigid claims he struck her first, but Cairo tells the police that she and Spade attacked him after he was let into their apartment and that she threatened to murder him. Aloof and hovering by the door, Spade stays quiet until the police threaten to arrest all of them.

Not wanting the police to bring them to the station, Spade tells Dundy that the three of them were just playing a practical joke on him. Spade claims that before answering the door, he told Cairo to call out to the police in order to get the police tense and nervous for no reason. Cairo, who doesn't want to go to the station either, agrees and says he got the gash from tripping over himself. Knowing that Spade is hiding the truth, Dundy snaps and hits Spade in the face. Before Spade has a chance to hit him back, Polhaus gets between the two men and prevents the fight.

Spade may have told this story in order to illustrate that people do not change. As such, he's trying to tell Brigid that he knows that she is unable to stop lying. When talking to Cairo, Brigid speaks with confidence and self-assurance. This scene reveals how Brigid is deceitful in the way she interacts with people, changing the way she behaves depending on whom she is trying to get the best of.



Slapping a woman, Cairo appears weak and dishonorable. Spade, in response, emasculates Cairo not by punching him but by slapping him.



The police appear incompetent since they hurl thinly veiled accusations at Spade without any substantial evidence. Spade, however, is willing to call them out for their bad police work, not worrying that his disrespectfulness will get him into more trouble.



Since the reader has little idea about what happened between Brigid and Cairo, this scene forces us to imagine what went on inside. Depending on one's view of Brigid's ethical integrity, she could appear as the aggressor or the victim.



Although the story is preposterous, the officers have no evidence to prove that they are lying. Without evidence, the officers are powerless. In an example of aggressive masculinity, this powerlessness provokes Dundy into trying to regain some power by hitting Spade. Just as aggressive, Spade doesn't care that Dundy is a cop and would have hit him back if not for Polhaus' intervention.



Cairo and Brigid confirm that it was all a practical joke. Spade tells the police that if they bring them to the station, the newspapers will ridicule the cops for arresting people on the basis of a practical joke. Angry but not wanting to be embarrassed, the cops decide to leave. Cairo leaves at the same time as the police, despite Spade's warning that they will question him.

The cops know Spade is lying but they don't want to risk looking like fools in the paper so they let them all go. This scene shows just how good Spade is at manipulating the incompetency of the police.



CHAPTER 9: BRIGID

Alone with Brigid in the apartment, Spade lets his contempt for Dundy show, cursing nonstop for five minutes. After regaining his composure, Spade asks about what happened with Cairo. Brigid tells him she was trying to frighten Cairo in order to make him stay quiet, but that she frightened him too much and he called for the police. Annoyed with her incompetence, Spade tells her she has no idea how to handle herself.

In this rare example of Spade expressing a genuine emotion, he rages against Dundy. As a man, anger is one of the few emotions that Spade feels comfortable expressing. Brigid also seems to reveal that Cairo was telling the truth in that she did threaten to murder him. As such, Brigid appears to have a much darker side.



Once again, Spade demands Brigid provide more information about herself. In response, Brigid tells Spade that Cairo offered to pay her once she stole the statue of the **bird** from a Russian man named Kemidov living in Constantinople, but Thursby offered to pay her more for the statue than Cairo. She says she gave Thursby the statue, but then realized that Thursby was going to refuse to pay. Thus, she claims that she wanted Archer to follow Thursby to where he was hiding the statue so that she could steal it back.

Now we find out that in addition to making death threats, Brigid is a thief. Although she admits to stealing the bird, she still casts herself as the victim since she claims that Thursby turned on her.



Spade doubts, aloud, that any of what she has just told him is true, and she concedes that only some of the story has any truth to it. When he demands that she tell him the true story, she feigns exhaustion and says she can no longer tell the difference between fact and fiction. At that, she falls into his arms and kisses him. He is swayed by desire and the chapter ends with Spade's eyes burning yellowly.

After all her lies, Spade cannot trust anything Brigid says. In order to get him to stop asking questions, she seduces him. This time, instead of asking if he wants sex, she falls into his arms. Unable to resist the temptation, Spade yields to her, the power of his desire overwhelming his reason, visible in his yellow animal-like eyes.



CHAPTER 10: THE BELVEDERE DIVAN

The next morning, Spade wakes up beside Brigid, who is naked and fast asleep. Rummaging through her clothes, Spade finds the key to her hotel room and heads there to search for any clues. After finding nothing of use, Spade returns home without Brigid knowing anything about his departure. While Brigid showers, he slips the key back into her clothes pocket. Later, as they eat breakfast, he asks her about the true story of the **bird**. She refuses on the basis that they shouldn't talk about such things after sharing an intimate evening together. After breakfast, Spade drops her off at her hotel and they make plans for dinner.

Spade reveals his lax moral standards when he searches the room of the woman he just slept with. His behavior towards Brigid reveals that at some level he knows Brigid was just using sex to make him stop asking questions. As such, he lacks all sentimentality when dealing with her. In contrast, Brigid continues to pretend that the sex was meaningful in order to avoid answering questions. Put another way: he avoids sentimentality to get what he wants, while she uses sentimentality to get what she wants.



Spade goes to Cairo's hotel where he notices the young man who was shadowing him the previous day waiting in the lobby. Realizing the young man probably works for the Mr. G that Brigid made reference to, Spade confronts the young man about his employer. The young man pretends to know nothing so Spade calls over the hotel-detective, Luke, who asks the young man to leave.

Twenty minutes after the young man leaves, Spade notices a disheveled Cairo returning to the hotel. Cairo tells Spade that the police have been interrogating him all night, but that he kept to the same story about it being a practical joke. In order to make Cairo think he's still working for him, Spade tells Cairo he only slapped him so that Brigid would trust him and help him find the **bird**. Implying he doesn't fully trust Spade, Cairo tells him that he always has a smooth answer ready. Spade shrugs off Cairo's distrust with a joke and Cairo goes upstairs to sleep.

Back at the office, Effie tells Spade that Mr. G. called and wants to speak to him. When Spade enters his private office, Brigid is there waiting. She tells Spade her room was searched and that she wants to move hotels again. Instead, Spade asks Effie if Brigid could stay at her house for a few days. Effie agrees and Spade makes plans to send Brigid in a taxi to Effie's home. However, he makes sure that Brigid doesn't leave until a while after Effie does, so that the young man who's been following Spade doesn't realize that Brigid is staying at Effie's.

CHAPTER 11: THE FAT MAN

At the office, Spade receives a phone call from Mr. G., who identifies himself as Casper Gutman, and they decide to meet that afternoon at Gutman's hotel room. After Spade puts down the phone, Iva rushes into the office, confessing that she informed the police that Spade had something to do with Miles Archer's murder. She explains that she called the police because she was jealous of seeing Spade with Brigid. She tells Spade she only came to his apartment to warn him that Phil Archer, Miles' brother, found out about the affair and believes that Spade killed Miles. Understanding that she was upset, Spade forgives her and tells her to meet his lawyer, Sid Wise, for legal advice about how to deal with the cops from now on.

Spade appears to have a good working relationship with Luke, implying that Spade gets along better with other private detectives than with police officers. The police represent the incompetent authority that Spade finds so contemptible.



At this point, the reader has no firm evidence to know who Spade is really working for. Because the novel provides no access to Spade's inner feelings or thoughts, his allegiances and loyalties are as mysterious to us as they are to the other characters. Spade's motives may be as dubious as everyone else's seem to be.



Although Spade is willing to break Brigid's trust by searching her room and lying to her about it, he still appears to want her to feel safe. However, Spade may just be telling her to stay at Effie's so that he can have Effie watch over her for him. Spade's motives and his true feelings about Brigid remain a mystery.



In some ways, Iva is the complete opposite of Brigid. Where Brigid is cunning and mostly plans her actions ahead of time, Iva lacks any forethought and acts rashly based on her emotions. Moreover, unlike Brigid, Iva really does seem to care for Spade, even if she at times expresses herself through jealousy.

Arriving at his hotel suite, Spade comes face to face with Casper Gutman, who the narrator describes as extremely fat. Very talkative, Gutman claims that they're both honest, plain-speaking men who are looking out for their own best interests. Gutman then asks Spade to find the **bird** but then refuses Spade's request for information about the item. Shouting in anger, Spade says that if Gutman wants him to find the bird, then he must be given all the information by five-thirty that day. Hearing the commotion, the young man enters the room from a side room. Before leaving, Spade threatens to kill the young man – who he refers to as a “gunsel,” – if the young man doesn't stop following him.

Gutman's physical appearance suggests that his excessive gluttony coincides with the other excessive aspects of his personality like his greed and talkativeness. Spade's threat to kill the young man may reveal Spade's lack of concern for law and morality. However, Spade may just be trying to make Gutman think he's willing to use violence so that Gutman doesn't try to double-cross him. Spade also refers to Wilmer as a “gunsel,” which means both a young gay man as well as a gun-carrying criminal, revealing how this novel connects homosexuality with guns.



CHAPTER 12: MERRY-GO-ROUND

After leaving the hotel, Spade meets with his lawyer, Sid Wise, at his law office. Sid recounts the story that Iva told him during his meeting with her. Sid says that she was following Archer the night he was murdered because she wanted to know if he was cheating on her. While following Archer, she realized that he was just at work shadowing a couple. Satisfied that he was not cheating, she drove around for awhile and then returned home. After Sid finishes the story, Spade says that although that may be the truth, he cannot trust anything either he or she says.

At this point there are two layers of deception. Spade cannot trust that Iva told Sid the truth and he cannot trust Sid because he may be telling a fake story that he and Iva made up together in order to deceive Spade. With so many layers of possible deceptions, Spade realizes that there is so much out of his control.



Spade arrives at back at his office and finds Effie waiting for him. She tells Spade that Brigid never showed up at her home so she came back to the office to find him. Confused, Spade says he put Brigid in the cab himself before leaving to meet Gutman. Spade goes to where the cabs line up outside his office and finds the driver who took Brigid. The driver tells him that she asked to stop for a newspaper, he got her one, and they kept driving until she asked him to change direction so that she could be dropped off at the Ferry Building. Spade heads off to buy a copy of the newspaper.

Unlike his mistrust for Sid, Spade trusts that Effie isn't lying about Brigid not showing up to her apartment. Effie may be the only character whom Spade has complete trust in.



After finding nothing of use in the paper, Spade lets himself into Brigid's hotel room with the key she gave him but he finds nothing there either. When Spade returns to the office, the young man is waiting for him outside his office door. Spade notices that the young man is pointing a gun at him from within his coat pocket. The young man says Gutman wants to see him, so they go together to Gutman's hotel room. Only a few steps from Gutman's hotel room, Spade jumps the young man and takes the two automatic pistols he had hidden, one in each pocket. Now in control of the **guns**, Spade knocks on Gutman's door.

Again, Spade shows his fighting skills when he disarms the young man without the guns even going off. While Spade carries no guns, the boy carries two, showing that he's trying to compensate for his youth with more firepower. Guns are normally symbols of masculinity, so the boy thinks he can increase his masculinity by having two guns. And yet Spade once again demonstrates that a truly masculine man needs no guns at all.



CHAPTER 13: THE EMPEROR'S GIFT

In the room, Spade gives the **guns** to Gutman who seems more impressed with Spade's abilities than annoyed with the young man's slipup. Gutman gives Spade a drink and then quickly launches into the history of the statue now identified as the **Maltese falcon**. Gutman claims that in the 1500s the rulers of Malta gave a gold and bejeweled falcon as symbol of their loyalty to Emperor Charles V, King of Spain. Gutman says the falcon passed from one owner to the next throughout the centuries and was eventually painted black to disguise its worth. Ultimately, the bird wound up in the hands of a Russian general named Kemidov who lives in Constantinople

At first, Gutman says he tried to buy the statue from Kemidov, but he refused so Gutman paid what he calls "agents" to steal it for him, but those same agents have yet to give him the statue. Gutman tells Spade that if he retrieves the **bird**, then he will give Spade a choice. He'll pay him either \$50,000 dollars or 25% of the overall profits once he sells the bird.

As Spade thinks over the deal, he suddenly realizes that his drink has been drugged. When he tries to stand, Gutman calls for the young man, now identified as Wilmer Cook, who comes and trips the disoriented Spade. As revenge for disarming him, Wilmer kicks Spade in the head and Spade goes unconscious.

CHAPTER 14: LA PALOMA

The next morning, Spade quietly opens his office door to find Effie asleep at the reception desk. He wakes her and she's shocked to see the large bruise on his head. He explains that Gutman drugged him and that he's been unconscious for twelve hours, which has given Gutman and Wilmer Cook time to look for the statue without his interference. As Spade puts a cold compress against this head, he reports what Gutman told him about the **falcon** so that Effie can ask her cousin, a history professor, if the story has any truth to it.

Spade returns the guns to Gutman in an attempt to further emasculate the boy. Gutman's description of the bird reveals how it was originally a symbol of loyalty and generosity. Since the color black often denotes evil or wrongness, the statue's original symbolism becomes perverted when it is painted over. In contrast to its original meaning as a public display of loyalty, the bird was painted black to conceal its value so its owner could protect it from other people's greed, but of course events have proven that such deviousness only increased the greed that people felt toward the falcon.



No longer a symbol of loyalty, the bird becomes a symbol for greed. Gutman is willing to steal and most likely kill just to get his hands on the bird. Gutman is another person who tries to hire Spade; Spade's apparent immorality seems to make others think that he's totally in it for the money, which may be true.



Although Gutman has apparently told him the true history of the bird, he has deceptively drugged Spade for as of yet unknown reasons. Wilmer's kick is a kind of revenge for Spade emasculating him earlier. Of course, Wilmer only kicks Spade once he's been drugged, which isn't all that manly a thing to do.



Without warning, the narrative jumps ahead twelve hours, beginning with Spade already awake after being drugged and at his office. This disorientating jump in time reflects Spade's disorientation from being drugged and also captures the sense of how Spade has lost time that his enemies have used to benefit themselves. Spade, meanwhile, is still trying to figure out what is and isn't true.



Spade next heads to Cairo's hotel where he meets up with Luke, the hotel detective, and together they search Cairo's room. In the room, Spade notices a newspaper with a section about ship arrivals ripped out. Spade goes to the hotel store where he reads in the same newspaper issue that the ship *La Paloma* had arrived in San Francisco from Hong Kong yesterday morning. Remembering that Brigid said she met Thursby in Hong Kong, Spade realizes that Brigid must have seen the same notice in the newspaper and had gone to the Ferry Building to meet the ship.

Back at the office, Spade returns the calls of Tom Polhaus and District Attorney Bryan, arranging individual meetings with each of them. After he makes his calls, Effie enters his office with the news that her cousin has verified the information about the **falcon**. When Spade notices some black soot on her face, she mentions that she passed the harbor where a boat, the *La Paloma*, was on fire. Realizing that fire must mean that *La Paloma* has something to do with Brigid and the bird, Spade smiles at her knowingly.

CHAPTER 15: EVERY CRACKPOT

Spade and Polhaus meet for a lunch of pickled pig's feet at a diner. Polhaus apologizes for Dundy punching him and informs Spade that they have substantial evidence linking Thursby with Archer's murder. Specifically, they found a witness from Thursby's hotel who claimed that the gun that had fired the fatal bullet was Thursby's. Polhaus tells Spade that Thursby had a long history working as a gunman and bodyguard in the mob. Most recently, he worked for Dixie Monahan, a mobster who was in deep gambling debts to other mobsters

After talking with Polhaus, Spade meets District Attorney Bryan at the man's office. Bryan asks Spade for his opinion on who killed Thursby as well as why Archer was following Thursby. Not wanting to breach his client's confidentiality, Spade refuses to tell Bryan anything. Bryan tries to convince Spade that his client was working for Dixie Monahan's debt-holders, who employed Archer to follow Thursby so that he would unknowingly lead them to Dixie.

Spade ridicules Bryan's theory as completely ungrounded, telling Bryan that the only way he'll catch the murderer is if the police stay out of the case and let Spade do his work. Spade storms out but not before calling Bryan and every person on the government payroll a crackpot.

The hole in the newspaper is a metaphor for how information works in this novel. No matter what, there are always holes in Spade's knowledge and, to understand what's going on, Spade must fill in the missing information. This scene also contrasts with when Spade burned the note with Brigid's info on it. Cairo, not as mistrustful as Spade, doesn't realize that he should have destroyed the paper.



*Spade's smile at the end of the chapter appears heartless. Since Spade assumes that Brigid went to *La Paloma*, she may have also been injured on board the burning ship. However, instead of feeling concern for her safety, Spade feels gratification that his hunch was right.*



While the book is critical of the failures of authority, it does not caricature all police officers as arrogant. In contrast to Dundy's brash arrogance, Polhaus is a considerate and helpful police officer who provides Spade inside information into the murder case. Polhaus seems to care primarily about solving crimes, and knows that Spade is able to do that.



In contrast to Polhaus, Bryan is an authority figure with almost no accurate info (neither of them even know about Gutman or the falcon) so they concoct unfounded theories. In this way, it seems more important to the authorities that they find any answer to the mysteries surrounding the murders rather than to do the work to find the right answer.



Spade's disgust at the authorities' incompetence reveals itself in full here. Since Spade calls everyone in government a "crackpot," this scene reveals his contempt for the ineffectiveness of the authorities in general.



CHAPTER 16: THE THIRD MURDER

At the office, Effie strokes Spade's head as he tells her that Brigid may have been around *La Paloma* when it caught fire. Effie pulls away, disgusted that he would get lunch with Polhaus and meet Bryan rather than search for a woman in danger. Effie calls him contemptible, accusing him of spitefully ignoring a client in danger just because she withheld information and did something without his consent or knowledge. Spade snaps at her for talking too much and leaves the office so he can think in quiet.

Spade returns to the office an hour later in uncharacteristically high spirits. Effie tells him that Luke called about Cairo, and then she asks if he found Brigid. He kisses Effie on the nose and tells her he'll let her know about everything when he come back from seeing Luke. At Cairo's hotel, Luke tells him that Cairo just checked out of the hotel. They search his hotel room again but find no clues.

Spade returns to the office and tells Effie that during the hour he was gone, he interviewed crewmen from the *La Paloma*. From the interviews, Spade was able to piece together that Brigid, Gutman, Cairo, Wilmer, and Captain Jacobi of the *La Paloma* had all met onboard the ship the previous night. As Spade is in the middle of explaining how the fire was probably started by accident, a tall gaunt man with a package under his arm barges into the office, muttering the words "You know-" before falling to the ground. As the man dies, Spade cradles him and barks at Effie to lock the door.

Spade inspects the body and sees that the man has been shot a half a dozen times. Spade then unwraps the package to find the **falcon**. With absolute elation, he lifts the bird over his head, not realizing that he is standing on the dead man's hand. As he revels in his triumph, Effie gets a call from Brigid who is at Gutman's hotel and claims to be danger.

Before leaving, Spade tells Effie to call the police and let them know about the body, but to conceal any information about the **falcon** and the relationship between this man, who he believes is Captain Jacobi, and Brigid. Before leaving with the falcon under his arm, he affectionately rubs her cheek and says she's "a damn good man, sister."

Effie plays the role of Spade's conscience, getting angry at him for not immediately trying to find Brigid. Effie claims that Spade is not helping Brigid out of sexist spite because he doesn't like when women withhold info or do things independently. Spade responds with more sexist language by telling her she talks too much, which is a common sexist insult that men often use. That Spade leaves the office might suggest merely that he wants some peace and quiet or that Effie's accusation has actually hurt him or made him think.



The jump in the narrative should make the reader more mistrustful of Spade because we have no idea how he spent the last hour. The reader won't be able to confirm or deny anything he tells Effie about the hour he spent away from the office because the reader doesn't know what happened.



The man's last words are "You know-," which are important words in a novel where everyone is seeking knowledge, and no one seems to know. These two words could be an accusation against Spade or an indication that the man is trying to tell Spade something. The irony is that we don't know what the man was going to say and we'll never know, because now he's dead. These last words illustrate how knowledge in the novel is always just beyond our grasp.



Greed for the falcon makes Spade momentarily appear coldhearted. In fact, his mind is so clouded by greed, Spade doesn't pay attention to where he's standing, causing him to disrespect the corpse of the dead man by stepping on his hand. And then Spade must weight the value of the falcon against the prospect of Brigid being in trouble (or lying about being in trouble).



Spade's line to Effie reveals how he sees her as both a sister and a male friend. As such, he has trust but no sexual desire for her. Perhaps the novel suggests that, for Spade, trusting a woman cannot coexist with desire for her.



CHAPTER 17: SATURDAY NIGHT

Spade hides the **falcon** in a locker at the bus depot then takes the locker key and mails it express to his apartment. With the falcon safe, Spade heads to Gutman's hotel room where a beautiful young woman, Rhea Gutman, lets him in. As soon as she does, she faints into his arm.

Spade helps her walk back inside the apartment, realizing that Gutman must have drugged her. In his arms, Rhea reveals that she's been keeping herself awake by making cuts in her belly with a metal pin. In garbled half-phrases, she manages to say that Gutman, Cairo, and Wilmer have taken Brigid to an address in Burlingame, a town twenty miles from San Francisco, with plans to kill her. Spade leads Rhea to the bed, calls the hotel manger to come look after her, and then calls himself a taxi to take him to Brigid's location.

The address turns out to be a house in the suburbs with a for-sale sign stuck in the yard. On the sign, there is a notice that prospective buyers can get the key from the people at a house down the street. After getting the key and searching the house, Spade realizes he's been tricked since no one has been to the house in weeks.

Spade returns home and, as he puts his key into the door, Brigid rushes towards him, embraces him, and explains she's been hiding in wait until he came home. When they enter his apartment, the light suddenly turns on and Gutman along with Wilmer and Cairo, each holding **guns**, are waiting for them.

CHAPTER 18: THE FALL-GUY

Spade and Brigid enter the room and sit on the couch across from Gutman. Cairo and Wilmer lower their weapons and stand beside the couch. Gutman admits to the hoax of having his daughter trick Spade into looking for Brigid while they tried to find Captain Jacobi. In response, Spade offers to give the **falcon** to Gutman for the agreed upon \$50,000 dollars, but Gutman instead produces an envelop with only ten one-thousand dollar bills in it. Gutman says this is the highest amount of money he is willing to pay. Without explaining that the key to the locker where he stashed the falcon will arrive in the morning mail, Spade tells them he cannot get the bird till morning.

In another example of Spade's possible greed and emotional detachment, he prioritizes securing the falcon over immediately finding Brigid. And then he is immediately faced with another beautiful damsel in distress.



Rhea is one of the big mysteries in the novel. She never appears again and we do not know if she is knowingly tricking Spade at her father's request or if her father tricked her, too, by giving her this false information. As such, cutting herself is either an act of heroism in trying to save Brigid or of cunning deceit.



This house in the suburbs perhaps represents the idealized suburban life. But for Spade, who cannot maintain a relationship of trust with women, this house will always remain an unrealizable fantasy. For him, the house will always be empty.



In what looks like it will be the climax of the novel, all the major characters appear in the same room. Now, perhaps, all the deceptions and lies will be revealed.



Gutman's greed makes him go back on his promise to pay Spade the original amount for the bird. While Gutman appears to be in control, Spade is the one with the falcon so he knows they can't hurt him until he hands it over.



Spade says the money doesn't matter until they find a fall-guy on whom to pin the murders of Thursby and Jacobi in order to get the police off their trail. To everyone's surprise, Spade suggests they tell the police Wilmer committed the crimes. Gutman politely refuses Spade's suggestion, saying that Wilmer is like a son to him.

Spade tries to convince them to betray Wilmer, saying that Wilmer wouldn't be able to sell out the rest of them since the police won't believe anything Wilmer says once he's been arrested. Spade explains that District Attorney Bryan doesn't care if the police catch the actual killer since all that matters to him is bolstering his reputation as a DA who closes cases. Spade says that Bryan will stop investigating as soon as he has enough evidence to throw someone, even if that person isn't guilty, in jail.

Unable to listen to Spade's plan any longer, Wilmer threatens to kill Spade. Gutman calms Wilmer by telling Spade that his suggestion is simply too impractical. Cairo suggests that they give the police Brigid instead of Wilmer. Spade says that if they can make her look guilty, then they should give her to them. Brigid gasps at his betrayal.

Spade tells Gutman that he hopes Wilmer's **gun** is not preventing him from betraying Wilmer since Spade could easily take his gun away, just as he did the last time. At that, Wilmer points the gun at Spade but Gutman grabs Wilmer before he can fire. Spade rises from the couch and slowly approaches Wilmer, jabbing him in the face and taking his guns. In response for attacking Wilmer, Cairo feebly strikes at Spade but Spade easily pushes him off. Gutman agrees that Wilmer, who is now unconscious, will be their fall guy.

CHAPTER 19: THE RUSSIAN'S HAND

Not wanting to betray Wilmer, Cairo considers forgoing the pursuit of the bird, but Spade says if he does then they'll have to turn him in alongside his "boyfriend" Wilmer. Wilmer awakes, but without any **guns** and aware that everyone has betrayed him, he silently sulks in the corner. After Cairo reluctantly agrees to betray Wilmer, Spade tells Gutman to provide him the information about the murders so he can convincingly frame Wilmer.

All along Spade made questionable moral decision, but having a man thrown in jail for a crime he didn't commit is way worse than anything else he's done. The narrative implies his desire for the ten grand outweighs his ethical integrity. Gutman, now, is the one who shows some ethics by privileging his love for Wilmer above an easy escape from the police.



Spade implies that the justice system is corrupt in order to convince Gutman to betray Wilmer. It's unclear how accurate Spade's description of authority figures who care about their own reputations more than about getting justice really is, though it certainly seems plausible. If Spade's description is accurate, then he exists in a world without any moral center at all, and indeed he acts like a man who has no outside moral or ethical pillars on which to lean or rely.



At this moment, the narrative tests how much trust we have in Spade's code of ethics. Although he is the novel's protagonist, we don't know if he'd actually be willing to betray Brigid in such a cruel way.



Gutman's betrayal of Wilmer, who he considers like a son, reveals how greed makes people betray the ones they love. Though as Spade implies it is also possible that Gutman actually doesn't feel such love for Wilmer and instead just doesn't want to betray Wilmer when Wilmer is holding a gun. Whether love is real between two characters is never clear in the novel. Once again, Spade emasculates both Wilmer and Cairo by beating them in a fight despite not having any guns.



In order to get him to betray Wilmer, Spade emasculates and insults Cairo by implying that he and Wilmer are lovers. Although the novel gives little indication of Wilmer's sexual orientation, Cairo's loyalty to him may reveal his love for and possible romantic relationship with Wilmer.



Gutman explains that Wilmer killed Thursby so that Brigid would fear that she was next and would give Gutman the **falcon**. During their meeting on the ship *La Paloma*, Brigid and Jacobi agreed to give Gutman the bird after he threatened to kill them, but they managed to escape. After some searching, Gutman and his crew were able to locate Brigid's hotel. At the hotel, Wilmer shot Jacobi while he was trying to run off with the bird. Although Jacobi got away, the criminals forced Brigid to call Spade and pretend to be in danger so that he left the office, giving Wilmer time to intercept Jacobi before he could give the falcon to Spade.

Satisfied with the info, Spade asks Brigid to make them some coffee. During the struggle with Wilmer, Gutman had noticed Brigid pick up the envelope with the cash. As she goes to the kitchen, Gutman asks if she can leave the envelope behind. She agrees and gives the envelope to Spade, who throws it at Gutman, saying that if he's so worried about the money, then he can hold on to the envelope for now.

After counting the money, Gutman claims that one of the one-thousand dollar bills is missing and accuses Brigid of stealing it. Although she denies his accusation, Spade takes her to the bathroom and forces her to undress in order to confirm that she's not hiding it in her clothes. As she undresses, she tells Spade that he is killing something in their relationship by seeing her naked like this. When Spade is satisfied that she isn't hiding the bill, he returns to the living-room.

Brigid goes into the kitchen to prepare food and coffee as Spade confronts Gutman, claiming that Gutman himself stole the bill while he counted the money. After Spade says he'll search him if he doesn't admit to stealing it, Gutman quickly produces the crumbled up bill from his pocket and puts it back into the envelope. Gutman claims he was testing Spade to see how he would react and that Spade passed his test. Brigid then enters the living-room with the food. They eat and remain silent until morning arrives

As Gutman's story reveals, greed and their desire for the falcon drive Gutman and Wilmer to kill without remorse. Although we cannot necessarily trust Gutman, he now has a self-serving reason to tell Spade the truth. The reason is that Spade must know the details of the crime so that he can successfully frame Wilmer.



Spade's lack of concern about the money may reveal that greed is not his chief motive. However, giving Gutman the envelope may also be a ploy to show Gutman that Spade is so in control that it doesn't matter who holds the money because, in the end, Spade will be the one with the cash.



Spade would rather have the utmost control over the situation than trust Brigid. Brigid, however, tells him that he risks ruining their relationship by valuing control and verifiable knowledge about the location of the bill over trust in her. She doesn't mind him seeing her naked, she just wants it to be in a moment of trust, of love. Or she wants Spade to think that's important to her, to think that she loves him.



Although it comes as no surprise, Gutman cannot be trusted. He and Spade are battling for control through a series of deception and lies. Spade asserts control by seeing through Gutman's deception, but then Gutman asserts control by saying his deception was in fact a test to see if Spade could see through it. Whether he was testing Spade's acuity, testing whether Spade would search Brigid, or making up that the whole thing was a test, isn't clear. Meanwhile, Brigid has been sidelined and made to perform traditional domestic duties.



After sunrise, Spade calls Effie, gives her the info about the bird's location, and asks her to bring it to his apartment. An hour later, she appears with the package, hands it to Spade at the doorway, and leaves. After tearing the package open, Gutman chips away at the **falcon's** black enamel and finds that the statue is made of lead instead of gold. Realizing it's a fake, Gutman shouts in rage and Spade accuses Brigid of tricking them, but she and Cairo both claim that this statue was the same one they stole from Kemidov. In the confusion, Wilmer slips out of the apartment.

Gutman explains that Kemidov must have discovered the true worth of the statue and replaced it with this decoy in order to protect the real one. Gutman decides to return to Constantinople in order to locate the real statue. Gutman then asks for the envelope with the cash. Spade refuses, at which point Gutman reveals a golden **gun**. Spade returns the envelope, but first takes one of the bills as a bribe for not calling the police. Gutman allows him to take it and he and Cairo leave the apartment.

CHAPTER 20: IF THEY HANG YOU

As soon as they leave, Spade calls Polhaus and lets him know that Wilmer killed Thursby and Jacobi on Gutman and Cairo's orders. After hanging up, Spade tells Brigid that she needs to tell him her role in the murders so that he will be able to protect her from the police interrogation. She tells him that Gutman employed her and Cairo to steal the **falcon**, but that she and Cairo double-crossed Gutman and stole it for themselves. But when she feared Cairo would turn on her, she employed Thursby for protection. She and Thursby went to Hong Kong to escape Cairo and Gutman, but there she decided she couldn't trust Thursby so she gave the statue to Jacobi to take to San Francisco.

Spade infers that Brigid wanted to get Thursby out of the way so she could keep the profits from the statue for herself. Spade says that she hired Archer to follow Thursby and make him think that Dixie Monahan's debt-holders were looking for him. In order to scare Thursby off, Brigid says that she pointed out Archer to Thursby the night Archer was following them, adding that if she knew Thursby would kill Archer she would never have done that.

The symbol of greed, the falcon, itself turns out to be a fake, suggesting that greed is ultimately worthless. The falcon may also be a symbol for the final truths that Spade seeks to uncover. In this way, the bird's fakeness implies that people can never get their hands on ultimate truths, that such ultimate truths may not even exist, that at heart life is just a series of deceptions with no end. Recall how this resonates with the story of Flitcraft, who briefly glimpsed a profound if terrible truth—we all die—and then deceived himself and eventually went back to an identical version of his previous life.



Even though the statue is a fake, Gutman will not give up his unyielding pursuit of the bird, showing the obsessive power of greed. Gutman's golden gun symbolizes how violence and greed are counterparts to one another. Meanwhile, Spade giving himself a bribe again calls into question his own ethics.



Even though Spade took Gutman's money, he calls the police in order to get justice. Spade, however, may have ulterior motives. Since the falcon was a fake and Spade cannot make any money, he has no reason to protect the criminals. So, in order to get the cops to stop investigating the murder case (since he is a suspect after all), he turns in the criminals. As of yet, we don't know if self-preservation or justice is driving Spade to act.



Unlike Gutman who appears to tell Spade the truth about his and Wilmer's involvement in Thursby's murder, Brigid cannot stop lying. She tells Spade that she didn't trust Thursby, but Spade realizes she just was greedy and didn't want to share the profits. Her greed gets Archer killed, though she denies responsibility for his death.



Spade reasons that Thursby couldn't have killed Archer since Archer would have been drawn into the secluded alley only by someone he knew and trusted. Spade accuses Brigid of killing Archer by seducing him into the alley and then shooting him with Thursby's gun, hoping that the police would arrest Thursby for the crime. But after she heard Thursby was shot, she knew Gutman was in town and she would need another protector. Afraid of Gutman, she went back to Spade for help.

Thinking he will still help her, Brigid confesses to the crime. Spade, however, tells her that she'll probably be sentenced to twenty years in jail for killing Archer. Surprised that he's unwilling to help her, Brigid asks if he loves her. Spade says he won't risk going to jail just because he may have romantic feelings for her. More than love, however, Spade says he wants justice for his partner despite acknowledging that he didn't even like or respect Archer.

Brigid asks if the **falcon** had been real and he got his money, would he still have turned her in. Spade answers that the falcon wasn't real, but also that he's not as crooked as he seems, implying justice matters more to him than money. At that moment, the cops arrive, tell Spade they've arrested the criminals, and take Brigid away. Spade gives them the one-thousand dollar bill as evidence of Gutman trying to bribe him, but the police tell Spade that Wilmer already killed Gutman before they had a chance to arrest him.

The next morning at the office, Effie asks if the papers were right in reporting that he turned in Brigid. Spade confirms the story and she looks at him with contempt, saying that he did the right thing but that she's still disgusted that he would turn on someone who loved him. At her rejection, Spade turns pale and goes to his desk. As he sits down, there is a knock at the door. Effie comes into his private office and says Iva wants to speak with him. With some reluctance, Spade tells Effie to let her in.

Again, Brigid and Spade face off in a kind of chess match of deceptions and skeptical insight. According to Spade's theory, Brigid's greed turns her into a heartless villain who killed a total stranger just so she could frame a man who's been helping her so as to increase her own profits. If this accusation is true, Brigid seems just as bad or even worse than even Gutman.



This is a definitive moment, for two reasons. The possible relationship between Brigid and Spade comes to a climax here, as Spade is faced with protecting a woman he may care for versus getting justice for his partner (whom he neither liked nor respected). That he chooses justice for his partner suggests three things: first, that he does not put much stock in love in general; that he does not trust that Brigid truly loves him (which in some ways is a just a variant of the first reason, as Spade finds love innately hard to trust because there can be no proof of it); and, finally, that he does have a code of ethics that pushes him to seek justice no matter what.



At last, Spade reveals his steadfast ethical code, saying he only acted crooked in order to catch the real criminals. Even if he was offered the \$50,000, Spade claims he would still have sought justice. Spade also gives the "bribe" he took from Gutman to the cops as evidence against Gutman, emphasizing how justice matters more to him than money. Meanwhile, that Wilmer killed Gutman shows the inevitable result of deception and betrayal: in this case Wilmer, who thought Gutman loved him, turns on Gutman after Gutman betrayed him.



Effie's reaction reveals that sometime justice and loyalty cannot always coexist. Spade cannot do right by a woman who loved him and do right by his dead partner. Since Effie has been a source of morality, her disapproval makes Spade rethink his decision, makes him face the fact that he turned down the chance at love, for a woman who seemed his equal, for justice. And in the last moment Spade is faced with a further result of his choice: having given up on a chance at love with a woman who was his equal; having betrayed a chance at love in favor of justice; Spade must now confront Iva's attempts to rope him into a more domestic arrangement with a woman he definitely does not love. Will Spade, after seeing the possibility of love and facing death, follow in Flitcraft's footsteps and fall into a kind of blind domesticity?





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Plaue, Ethan. "The Maltese Falcon." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Jun 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Plaue, Ethan. "The Maltese Falcon." LitCharts LLC, June 17, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-maltese-falcon>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Maltese Falcon* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Hammett, Dashiell. *The Maltese Falcon*. Vintage. 1992.

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Hammett, Dashiell. *The Maltese Falcon*. New York: Vintage. 1992.