

Questions – The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961)

1) The first paragraph of *The Maltese Falcon* describes the “v motif” of Sam Spade’s facial features and describes Spade more generally as “rather pleasantly like a blonde satan.”

- How did this initial characterization affect your reading of *The Maltese Falcon*?

2) Immediately after hearing about his partner Miles Archer’s death, Sam Spade carefully rolls a cigarette; Hammett describes the action in almost excruciating detail:

“Spade’s thick fingers made a cigarette with deliberate care, sifting a measured quantity of tan flakes down into curved paper, spreading the flakes so that they lay equal at the ends with a slight depression in the middle, thumbs rolling the paper’s inner edge down and up under the outer edge as forefingers pressed it over, thumbs and fingers sliding to the paper cylinder’s ends to hold it even while tongue licked the flap, left forefinger and thumb pinching their end while right forefinger and thumb smoothed the damp seam, right forefinger and thumb twisting their end and lifting the other to Spade’s mouth” (p.11-12).

- Aside from a possible deep addiction to tobacco, do you think this description reveals anything about Sam Spade?
- Why would Hammett describe the action in such extreme detail?

3) How does Sam Spade treat each of the three female characters in the book and how do they treat Sam? Do any of these relationships have a future?

4) Is Sam Spade a romantic?

5) How do we as readers judge whether various characters in the novel are telling the truth to one another?

- Sam Spade
- Brigid O’ Shaughnessy: (p.5; 54-55)
- Iva Archer: (p.215)
- Joel Cairo: (p.42-44)
- Mr. Gutman, “the fat man”: (p. 104-106, 108)

6) The newspaper plays important roles in both Edgar Allan Poe’s and Rex Stout’s detective stories. What role(s) does it play in *The Maltese Falcon*? (p.78)

7) Sam Spade’s relationship to the a) police and to b) the law is—shall we say--

“complicated.”

- What do you think some of these complications are and why do they exist? (p. 41;78; 148-149; 180-181)

8) At one point, Sam Spade tells Brigid O’Shaughnessy a lengthy, seemingly irrelevant story about a past case involving a man named Flitcraft who disappeared, changed his identity, created a second life for himself, and then after a time resumed his former life as if nothing had ever changed (p. 61-64); he concludes the story:

“But that’s the part I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling” (p. 64).

- Why do you think Spade tells this story?
- Do you think it has any affect on Brigid O’Shaughnessy?

9) The “fat man,” Gutman, tells Spade a lengthy tale—from which the novel owes its title--about the origin and history of the highly-sought-after “black bird” (p.123-128).

- Why does Gutman bother telling this story?
- Does the story have anything valid to say about human nature in general?

10) How would you explain the character of Gutman?

11) Surprise! The “black bird” is made of lead; it is black through-and-through (p.201-202).

- Who conned whom?
- Where is the Maltese Falcon?

12) Toward the novel’s conclusion, Sam Spade repeatedly tells Brigid O’Shaughnessy: “I won’t play the sap for you” (p.212-213).

- Do you think he had any genuine feeling for her?

13) Sam Spade says to Brigid O’Shaughnessy: “I’m going to send you over. The chances are you’ll get off with life. That means you’ll be out again in twenty years. You’re an angel. I’ll wait for you” (p.211). And then: “If they hang you I’ll always remember you” (p. 211).

- How does this affect your view of Sam Spade?

13) Sam Spade describes a loyalty to his partner and a “code” of the detective business (p. 213-214). He then tells Brigid O’Shaughnessy: *“Don’t be to sure I’m as crooked as I’m supposed to be”* (p. 215).

- Do you think Sam Spade acts morally or lawfully or ethically in the end?